

Resilience: Hard-Won Wisdom for Living a Better Life (Greitens, Eric)

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.

And when those people reflect on their suffering, they often uncover a similar truth: that struggle helped them to build deep reservoirs of strength.

Not all growth happens this way. But a great deal of our growth does come when we put our shoulder into what's painful. We choose to, or have to, step beyond the margins of our past experience and do something hard and new.

Pain can break us or make us wiser. Suffering can destroy us or make us stronger. Fear can cripple us, or it can make us more courageous.

It is resilience that makes the difference.

To be resilient—to build a full and meaningful life of strength, wisdom, and joy—is not easy. But it's not complicated. We can all do it. To get there, it's not enough to want to be resilient or to think about being resilient. We have to choose to live a resilient life.

I've been fortunate in other ways as well. I've been able to learn from great examples of resilience: refugees who survived genocide, other Navy SEALs who endured the hardest military training in the world, wounded veterans who have rebuilt purposeful lives in the face of devastating wounds.

We all need resilience to live a fulfilling life. With resilience, you'll be more prepared to take on challenges, to develop your talents, skills, and abilities so that you can live with more purpose and more joy.

Of all the virtues we can learn, no trait is more useful, more essential for survival, and more likely to improve the quality of life than the ability to transform adversity into an enjoyable challenge. —MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI

The worst form of stress is an absence of stress, because the feeling that there is no life before death gives rise to a despairing feeling of emptiness in the face of the void. —BORIS CYRULNIK

There are some things which cannot be learned quickly, and time, which is all we have, must be paid heavily for their acquiring. —ERNEST HEMINGWAY

There is only one road to true human greatness:
the road through suffering. —ALBERT EINSTEIN

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.

“The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”

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.

I begin with humility, I act with humility, I end with humility. Humility leads to clarity. Humility leads to an open mind and a forgiving heart. With an open mind and a forgiving heart, I see every person as superior to me in some way; with every person as my teacher, I grow in wisdom. As I grow in wisdom, humility becomes ever more my guide. I begin with humility, I act with humility, I end with humility.

No doubt you’ve read this famous prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Your task is not to begin in a noble place, but to end up in one.

People who hate something in themselves are often harshly critical of others. And people who hate something in themselves find it hard to see honor in someone else.

There are simple standards for measuring the worth of people’s critiques. Do they actually care about you? Do they just talk at you, or are they willing to sweat with you? Have they put any effort into what they are saying to you?

Someone who cares about you, sweats with you, and corrects you when you need to be corrected is one of the most precious things in life: a true friend.

Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it!

Remember what comes first. A focus on happiness will not lead to excellence. A focus on excellence will, over time, lead to happiness.

One needs something to believe in, something for which one can have whole-hearted enthusiasm. One needs to feel that one's life has meaning, that one is needed in this world."

Any fool can learn from his mistakes. The wise man learns from the mistakes of others.

"Well, if you don't want to be smart, then you better be hard"?

You know why a lot of people don't do this, Walker? Because they are embarrassed to think of themselves as being more than they are today. And here's the crazy part: they don't have to share this with anyone, and yet the very idea that they might think of themselves as capable of greatness causes them to imagine a thousand critics, and they constrain their own sense of who they can be. Shot down by a ghost sniper of their own creation

The schools that produced Shakespeare and Jefferson and Darwin had some writing materials, some printed books—and that was it. Imagine you're a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old school kid at Radley Hall in England in 1837. Here are some of the questions on your winter exam: Why is not virtue either *παθος* or *δυναμις*? Give Aristotle's reasons (4) why true self-love cannot exist in vicious men. Find the length of an arc whose chord is 18, and the chord of half the arc $10\frac{1}{3}$. Give the characters of Alfred the Great, Cardinal Wolsey, Henry the Eighth, and Queen Elizabeth. How are Peterborough, Constantinople, Edinburgh, and Paris severally situate[d] with regard to London? Can you imagine passing that test, Walker? I can't.

Millions of people, in all walks of life and in every endeavor, create distractions and excuses for themselves by focusing on tools rather than on character. They'd rather, as Socrates warned, focus on what they have than on what they are. But you know better than that. No tool can take the place of character.

We sow a thought and reap an act; We sow an act and reap a habit; We sow a habit and reap a character; We sow a character and reap a destiny. —ANONYMOUS

But it's not true. Most lives aren't that neat. When you read a good biography, or you come to know a good friend, what you begin to see is that the direction of that person's life is shaped not by a single turning point, but by thousands of days, each filled with small, unspectacular decisions and small, unremarkable acts that make us who we are.

Your life builds not by dramatic acts, but by accumulation.

Because magic's fun. It's fun to watch a person get sawed in half and put back together. And it's fun to think that after a lifetime of laziness someone can suddenly produce great work. It's easy and comforting to believe that a single moment's

kindness can wipe out a lifetime habit of cruelty. It's fantastic to believe that the man who's always been a coward will awaken and find courage.

People like to imagine that they will "rise to the occasion." They taught us in the Teams that people rarely do. What happens, in fact, is that when things get really hard and people are really afraid, they sink to the level of their training.

You train your habits. And if a critical moment does come, all you can be is ready for it.

You've never been afraid of hard work, Walker. And that's the only kind of magic you need to believe in. You don't need a turning point, an epiphany, a miracle moment to change your life. How many people have put off the necessary, unglamorous work of building habits because they spend their lives waiting for an epiphany that never comes? Don't wait. Don't wait a single day. Live.

There's one sure way to build self-respect: through achievement. A child who learns to tie her own shoes grows in confidence. So does a child who learns to spell his name. So does a student who learns to stand in front of class and read his poem. Self-respect isn't something a teacher or a coach or a government can hand you. Self-respect grows through self-created success: not because we've been told we're good, but when we know we're good.

Willingness to fail, a willingness to begin again—

Today I'm writing about the single most important habit to build if you want to be resilient: the habit of taking responsibility for your life.

Ask them: "What are you responsible for?" The more responsibility people take, the more resilient they are likely to be. The less responsibility people take—for their actions, for their lives, for their happiness—the more likely it is that life will crush them. At the root of resilience is the willingness to take responsibility for results.

You are not responsible for everything that happens to you. You are responsible for how you react to everything that happens to you.

The first word out of the mouth of the complainer is almost always "they." "They" were unfair. "They" didn't. "They" wouldn't. "They" can't. "They" distracts from "I." "They" suggests that someone else is in control. On the other hand, as soon as we say "I am responsible for . . .," we take control of something.

Excellence is difficult. An excuse is seductive. It promises to end hardship, failure, and embarrassment. Excellence requires pain. An excuse promises that you'll be pain-free.

People who think you weak will offer you an excuse. People who respect you will offer you a challenge.

If we had an external enemy who consistently forced us to make bad choices, to engage in self-destructive behavior, to be less than we are capable of, we'd declare war. Why should we act any differently when the enemy is inside?

With nothing meaningful in life, nothing is interesting.

Rosa Parks, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa. They aren't often thought of as warriors, but they endured more hardship and inspired more courageous commitment than most generals. If people want to talk like warriors, they also have to embrace the true warrior's purpose: serving something greater than yourself.

Nietzsche said: "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

"The ultimate aim of the quest," wrote Campbell, "must be neither release nor ecstasy for oneself, but the wisdom and the power to serve others."

In everything that happens to us, daily life gives us the opportunity to do philosophy.

Think of what Socrates asked his fellow citizens to do: Examine your lives. Take a disciplined look at your actions. Test your beliefs. Ask the hard questions. Discover how much you don't know.

In our security and comfort, we slip quietly into the false expectation that life will afford us complete happiness. We believe that we will move only from pleasure to pleasure, from joy to joy. When tragedy strikes or hardship hits, too many of us feel ambushed by pain, betrayed by the present, despairing of the future.

Resilience is not a path to perfection. Instead, we seek to be resilient in the face of life's imperfect reality.

Without results, all the kind intentions in the world are just a way of entertaining ourselves.

The fight is won or lost far away from witnesses . . . in the gym, and out there on the road, long before I dance under those lights. —MUHAMMAD ALI

We can practice self-examination. Seneca recommended looking back over each day's actions before going to bed. He said that you should ask yourself: "What evils have you cured yourself of today? What vices have you fought? In what sense are you better? . . . When the torch has been taken away and my wife, already used to my habits, has fallen silent, I examine my entire day and measure what I have done and said. I hide nothing from myself."

You know that the will to win is cheap and common, while the will to train is rare and noble.

The magnitude of the challenge × the intensity of your attack = your rate of growth

As the novelist Anthony Trollope wrote, “A small daily task, if it be really daily, will beat the labours of a spasmodic Hercules.”

Many programs run by the professional improvers of society are built on education, not training—on delivering facts rather than strengthening practice. Knowledge matters. But our efforts too often stop at knowledge, because it’s easier to measure what we’ve told people than it is to measure how we’ve changed people. It is easier to preach to people than to practice with them.

Maybe. Maybe it’s half. But it’s half at most. Knowing is usually the easy part. Doing is much harder.

To work through pain is not to make it disappear, but to make it mean something different for us—to turn it into wisdom.

Unnecessary suffering is masochistic rather than heroic.” If you can avoid unnecessary pain, avoid it. If you can’t avoid it, then you have to choose your attitude toward it.

What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task.”

Some people snap a rubber band on their wrist every time they catch themselves putting themselves down, while others jump up and down while smiling (it sounds nuts, but you do feel better).

There are lots of ways to do this, but all of the strategies have two features in common. One, they make you aware of your self-talk. Two, you start to change the voice in your head. (This, again, is hard. It takes a lot of mental effort and attention, and many people simply aren’t willing to do the work.)

Talking positively to yourself will feel different at first: maybe it will come as a relief, or maybe it will just feel fake. But remember that changing the tone of your self-talk won’t work if you try it only once.

Positive self-talk is the same: if you make it a practice, it works. Ultimately, you’ll discover that, in tough moments, you’ve got a voice in your head that recognizes difficulty but still helps you to see possibility; it will become a part of who you are.

Effective self-talk is usually simple. It's usually brief, even dull. A phrase is often better than a sentence, and a word will sometimes do just fine. Here are some examples researchers have collected from successful athletes: Good job, do it again. Concentrate. Breathe. Stay tough. There is a difference between self-talk that is aspirational and self-talk that is delusional. The difference is not in the words. The difference lies in practice. You can try to talk yourself up before a big contest, but if you haven't done the training, you won't believe your own talk. Self-talk tied to disciplined practice enhances your power. Self-talk divorced from practice is just self-delusion.

They reminded us that tonight was going to be our first full night of Hell Week. "And you men have many, many more nights to go." We watched the sun slip lower and make contact with the ocean. As the sun slipped beneath the waves, something broke in our class. Out of the corner of my right eye, I saw men running for the bell. First two men ran, then two more, and then another. The instructors had carried the bell out with us to the beach. To quit, you rang the bell three times. I could hear it ringing: Ding, ding, ding. Ding, ding, ding. Ding, ding, ding. A pack of men quit together. Weeks earlier, we had started our indoctrination phase with more than 220 students. Only 21 originals from class 237 would ultimately graduate with our class. We had more men quit at that moment than at any other time in BUD/S training. Who would have thought, after having to swim fifty meters underwater, endure drown-proofing and surf torture and the obstacle course and four-mile runs in the sand and two-mile swims in the ocean and log PT and countless sit-ups and flutter kicks and pushups and hours in the cold and the sand, that the hardest thing to do in all of BUD/S training would be to stand on the beach and watch the sun set? It was the darkest moment for so many because they weren't thinking about what was right in front of us. They were thinking about everything that was to come. And in their minds, what they hadn't yet seen or touched or tasted turned monstrous.

People quit when they started to think about how hard something was going to be.

When things feel too big to handle, break 'em down. It worked for you then. It'll work for you now.

Ernest Hemingway argued that "cowardice . . . is almost always simply a lack of ability to suspend the functioning of the imagination."

People who are unprepared can be unhinged by even the smallest of things."

The third is that people who give advice or help, or who coach or teach, often feel that if what they tell people to do is simple, then they won't be considered experts.

Some experts like to pretend that they have some kind of special, even sacred knowledge.

There's been a lot of research on gratitude in recent years, and nearly all of it backs up what Cicero said two thousand years ago: it's "the parent of all the other virtues."

People who practice gratitude are less stressed and less depressed than those who don't. They're less likely to be overwhelmed by bad fortune. They even sleep better at night. One finding stands out: of all the personality traits psychologists studied, nothing did more than a sense of gratitude to promote happiness.

You hold on to your pain because part of you would rather be right than happy.

Just as a person locked in isolation loses touch with reality, ideas that never have meaningful interaction with other ideas become erratic and fragile. As their ideas deteriorate in strength, many people lock them up all the more tightly and react all the more angrily when they are challenged. In this way, people who were once vibrant, interesting, and productive become stale, boorish, and self-destructive.

First, why am I here?

Second, what's going on around me?

Third, what am I going to do about it?

Four, how will my actions affect others?

Every day we are shaped by the people we spend time with. Be with people who are the way you want to be. If you want to be excellent, be around people who pursue excellence. If you want to be happy, be around people who are happy. If you are around resilient people, you're far more likely to be resilient yourself.

Aristotle viewed friendship as an essential requirement of both happiness and excellence.

He believed that friendship could be based on one of three things: utility, pleasure, or virtue.

Friendships of utility bring together people who are useful to each other. Think of business partners, coworkers, teammates. Ideally you treat each other with respect and kindness.

Then there are friendships of pleasure. There are some people we just like being around. They make us happy. Every person should have friends like these; we have a blast with them. It's also true that you can enjoy being around such friends for years and then reach a point when you no longer find each other amusing, and the relationship may die.

Over time, you may grow to like each other. But you're initially drawn together because you're useful to one another. Such relationships are part of every human life and can be genuinely valuable. But such friendships can also be fleeting: they are prone to disappear as soon as you stop being mutually useful.

A friendship based in virtue and excellence is different.

This is important, because when people read Aristotle today and see that he thinks that the ultimate friendship is one based in "virtue,"

But if you see that Aristotle is talking about friends who enrich one another's lives, who help one another live their best possible lives, then what he's saying starts to make sense.

Aristotle points out that your deep and true friends—sometimes he calls them your "perfect" friends—can also be pleasant and useful, but they don't have to constantly work at it. And neither do you. You aren't fearful that your true friends will lose interest. With your closest friends, it's often enough to simply be together.

Aristotle argues that such friendships are an end in themselves. It's not that we pursue them because they will help us to live an excellent life; we make time to create such friendships because they are part of an excellent life. In fact, Aristotle suggests—and I also believe—that we can't live our best lives or become our best selves without these kinds of friendships. The best friends support us, challenge us, inspire us. And we do the same for them.

When all I thought about was my own pain and how the world had dealt me an unfair hand, I became weaker. When I thought of the needs of my team, my friends, I became stronger.

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There's a great line on this from the mathematician Blaise Pascal. He once wrote at the end of a letter to a friend, "I have made this longer than usual, because I have not had time to make it shorter."

Part of the answer: You cannot do that because you want to do it for the wrong reasons. You want to do it to feel powerful and to satisfy your ego. And part of the answer is that you have not earned the privilege of training someone else. You don't know what you are doing. You are very liable to hurt someone, and if some good result is produced, it will come by accident rather than intention.

People form even deeper bonds when they serve together. "Serve" is not quite the right word, but it's better than "work." People can work with others and not feel any sense of common cause. Being in the same place, working for the same boss, and even doing the same tasks can breed resentment, alienation, competition, and distrust just as easily as they can bring people together.

Serving together is different. When we share a purpose with others, our work creates a shared connection. When the work matters, we're more often able to overcome personal differences in service of a shared goal.

In other words, the more vital people consider a mission, the more they'll learn to deal with people who rub them the wrong way.

That's helpful to remember if you're ever on a team that's starting to tear itself apart in the face of hardship. Often people react to these breakdowns by trying to ensure that there's more "understanding," or that people's "feelings are respected." Sometimes that's essential. But much of the time, when animosities and jealousies rule the day, it's because the work simply isn't important enough for people to put their differences aside. We're often told that work that's too intense can break a team. Maybe—but intense work that matters can just as often save a team.

But all resilient teams share one thing: an ability to manage many interests while serving a purpose that is larger than the interests of any one person.

When things are hard, sometimes the best thing you can do is to drown what's wrong in a sea of what's right.

As usual, Seneca captured the idea clearly: "At the moment we go to sleep, let us say, in joy and gaiety: 'I have lived. I have traveled the path which Fortune assigned to me.' If a god gives us the next day as a bonus, let us receive it with joy . . . Whoever has said to himself 'I have lived' can arise each day to an unexpected gift. Hurry up and live, and consider each day as a completed life."