

Continuing Thoughts about Resilience and Caring: What We Can Learn from Military Veterans

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I am writing this article on November 11, Veteran's Day. I mention this detail since the theme I have selected to address in this piece was prompted, in part, by material related to resilience in military veterans. This theme is also a follow-up to my October article "Changing Mindsets about Stress." After that article was sent out and posted on my website, I received feedback via emails and in my workshops that people were intrigued by the research I cited, especially that of psychologist Dr. Michael Poulin at the University of Buffalo.

Poulin found that while stressful events were associated with people dying at an earlier age, such an association was not found in those individuals who were actively involved in helping others. In analyzing the data, Poulin noted that there was "a significant interaction between helping behavior, stressful events, morbidity, and mortality. . . . Helping others predicted reduced mortality specifically by buffering the association between stress and mortality."

In citing Poulin's study, health psychologist Dr. Kelly McGonigal concluded, "Caring created resilience. And so we see once again that the harmful effects of stress on your health are not inevitable. How you think and how you act can transform the experience of stress."

Poulin and McGonigal's observations supported my longstanding belief that resilience is nurtured when people of any age are engaged in what I call "contributory" or "charitable" activities, namely, those activities that enrich the well-being of others.

Several events this past week motivated me in this month's article to continue to highlight the healing powers of contributory activities.

Feedback at a Conference

Last week I was privileged to offer one of the keynotes at the Biennial Convention of the Union for Reform Judaism. My keynote was titled "The Power of Mindsets: Creating Resilient and Compassionate Congregational Communities." Among the groups in the audience were clergy, educators, and congregational lay leaders. As I

do in all of my presentations about mindsets and resilience, I described the beneficial impact of acts of charity on our own lives and the lives of others.

I know that the encouragement and inclusion of contributory activities are a staple in most, if not, all religions. For instance, in Judaism the Hebrew word *Tzedakah*, while not being an exact definition of charity, captures the act of giving aid and assistance to those in need. Some differentiate *Tzedakah* from charity since the latter is defined as a voluntary gesture of goodwill, while the former is often interpreted as a religious obligation.

Following my keynote at the Biennial a number of attendees chatted with me during the next couple of days about the messages embedded in my keynote as well as two follow-up sessions I conducted. Similar to feedback from my October article, many were specifically interested in the research that linked helping others with our own emotional and physical well-being and our capacity for resilience. As one congregational lay leader commented, “I know that helping others is beneficial, but I wasn’t aware of the research that shows how much it also benefits our own health. I wasn’t aware of the extent to which it can lessen the stress and pressure most of us experience.”

Reflections about Resilience

The relationship of contributory activities to resilience was unexpectedly highlighted once again this morning on Veteran’s Day. I read an article authored by Joe Klein in *Time* magazine titled “Bringing the Good Fight Home.” It is based on his recently released book *Charlie Mike: A True Story of Heroes Who Brought Their Mission Home*. “Charlie Mike” stands for “continue mission”; the book details the work of two veterans—former Navy SEAL Dr. Eric Greitens and Marine Sergeant Jake Wood—who upon coming back from the war zones established public service organizations in which other veterans could participate.

As I read Greitens’ name, all I could think about was the convergence of different events, leading to my decision to write this month’s article. Just the day before I had begun to read Greitens’ book *Resilience: Hard-Won Wisdom for Leading a Better Life*. I purchased the book after listening to a podcast interview conducted with Greitens by Chris Brogan (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/owners-mind-chris-brogan/id830619483?mt=2>). I met Chris when he presented at my son Rich’s annual

social media conference in Maine and was very impressed by his knowledge, insights, and genuine caring for others.

Greitens' book is composed of letters that he wrote to another Navy SEAL, Zach Walker, who unexpectedly contacted him after years of not being in touch. Walker was struggling with PTSD, emotional pain, heavy drinking, and a loss of purpose in his life.

Although I have just begun to read Greitens' book, I was immediately captured by the format in which he responds to his former comrade and the insights he imparts about resilience--insights laced and enhanced by quotes from ancient and modern thinkers. Having reflected upon and written a great deal about resilience, I welcomed Greitens' perspective. He writes:

Resilience is the virtue that enables people to move through hardship and become better. No one escapes pain, fear, and suffering. Yet from pain can come wisdom, from fear can come courage, from suffering can come strength—if we have the virtue of resilience.

A few pages later, Greitens offers the following observation, “What happens to us becomes part of us. Resilient people do not bounce back from hard experiences; they find healthy ways to integrate them into their lives.”

In my work I have emphasized the concept of “personal control” as a key dimension of resilience. To be resilient we must examine the steps we can initiate to deal successfully with the struggles and challenges we face. We must avoid succumbing to a victim's mentality that is dominated by doubt. We must not surrender to constant questions of “why me?” but instead focus on the situations we can change.

I have often asserted that we are the “authors of our own lives.” In advancing this view I recognize that events occur over which we have little, if any, control, but what we have far greater influence over than we may appreciate are our attitudes and responses towards these events. To subscribe to a belief in “personal control” permits us to remove those shackles that serve as obstacles towards our assuming and maintaining a resilient lifestyle.

Greitens captures a similar view:

The first step to building resilience is to take responsibility for who you are and for your life. If you're not willing to do that, stop wasting your time reading this

letter. The essence of responsibility is the acceptance of the consequences—good and bad—of your actions. You are not responsible for everything that happens to you. You *are* responsible for how you deal with what happens to you.

In reading the beginning pages of Greitens' book, in absorbing the insights he shares about resilience, I am eager to read the book in its entirety.

The Mission Continues

In the *Time* magazine piece Klein describes Greitens' experience visiting wounded veterans at Bethesda Naval Hospital. He went with Steve Culbertson, the CEO of Youth Service America. As they spoke with these seriously wounded veterans and asked what they wanted to do next, the reply was always the same, "I want to go back to my unit" or "my guys." Although almost all would not be able to return to their units given the extent of their injuries, I could not help thinking of their wish and their need (and the needs most of us possess) to feel connected with others and to have a sense of purpose for living.

The veterans were also asked what they would like to do after they retired from the military. In light of their answer to what they wanted to do next, it was not surprising to hear their responses to this question. A large number said they would like to work in the public sector. Culbertson described his program to the veterans and the goal of engaging young people to help solve problems facing the country. He asked the veterans if they would be interested in doing the same. All replied in the affirmative.

As Klein reports, Greitens contacted two close friends, Ken Harbaugh at Yale Law School and another Navy SEAL, Kaj Larsen. He told Ken that he had a plan for assisting wounded veterans return to civilian life by having them do public service in the communities in which they resided. Part of the plan involved offering fellowships to the wounded veterans who were willing to do some kind of public service similar to what they had undertaken in Iraq and Afghanistan. They labeled the program "Mission Continues."

Klein adds, "To receive the stipend, they would have to find a local service organization to sponsor them and supervise their work. The core idea was there from the start: if they were helping other people, they might not spend so much time fretting about

themselves. They might make new friends, make the transition to civilian life more easily and maybe even re-create the same sense of purpose they had in the military.”

At one of my recent workshops I was asked if helping others can be taken to an extreme with helpers ignoring their own needs and becoming even more emotionally and physically depleted. I replied that certainly was a possibility, but in reading the vignettes described in Klein’s article, it was obvious that the Mission Continues program also involved counseling and mentoring for the veteran to insure that the latter’s own well-being was not neglected.

The comprehensive influence of the Mission Continues program is eloquently summarized by Klein:

What I’ve learned from the veterans I’ve met over the past five years is they thrive on the good feelings that come from helping others. They are a generation of volunteers, every one of them. The Mission Continues has had more than a thousand fellows, and thousands more are working in local service platoons across the country. And the rest of us have something we can learn from them this Veterans Day: that active, full-metal citizenship not only helps veterans return from the wars to regain a sense of purpose and stability, but it helps to build a stronger country.

A Longstanding View Constantly Reinforced

More than 35 years ago, I learned that one of the fondest and most vivid memories that adults have of events in school that boosted their motivation and dignity as students was when they were given opportunities to help others. I have long advocated that if we are to raise caring, resilient children we must offer them opportunities at an early age to engage in contributory activities that reinforce their belief that they make a positive difference in the world. Life devoid of a sense of purpose and meaning is a life prone to emptiness and despair. Reading of the work of Greitens and his colleagues in founding and developing Mission Continues further strengthens my belief that throughout the lifespan it is important to ask: “What is it that I can do (or my children can do) to enrich the lives of others?” In the process of helping others to become resilient, our own resilience will thrive.

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