

Resilience in the Face of the Sudden Loss of a Husband

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

During the many years I have been writing a monthly website article, two have been devoted to messages conveyed in college commencement speeches, one by the late Steven Jobs at Stanford University in 2005 ([January, 2006 article](#)) and the other by J.K. Rowling at Harvard University in June, 2008 ([June, 2008 article](#)). The insights they expressed resonated immediately with my decades-long interest in identifying and reinforcing the underpinnings of resilience.

In other columns I have written about resilience in the face of illness, trauma, or loss, including an account of the death of my twin brother Michael from a rare disease, amyloidosis ([February, 2013 article](#)). Michael's incredible attitude and the dignity with which he conducted his life when confronted with an illness with no known cure captured the essential nature of what I have described as a "resilient lifestyle."

This past week I was very moved by the reflections and emotions expressed by another commencement speaker, Sheryl Sandberg, to graduates at the University of California at Berkeley. Sandberg's life is filled with many accomplishments, including her past role as Vice President of Global Online Sales and Marketing at Google, her current position as Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, and her authorship of the bestselling book *Lean In*. Several people emailed me with a link to Sandberg's speech, whether to the actual transcript or to a news account, knowing I (and I am certain many others) would be very interested in what she conveyed about loss and resilience. My wife read a lengthy excerpt of her speech in *The Boston Globe* and immediately suggested I read the article and write about it.

For those not familiar with the tragedy that occurred in Sandberg's life last year, she and her husband Dave Goldberg were vacationing at a resort in Mexico when he was found on the floor of a gym. He had been alone when he apparently fell off a treadmill while exercising and died after suffering head trauma and blood loss. Autopsy results suggested that he experienced a cardiac arrhythmia that contributed to his fall and death.

Thoughts at the Conclusion of *Sheloshim*

The thirty-day period following a spouse's death is called *sheloshim* in the Jewish faith, the completion of the religious mourning for one's spouse. At the conclusion of *sheloshim*, Sandberg posted on her Facebook page a very personal and poignant account about her husband's sudden passing. She noted that her purpose in sharing publicly her reflections was not only to signify the end of *sheloshim* but also "to give back what others have given to me. While the experience of grief is profoundly personal, the bravery of those who have shared their own experiences has helped pull me through."

Sandberg added, "I think when tragedy occurs, it presents a choice. You can give in to the void, the emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or breathe. Or you can try and find meaning. . . ." Noting her despair and all of the "moments lost in the void," she asserted, "But when I can, I want to choose life and meaning."

In reading these words I immediately thought about the insights of two individuals whose perspectives have had a profound impact on my personal and professional life. One is psychiatrist and holocaust survivor Dr. Viktor Frankl, who in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* advanced the belief that even in the most dire, degrading, seemingly hopeless circumstances we can still demonstrate a fundamental human attribute that even in a concentration camp could not be destroyed, namely, to choose our attitude and behavior in that environment.

The second influential person is Rabbi Harold Kushner who, in his bestselling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, eloquently described his journey to make meaning of his son Aaron's struggle with and death as a teenager from progeria, an disorder often labeled "rapid aging." Kushner voiced a position similar to that of Frankl's, namely, while we may have little, if any, control of a particular event occurring, we must not underestimate the degree of control we maintain in our response to such an event. Kushner wrote, "In the final analysis, the question of why bad things happen to good people translates itself into some very different questions, no longer asking why something happened, but asking how we will respond, what we intend to do now that it has happened."

“Resilience Can Be Learned”

Sandberg observed on her Facebook post that during the month immediately following her husband’s death she learned gratitude. “Real gratitude for the things I took for granted before—like life. As heartbroken as I am, I look at my children each day and rejoice that they are alive. I appreciate every smile, every hug. I no longer take each day for granted.”

And she emphasized, “I learned that resilience can be learned.”

I enthusiastically concur with Sandberg’s belief. In my writings and lectures about a “resilient mindset,” I have endorsed the notion that components or features of a resilient mindset can be nurtured and learned.

At the Berkeley commencement, approximately a year following her husband’s death, Sandberg informed the graduates, “I am not here to tell you all the things I’ve learned in life. Today I will tell you what I learned in death.” She described experiencing the “depths of sadness and the brutality of loss.” And then similar to what Frankl, Kushner, my brother Michael, psychologist Dr. George Bonanno in his book *The Other Side of Sadness*, and countless others have reported, Sandberg emphasized, “But I also learned that when life sucks you under, you can kick against the bottom, break the surface, and breathe again. I learned that in the face of the void—or in the face of any challenge—you can choose joy and meaning.”

She continued, “I’m sharing this with you today, as you take the next step in your life, you can learn lessons that I learned only in death. Lessons about hope, strength, and the light within us that will not be extinguished.” Sandberg predicted that all of the graduates will face different kinds of adversity on their life’s journey but then suggested that they reflect upon what they will do at such times. “It is the hard days—the times that challenge you to your very core—that will determine who you are. You will be defined not just by what you achieve, but by how you survive.”

Sandberg’s words from both a month after her husband’s death and a year later indicated that her search for joy and meaning and her will to survive were rooted in great part in her connections with others. On the Facebook post she spoke about learning to

ask for help and being grateful for all of the support she has received from family and friends.

To Manage the 3 P's

In speaking with the graduates she quoted the work of psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman whom many consider the “father of positive psychology.” She noted that Seligman identified “three P’s—personalization, pervasiveness, and permanence—that are critical to how we bounce back from hardship. The seeds of resilience are planted in the way we process the negative events in our lives.” The 3 P’s include:

Personalization refers to the belief that in some way we are at fault for the adversity in our life, even when there is no evidence to support such an assumption. Sandberg described that her husband died in seconds from a cardiac arrhythmia, and she had wondered if she could have taken an action that would have prevented his death. “His doctors had not identified his coronary disease. I was an economics major; how could I have?” Feeling at fault or guilty paralyzes us from discovering more effective ways of coping.

Pervasiveness involves the assumption that a noteworthy adverse event will affect all parts of our life, depriving us of finding any relief from our pain or any opportunity to deal more constructively with the event. Sandberg observed that she was more fortunate than other women who have lost a spouse, including not having to worry about negative financial consequences. However, other anxieties remained, but she slowly experienced parts of her life that were not filled with despair but rather with hope.

Permanence is rooted in the belief that our sadness will never disappear, that it will haunt us for the rest of our lives. In moments of intense loss and sadness, it is difficult to believe that at some point overwhelming negative emotions will not only lessen but we will slowly begin to experience joy. It is not that we forget the losses in our lives, but rather they become less intense, less dominant, less consuming. Happiness slowly filters back into our everyday existence. There is a fascinating field of study in psychology labeled “affective forecasting.” Research in this field indicates that our ability to predict what emotions we will experience and for how long in response to certain situations is rather poor.

Sandberg noted that a psychologist friend offered another suggestion, one that I believe can be helpful but unless proposed carefully is open to misinterpretation. The suggestion is to consider “how much worse things can be.” Sandberg stated, “This was completely counterintuitive; it seemed like the way to recover was to try and find positive thoughts.” She communicated her reservations to her friend and he replied, “Dave could have had that same cardiac arrhythmia while he was driving your children.” When he said this, Sandberg “felt overwhelming gratitude that my family was alive. That gratitude overtook some of the grief.”

I agree with Sandberg’s next observation that “finding gratitude and appreciation is a key to resilience. People who take the time to list things they are grateful for are happier and healthier.” In my writings and presentations I have echoed similar sentiments on many occasions. However, to be asked to think about “how much worse things can be” can easily be experienced as an insensitive recommendation. I recall seeing a woman in therapy who recently had a miscarriage. She reported that someone said to her, “At least you’re still young enough to have another baby.”

She said upon hearing this comment she felt that this person, perhaps well-intentioned, was minimizing or not validating her sadness. “I know I could still have another baby, but it would have been more comforting if this person would have first acknowledged what I had gone through before telling me how things could be better.” The lesson is that if we ask people to think of how much worse things could be or for what they should still be grateful, we must first acknowledge their emotions of sadness and anxiety. I sense that Sandberg’s finding her friend’s suggestion as helpful was based on knowing him as a caring person and as someone who had validated her pain and sorrow in other ways.

Connections and Gratitude: A Vital Force

At the end of her commencement address, Sandberg returned once again to the importance of connections in our lives. “It is the greatest irony of my life that losing my husband helped me find deeper gratitude—gratitude for the kindness of my friends, the love of my family, the laughter of my children. My hope for you is that you can find that gratitude—not just on the good days, but on the hard ones, when you will really need it.”

As one can gather from this month's column, Sandberg's reflections on loss and resilience were highly relevant for me on both a personal and professional level. Her insights about choosing one's attitude in the face of adversity, of appreciating the power of connections, of recognizing and overcoming the emotions and assumptions housed in the 3 P's are important lessons for all of us, whether or not we have experienced intense loss and hardships in our lives. The more we can develop a "resilient mindset," the more equipped we will be to cope effectively with the joys and setbacks that are a part of all of our lives.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>