

Keys to Wellness: Resilience, spirituality, and purpose



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Wellness is an outcome, an end product of what we understand and how we learn to live. Well-being is not something we directly create; we are simply hardwired to strive for and realize it when we are at our best. Understanding the interconnectedness of purpose, spirituality, and natural resilience, influences whether we realize well-being or not. Heady terminology for sure, but I have come to know my CSpH 5201 Spirituality and Resilience students and the professionals in our community-based resilience trainings yearn for wholeness and naturally gravitate toward wellness when they understand how they operate from the inside out. When adults settle down enough to pay attention to common sense and wisdom within, they self-right in the direction of well-being, even in spite of external circumstances not deemed as conducive to well-being (Marshall, 1998, 2002, 2004).

Some years ago I codeveloped a course on Spirituality and Resilience for the Center for Spirituality & Healing. The course attracts diverse and incredibly thoughtful students who thrive on examining theory and literature measured against their own life experiences in order to develop workplace applications. Learners gain new perspectives and describe significant improvements in their daily lives. The class is a learning community grounded in solid theory, literature, and lived experience. We explore three important but not frequently linked terms: purpose, spirituality, and resilience. Each has a wide range of definitions. For this issue of Wellness Works, I explore their inside out meaning. What perspectives emerge when we ask ourselves, "How do purpose, spirituality, and resilience characterize my personal wellness?"

Purpose

For a person who lives with purpose, there is an inner direction and knowing, a felt confidence about, and commitment to, one's life path. Purpose is a deeply held thought that brings perspective. A sense of purpose is a powerful protective factor fostering resilience in both children and adults (Benard, 2004). Purpose equips us to meet life and it gives us staying power. Rabbi Kushner (1987) explains,

Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter, so that the world will at least be a little bit different because of our having passed through it....What am I supposed to do with my life? (pp.18-19).

The human drive for purpose—What on earth am I here for?—is evidenced by Rick Warren's best seller, *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002). This and other titles are now printed in 20 languages for millions of readers.

Pulitzer prize-winning child psychiatrist Robert Coles (1993) speaks of the "call of service" as necessary to individuals and society. In 1977 Greenleaf coined the phrase, "servant leader," and positioned purpose at the heart of sound business. "The great leader is seen as servant first" (p. 7). Former President Carter's personal time commitments to Habitat for Humanity and global peace negotiations are statements of life-long purpose.

Purpose is more than goals and deeper than plans. We do not construct or design purpose. Purpose emerges or comes into view from an inner source. Most often purpose becomes clear when we are in a secure state of mind characterized by health and well-being. From this vantage point, purpose has power and can beat the force of negative influences in our lives (Hawkins, 1995). Speaking at Northrop Auditorium for Great Conversations in 2003, South African Archbishop Tutu gleefully explained he was part of

a very small handful of leaders who kept saying, "Apartheid will be undone!" He and his colleagues did not know how or when, but they declared their purpose would be realized. At times, he said, it felt like madness to say these preposterous words. Yet today the power of their inexplicable purpose is clear.

Spirituality

Each human being has an inner life. The path to wellness recognizes, nurtures, and articulates a quest for personal spirituality. Parker Palmer (1998) offers a useful definition of this inner landscape, "By spiritual I mean the diverse ways we answer the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life." Purpose and spirituality are integrally intertwined, as described in *A Hidden Wholeness* (2004). *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood* (2006) evidences burgeoning scholarly interest in spirituality.

Robert Coles in *The Spiritual Life of Children* sees "children as seekers, as young pilgrims well aware that life is a finite journey and as anxious to make sense of it as those of us who are further along in the time allotted us" (p. xvi). Michael Resnick indicates,

The building blocks of youth development are opportunities to develop competence in anything and to use and apply that skill in service to others. This is how we sparkle! These are the opportunities that help youth view themselves as spiritual people. It is important that they experience that sense of wonder, awe, and mystery (B. Benard, personal communication, November 30, 1998).

Spirituality and religion are distinguishable. Spirituality is formless—universal experiences of knowing and being, wonderment and exploration characteristic of all human beings. Religion has form—private matters of doctrine, belief, worship, practice, and affiliation. We can identify ourselves as human beings with a guiding spiritual nature or essence. In contrast we believe, practice, or profess a certain religion, belong to or are members of a specific faith community. Spiritual relationships or experiences may occur with or without a religious environment. A religious organization may or may not be spiritual. An individual or group may be both spiritual and religious. Both spirituality and religion are vitally important to individual and societal wellness. Deeply felt connections may be spiritual relationships or connections of the heart. World renowned psychiatrist and resilience author Steven Wohlin says his most effective work is done in spiritual relationship with his client when they co-create "sacred space." (K. Marshall, personal communication, April 20, 2006). Joseph Bailey (1998) explains "heart-to-heart" rather than "head-to-head" listening becomes a way of life because it connects us to innate mental health and well-being.

However, spirituality is difficult to study and as Jane Goodall (1999) says, "Science does not have appropriate tools for the dissection of the spirit" (p. 165). The real danger is that without solid research such as that of the Center for Spirituality & Healing, the critical spiritual dimension is not included in cutting edge studies fostering human and societal progress. Emmy Werner suggests most researchers undervalue this dimension and often see religion or spirituality as a "detractor" in their scientific study (K. Marshall, personal communication, November 24, 2003).

When speaking at the Marsh, Larry Dossey, co-chairperson of the National Institutes of Health, Office of Alternative Medicine Panel on Mind/Body Interventions, said after officially receiving more than 150 rather hard-to-find, invisible, scattered studies

documenting the positive health impact of prayer, he could no longer ethically withhold this non-traditional intervention from his own medical patients. His 1993 blockbuster book, *Healing Words*, called for the reinvention of medicine to include spiritual practice nearly 15 years ago!

Resilience

The definition of resilience is evolving in both research and practice. Today in our community-based and educational work it is useful to understand resilience as a natural, innate human capacity for navigating life successfully. This does not mean every person manifests resilience or that social supports are not essential. However, the opportunity to learn how we operate makes a great difference whether one realizes resilience or not (Marshall 2004).

We teach simple principles of Health Realization so adults and youth can find practical ways to tap their natural resilience. This is an educational process of learning that life happens from the inside out. This means we create our own experience of life events by the thoughts we choose to hold on to. If we begin to understand that we are thinkers with a natural ability to notice that we are thinking rather than what we are thinking, the world begins to be a very different place. We each have 60,000 thoughts a day. By habit, we hold on to a few stressful thoughts and frequently make tornadoes of the mind. In this insecure state of mind, we begin to believe what seems to us as real and permanent. From this perspective we blame the circumstances in our lives, when in fact, it is our attachment to particular thoughts that needs attention. We can not change a thought. The moment we notice a thought, it is has already happened. But the hopeful lesson is that we are more than our thinking, that this thought will pass, that another more helpful insight will become apparent. "Wait, the wisdom will come." We can begin to trust we are hardwired with common sense sufficient to meet life's ups and downs. In waiting for that wisdom to come, in the form of a new thought, we come full circle to spirituality and purpose.

As a spiritual being, we can trust that life will unfold in a good way and we are equipped to meet each moment. Each individual will have a private language regarding Divinity. In simplest terms we can learn to trust the unknown, to invoke the "still small voice within," to trust in that which is greater than us. Each individual, each culture, each tradition offers its own language and practice. In essence this "inner landscape" makes our future hopeful and promising. As Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl (1959) says, "Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom...there are always choices to make...any man can decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually," and "It is this spiritual freedom which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful" (pp 104-106).

Resilience research thoroughly identifies external protective factors (Werner, 2005; Masten, 2001; Benard, 2004) and to a much lesser degree discusses internal protective mechanisms (Rutter, 1993; Marshall, 2005). The test is whether we can expand these findings to promote individual and societal wellness. I believe we can. Ann Masten writes:

The great surprise of resilience research is the ordinariness of the phenomena . . . Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from ordinary everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities. This has profound implications for promoting competence and human capital in individuals and society (pp. 227, 235).

A CSPH 5201 student with life-long anxiety and a schizoaffective disorder diagnosis describes how new-found wellness is an outcome of his increased understanding of spirituality, resilience, and purpose:

My experience with this approach has shown me how psychological health is very understandable and very attainable for someone like me who has a mental illness. When you notice that someone has the expectation that they are going to see health in you, at the center of your being, you begin to find that health yourself (K. Marshall, personal communication, January 19, 2007).

May we all understand and nurture the seeds of wellness within as successfully as this student.

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