

On the Resilience of the Human Spirit

by Bernhard Kempler, Ph.D.

How can we account for the resilience of the human spirit? We come into the world confronted by what William James famously called “a blooming buzzing confusion,” and we must somehow organize this chaos into a reasonably stable and meaningful personal world which includes a sense of a continuous, stable, yet dynamic self. And, as Jung so well understood, our ego must deal not only with external challenges but also challenges from archetypal psychic energies which press from the “inside”, demanding expression in our individual lives.

The issue of “resilience” comes up powerfully when we are faced with extreme situations, situations for which we have had little or no occasion to develop adaptive mechanisms. How does our psyche withstand such outrageous attacks as war, criminal violation, brutality, and even life threatening illness? What impact do such experiences have on our trust in an orderly and predictable universe, on our security, and our belief in our value as human beings? Why do some individuals, whether adults or children, live through such extreme traumatic experiences, with their spirit relatively intact, while others are permanently damaged? Is it something intrinsic in their personality makeup, some genetic component of character? Is it some as yet unknown help or support they received?

My meditations on this topic are influenced by my own experiences of living through the darkness of the soul that was World War II. I was born in Poland in 1936, a Jewish boy, who from the age of three to nine was confronted with relentless, life threatening hatred and hostility. How was I to make sense of this? How could my childish ego, whose proper task was to grasp the rudiments of the immediate physical and emotional environment, cope with the reality that forces beyond my understanding were determined to hurt and kill me and my family?

But somehow I survived with my body and my psyche reasonably intact. I survived years of homeless wandering and

hiding, most of the time under a false identity and dressed as a girl. I survived ghettos and concentration camps, an escape through barbed wire, and hiding in crawl spaces in burning buildings. When the war was over I found myself in Sweden, where I lived for seven years before coming to America at the age of sixteen. (I cannot resist here to put in a plug for my sister's, Anita Lobel's, excellent autobiographical account of our lives during this period, entitled *No Pretty Pictures: A Child of War*, published in 1998 by Greenwillow Books, and selected as a finalist for the National Book Award).

For most of my adult life I hardly thought about my past, as my attention was focused on living my life as best I could in the present. But in the last ten or fifteen years there has been an upsurge of interest in the topic of resilience. This led me to ponder over my own experiences and to try to extract from these meditations an understanding of psychic resilience and survival. It seems to me that if we are to arrive at a meaningful understanding we must start with a detailed study of subjective experiences, for each person's response to extreme conditions constitutes an individual, creative act. For the sake of brevity I will summarize five internal dimensions that I believe grounded and protected me, and allowed me to escape relatively unscathed.

An open, flexible psychological structure: Being so young was favorable to my psychological resilience. This may seem counter intuitive, because we usually assume that the younger we are, the more vulnerable we are that we have fewer defenses, and that our relatively undeveloped psychological structures are more easily overwhelmed by traumatic events. But on the other hand a young psyche is more fluid and more flexible. It has not yet committed itself to firm expectations of the world, not yet become loyal to any particular world view, a set of values, or even a clear sense of self. For example, it was not a struggle for me to live through the war dressed as and acting like a girl. My main concerns were to not be noticed, to stay quiet and out of the way, to find something to eat. For older children and for adults seeing everything they held dear crumbling and collapsing around them constituted a catastrophic attack on their sense of personal worth and their fundamental orientation in the world. My intuition tells me that the trauma for a mother or father seeing his or her child being killed has to be more traumatic than any physical horror or deprivation experienced by a young child, such as myself.

Not taking it personally: Looking back I realize that a sense of judgment allowed me to give differential meanings to different experiences in terms of whether they were personally directed at me. My daily experiences throughout the war were marked by an alternating sense of danger with moments of relative safety, of good people with whom I felt safe, and those that I stayed away from, did not approach, did not talk to. The dangerous people were all strangers and faceless. I cannot remember the face of a single Nazi soldier, Gestapo officer, or a camp guard. On the other hand there were those few who tried to protect me, even risked their lives for me. These individuals I knew and they knew me, and I remember their faces. What they did was truly about me. Another way of saying this

is that in the deepest sense I did not take the persecution personally.

Spiritual protection: One of the good people was a devout Catholic woman who stayed with me for a good part of the six years. She taught me to pray, especially to the Virgin Mary, to say the rosary every day, and to go to church. We spent much time in the quiet and darkness of churches because they felt relatively safe. In Polish Catholicism the Virgin is central. She is the all protective, all compassionate mother figure, and her image, with her arms open, her hands out, inviting everyone to come to her, a gentle smile on her face, is everywhere. As a young child I did not understand why so many people wanted to harm me. I did have a vague understanding that this was because I was something called a Jew, and that my parents had believed in the wrong god. The solution to this problem was to believe in the Virgin, to pray to her and ask for her protection. I came to feel that I had a secret protector and that were I discovered the Virgin would set things straight, would intervene on my behalf and save me. This magical, spiritual sense of safety protected me from the everyday terrors that were all around me. As a psychologist I now understand the extraordinary power of an image of a divine protector. This is not a matter of religious beliefs, but of a numinous image with whom I formed a personal relationship. This protection was psychologically real and not an illusion.

Temperament: An orientation to present reality. My temperament keeps me fairly well focused on current realities. I tend to deal with things as they are and not put energy into what cannot be changed and over which I have no control.

While I have not treated my childhood experiences as unmentionable, I do not dwell on them and I do not see them as an essential part of my identity. As soon as the war was over I focused on the “task at hand”. A rabbi once said: “some things should never be forgotten, but they should not be dwelt on every day”.

Dissociation, or encapsulating the trauma: We have learned in the past few years that one of the natural psychological mechanisms people use to defend themselves from unbearable trauma is dissociation. Roughly speaking dissociation is a way of creating internal psychic barriers that separate the shocking, undigestible experiences from our normally comprehending and functioning ego.

In my case the sudden and dra-

matic changes that occurred in my life immediately upon the war's end proved an aide to this inner encapsulating dissociation. Through most of the war I lived as a girl, including an assumed name and false papers. At the exact point that the War ended I came to Sweden where I reverted to being a boy and very quickly began to speak Swedish. I started school for the first time in my life, assumed my real name and identity, and started engaging in normal age appropriate activities. It was as if all the hardships and terrors I had experienced throughout my childhood had somehow happened to someone else, or to me through some grand mistake which was now being corrected. What had happened to me was part of a general catastrophe, not part of “normal” life, and I was not to see it as a useful guide for how to live, how to understand the world, and what to expect of others.

My path of resilience appears to have been a complicated mixture of flexibility, judgment based on positive self evaluation, patience, and imagination. There are probably other and different paths to resilience and survival than those I have discerned in my own life. One such path is beautifully captured in this story from the Holocaust. One day, in a concentration camp, a group of Jewish rabbis got together and decided to put God on trial for the crime of the Holocaust. They presented detailed, extensive arguments for the prosecution and the defense. They then sat as a jury to weigh the evidence and to bring in a verdict. And they judged God GUILTY of the crime of the Holocaust. At this point one of the rabbis looked out the window and said: “Darkness is falling. It is time for us to pray.”



photo – Helen Moore