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Resilience, Growth & Kintsukuroi

You are better than you think you are

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Resilience. Grit. Sisu. Post traumatic growth. Different researchers emphasize the subtle distinctions within the larger truth that more often than not, we are better than we think we are. We are stronger, more adaptive. When things go wrong, most people, most of the time, do not dry up, crumble and fall to pieces. We are better able to withstand the disappointments and tragedies, hardships and tempests that rage during the span of our all-too-human lives.

When trauma does occur, rude and unexpected, it often cuts at our very foundations. It disrupts the most fundamental truths we'd held about our time on this earth. We want to believe that the world is good and just and beautiful and fair and we go about ordering our lives as such. And then one of the inconvenient, inconsiderate facts of our lives happens. A tumor awakes in a rage while we are eating casserole at the PTA potluck. Or the boy who used to chase soccer balls into your flower garden, doesn't come home one night after the high school dance. Or after building a life's worth of dreams with that special someone who once upon a time gazed in your eyes and promised to be there until death do you part, you discover that they had another life and other dreams and everything upon which you had ordered your life, is left in shambles. Trauma undermines the narrative we have of our lives and robs us of cohesion and meaning.

And as we stand there in the hazy aftermath, heart and spirit both raw, we are somehow supposed to keep going on with our regular lives. We are expected to make sense of the anemic normalcy of the shopping mall, or standing in lines going nowhere, or all of the planned and unplanned obsolesces we are told we want.

Some people never really recover. This is tragic.

However the good news is that research shows most people navigate the hardships just fine. They are the ones you see every day in the lunch room, or the next cube at work. Maybe they move a little more slowly, as if they have some sort of psychological limp. But after the suffering and struggling, most cope and rise again to live lives of simple happiness.

But even this is not the whole story. When the hardships happen, when life kicks the legs of the stool out from under us, there are some people who find a way to build new foundations and a new story.

In Japan there is an art form called *kintsukuroi* which means "to repair with gold". When a ceramic pot or bowl would break, the artisan would put the pieces together again using gold or silver lacquer to create something stronger, more beautiful, than it was before. The breaking is not something to hide. It does not mean that the work of art is ruined or without value because it is different than what was planned. Kintsukuroi is a way of living that embraces every flaw and imperfection. Every crack is part of the history of the object and it becomes more beautiful, precisely because it had been broken.

People are the same way.

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Source: Tea Bowl fixed in the Kintsugi method available via the public domain. Retrieved from Wikimedia 14:35, October 3, 2015

Sometimes, when everything we valued and built up and cared for over the years falls to pieces, we are better able to see opportunities and possibilities that would have never presented themselves had life not been torn to rags. Or standing and staring in the face of broken promises and broken dreams, eye-to-bloodshot-eye with our most assiduous fears, sometimes we discover that we were stronger than we imagined: that we can withstand more and that there is no reason to fear. Sometimes trauma brings us closer to God, or to our purpose in life, or leaves us more appreciative than we were before: appreciative and even happy. And when we are betrayed by someone we've loved, or taken advantage of, sometimes it is our trust and faith in others that grows stronger. We look around at all the friends and acquaintances and strangers that come rushing to our aide, and our faith in human goodness is restored. Cherish your relationships. Nurture them.



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That people are resilient is neither a stick of admonishment, nor a salve that takes suffering away. What it is, is a marker of hope. People can grow in the face of the horrific. It is evidence of what might be possible, no matter the loss, no matter the pain - kintsukuroi.

Further Reading

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The fact that some people grow under strain is not cause for self-flagellation in the midst of pain. It does not undermine the difficulties of living a hard life, or mean we would simply “get over it” if would only think happy thoughts.

After losing his three year old child, Harold Kushner wrote he was better counselor, a better minister. He was wiser, more forgiving, and had greater patience. And yet, Kushner continued, he would have given it all up - the growth, the strength, the wizened gaze - if only he could have his child back, or could have avoided the pain.