

Dangerous Memories, Faith and Resilience

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The theologian Johannes Baptist Metz raises a sensitive problematic in his explication of the theological category of “dangerous memories” (102). By dangerous memories he refers to the subversive experiences of victims that result into ongoing sufferings. Tragically enough, many people are carrying dangerous memories in their systems, which can result either into individual sufferings or collective sufferings with negative anamnesis (an ongoing remembrance that delves into the past to the present with futuristic projections). Such a sad interpretation of history and experience can however be turned into positive recollections when tied to what Metz calls *memoria passionis* (quoted in Downey 8). “The *memoria passionis* is important because one ties one’s suffering to the sufferings of Jesus and finds meaning in God” (Komboh 90). In this light, Harrington summarizes Metz’s arguments thus: “the story of Jesus’ passion and death constitutes a ‘dangerous memory.’ His memory confronts us with the terrible realities of misunderstanding, injustice and innocent suffering. ...[The] memory [of Jesus] places before us the surprising possibility that God can and does accomplish great things even in the midst of terrible sufferings” (Harrington). It is a reminder that our lives are always bigger than the problems we encounter.

This article recognizes that life spares no one from suffering since we are all vulnerable. We ought to have resources to fall back on for support. Christianity as other faith traditions, urges us to have faith that will support us as we journey through suffering. In this case, resilient faith becomes a source of great support. How do we build a resilient faith that heals our dangerous memories and leads us through suffering? This article examines the impact of resilient faith, assesses how resilient faith can be built in our personal lives for optimal well-being and then draws a conclusion. We begin with stories of human vulnerability because life spares no one from suffering.

Life Spares no one from Sufferings

Two events have shaped my spiritual journey into theodicy. The first was an incident in Jos, Nigeria when we were seminarians in the 1990s. The editor of the local newspaper, *Sunday Standard* lost his wife and five children who were travelling for the weekend to their village. The car skidded off the road into one of the old iron ore mine valleys. Left to mourn them were the editor himself and the daughter (last born of the family) who loved ‘daddy’

and wanted to travel with her father after his official duties at the press house. In African worldview, “while natural evil may be unpredictable, it is not entirely uncontrollable. Natural evil has a cause that must be addressed, or it will repeat itself in another form” (Long 53), but, alas, it is not everything that humans can address and control! Suffering, especially in the forms of fear and worry, then becomes inevitable.

The second event in my life was an encounter with an elderly woman of ninety three years old in San Francisco, California who looked hale and hearty. She narrated to me her life’s nightmares. She lost both parents before she had turned twenty and her three siblings died before she was twenty five years. Her only consolation was her husband and a high school girlfriend. She married her husband not long after the death of her last sibling. Unfortunately, her husband left her for another woman after thirty-one years of marriage at the time her high school girlfriend was going into the convent to become a Catholic nun. For the past thirty seven years she had always gone to the convent to spend some time with her friend whom she believed was the only person that truly understood her. Unfortunately again, her friend had caught dementia in the last three years and could not recognize her anymore. She however visited her every week at the senior living facility. When I asked her why she visited the friend regularly when her friend would not even know she is there. The elderly woman replied: “even though she cannot recognize me and does not know that I have visited, at least I still recognize her and know how she is doing.” When I asked her how she has been able to cope with all these tragedies she smilingly replied: “I have not gotten over them but by the power of my faith in Jesus, I have gone through them.”

Apart from the above two memories which have impact at individual level, there are other dangerous memories scattered around Nigeria that have resulted into the collective suffering of the people. Famous among them are the Jos crises, the continuous herdsmen attacks all over Nigeria, notably on a single village in Benue State that claimed over a hundred people in one night, the frequent bombing of mosques and churches that has changed public worship arrangements; the incessant Boko Haram attacks on innocent people with Chibok and Dapchi Girls becoming epic reference points; the unabated kidnappings and of course, the Corona virus that made Christians world over to witness not just the empty tomb at the 2020 Easter but witness in their empty churches. All of these have threatened the collective security of the people and their impact is obvious.

Returning to the two stories above that raised the problem of suffering, the second story specifically illustrates the power of faith in building resilience and helping people cope with traumatic situations. Faith as defined by the theologian Paul Tillich in his classic, *Dynamics of Faith*, is “the state of being ultimately concerned” (1) and trusting in divine providence.

Resilience on the other hand, is one's ability to respond favourably to a stressful and adverse event that would otherwise have resulted into a great decrease in well-being. "Resilient people 'bounce back' from difficult situations" (Compton and Hoffman 190) to their previous normal functioning states or are able to build a 'steeling effect' from such adversities (traumatic situations) to function even better than their previous states or as expected. Traumatic situations are those adverse and stressful circumstances that could lead to depressive moods. It is hoped that people overcome those negative circumstances and experience post-traumatic growth which "refers to significant changes in life goals and life commitments that require major alteration in one's sense of identity or life narrative" (Compton and Hoffman 189).

The woman in our story shows the power of a faith that builds resilience (henceforth referred to as resilient faith). Resilient faith is a quality of faith that leads us through difficult times, temptations and trials; to even become stronger than our previous state. In this regards, the woman in our story exudes good qualities of optimal well-being, which "refer[s] to states of optimal physical, mental, and emotional health" (Compton and Hoffman 127). She looks physically healthy, volunteers at the local senior living facility, does her physical exercises every day and is always smiling. She is quite a humorous person. The importance of humor to well-being cannot be overemphasized. "Research findings even suggest that physicians should prescribe jokes . . . the defense mechanism of humor, or being able to laugh either at oneself or at a situation, is associated with greater personal adjustment and well-being" (Compton and Hoffman 136). Gleaning from the resilient faith story of the ninety three year old woman therefore, we assess the impact of resilient faith.

The Impact of Resilient Faith

Granted that prolonged exposure to stress reduces resiliency, studies have shown a correlation between religion (faith) and well-being (Greeff and Loubser 288-301; Gunnestad and Thwala 169-185; Bosworth 691-707; Howard 50-53). Despite the fact that there are enormous challenges in measuring people's levels of happiness and well-being, especially in terms of cause and effect in relation to religious affiliation and belief, nevertheless, evidence suggests that people of faith record high mental and physical health. Apparently, religious faith tends to make people more resilient. "Research has been relatively consistent in finding that greater religiousness is significantly related to better mental health and higher subjective well-being" (Compton and Hoffman 229).

In a study in Zambia and Swaziland, Gunnestad and Thwala sampled 217 young orphans who were happy and doing well after losing parents at tender ages. They would "often refer to the Christian faith, both Catholic and Protestant" as the source of their inspiration. It was discovered "that 80.2% of

the orphans interviewed attended church every week” (170). In a similar study among the Xhosa people of South Africa, fifty-one “families who experienced either the death of a child or a serious financial setback” were sampled regarding the role their faith played in their healing/recovery process. “An analysis of the data indicates that spirituality [their faith] is a core aspect that contributed to the resilience of the families” (Greeff and Loubser 291). There are many studies that could be cited, but the few mentioned here only showcase the importance of resilient faith. Then how do we build resilient faith to sustain us in times of crisis?

Building Resilient Faith

Despite the fact that faith is important to our everyday functioning, it could still be fragile. People may lose their faith after going through traumatic condition/s for a long period of time. In order to foster post-traumatic growth in such persons, then developing skills of resilient faith becomes necessary since they have been found useful in healing dangerous memories. Suffice to note that resilience is a process and not an individual trait that some possess and others do not have.

Resilience comes from developing an enormous inner strength enhanced by interaction with cultural values, social support resources such as groups, family and community; and very significantly, the gift and life of faith, which is the key emphasis of this article. “As noted above, resilience is best understood as the result of a process rather than an innate trait. Consequently, one should [or can] speak of pathways to resilience” (Bosworth 700). In building a resilient faith, the question is; what are those circumstances and habits that could lead to a rapid adaptation to traumatic conditions? Drawing on modern empirical studies of post-traumatic growth, this article articulates the various factors that may contribute to resilient faith. Some of these considerations involve one’s external circumstances, such as the cause of an individual’s trauma, one’s family connections, and at times one’s place in society with expected duties/responsibilities. In spite of the fact that these factors may be important, we must draw attention to intrinsic explanations for resilient faith based on piety. One’s “sense of personal agency and trust in God provides important pathways to his [or her] resilience” (Bosworth 700), thence, any useful discussion on building resilient faith must begin with the internal pathways to resilience and shift to the extrinsic pathways that are specific to religious faith.

Internal Pathways

One’s will is very important in holding resilient faith. From personal experience of dealing with tragedies and evidence from researches (Greeff and Loubser 288-301; Gunnestad and Thwala 169-185; Bosworth 691-707; Howard 50-53), we can say there is a strong link between religious faith and

building of a strong will that fosters resilient faith. The belief that once there is the will there is the way holds here. This takes place in the following ways:

Facing Reality: People react to pain differently: while others react in negative ways, others are more positive (optimistic) in handling negative experiences. Resilience stems from optimism but you do not allow such optimism to becloud your sense of reality (Coutu 46-55). With the difficult events surrounding a person's life as he/she lives in pain, one must accept the situation and be opened to allow life take a new meaning. "It seems that success in life owes as much to our willingness to embrace our vulnerabilities as it does to our apparent strengths" (Howard 53). In facing reality, the person of Christian faith ought to align his/her suffering with the passion of Jesus Christ, thus, respond to it without cursing others like Christ hanging in pain on the cross. When Christians keep strong and live their lives well, they become examples of patient suffering to many people in the world. Unfortunately, many tend to be angry at everyone and themselves when in pain and difficulties. One should rather, turn towards a positive turn, and believe "that there can be a bigger story in life that we don't have access to at the moment" (O'Hanlon 29). In sensing our health and positive wellness this understanding leads us to the fact that our lives contribute or add to some divine end goal.

Having the Will to Make Meaning in life: Following the above is making meaning out of terrible situations in life. We should be able to face the down-to-earth reality of a situation without allowing it to weigh us down and "too much positivity is not advantageous to well-being" either (Crompton and Hoffman 40). After reading the article, "Resilience: After a Hurricane," one observes that after tragedies in life, people experience growth in these ways: a) they have to embrace change as part of life and never complain. They should believe that there is no condition in life that is permanent. b) They have to embrace even difficult opportunities to allow for self-discovery and open up for opportunities in life. Even when they cannot succeed in one task/goal, they know they will achieve in another. c) They also have to maintain high optimism and believe that 'even if the sun does not rise today it will rise tomorrow or the next.' d) Lastly, when they are people of faith, they may keep a journal; do meditations and participate in spiritual practices that enhance well-being (APA Help Centre 1-5). In other words, drill out from every experience a meaning that will spice your life.

Hope and Trust in God: Studies show that there is power in positive thinking. Cognitive theories attest to this fact: "Years of research support the conception that how we feel is often determined by what we think about and interpret the events of our lives" (Compton and Hoffman 55). At the same time as happy

people often focus on the positive side of life/events, “In contrast, unhappy people focus on the negativities they perceive” (Compton and Hoffman 56). Developing a positive attitude in life leads to optimism about the future, which leads to hope for brighter things. Optimism brings about self-confidence and perseverance. One persists in the midst of challenges and strives for a better future. Our motto in life should be, ‘failure is not a tragedy but a step forward.’ This is so because, by mere trying and failing you come to know that the already tried path is not a solution to the problem at hand. The next time you begin, you are not beginning from nowhere; you already have an experience to begin with, so, if you try and fail, you try again. The worst thing you can do in life is not to try at all and this is an antidote to pessimism. Recall and believe the scriptures: with God there is mercy, hope and the fullness of redemption (Ps 130); the impossible is made possible (Mt. 19:26, Lk1:37).

Be Ready to Move On: A good “building block of resilience is the ability to make do with whatever is at hand” (Coutu 52). This means having a zest for life. The above hope motivates you and you thrive in the face of challenging situations. Having zest in life means having the energy and vigor to pursue new experiences. Despite the fact that an adverse and stressful event may have taken a toll on you, there is however more to life than that. You may adopt the famous saying in the midst of tough times, ‘when one door closes, another one opens.’ In the face of tragedies, like the loss of loved ones, you simply say without many hard feelings, ‘life continues.’ With this you can turn to the faith community for support.

External Pathways

Faith communities are resourceful in sustaining resilient faith. They have the capability to support your will to stay up and not be subdued by an adversity. From personal pastoral experiences, these three resources are recommendable:

Social/Devotional Groups: Persons in difficult times need strong networks of support within their faith communities to nurture the internal virtues that would sustain them. Pastoral experiences show that the support and structures provided by devotional societies in the Catholic Church help people navigate through difficult times. Researches from Greeff and Loubser (288-301) as well as Gunnestad and Thwala (169-185) show available evidence on how such groups have helped in building resilient faith. The tragedy in the story of Thomas’ doubt of faith is that he was not with the community when Jesus appeared to them (*New American Bible*, John20:19-29). The Church encourages the formation, membership and harnessing of faith groups for witnessing the gospel and giving support, thereby enhancing a resilient faith in members (Can. 298 §1).

Prayer and Meditation: In prayer you are able to submit your petitions to a higher power; release the bottled-up energy in you and are relieved. Medical research shows that meditation is helpful in coping with pain (Robins et al. 511–518). One of the most used Christian meditative processes is “prayer of personal reminiscence” (Hassel 1). It is helpful for the healing of memories. This meditation pattern is based in St. Augustine’s *Confession*; a classic in Christian spirituality. It is patterned after how Augustine experienced deep healing for all his past sins, resentments and painful memories. People have tried this prayer and found it very helpful for healing of memories. This corroborates the research by the Harvard professor emeritus of medicine, Jon Kabat-Zinn who consistently working on the role of science and meditation, argues that meditation changes the way the brain functions and enhances well-being (33-47).

Reading the Scriptures: Religious readings, most especially the scriptures are very consoling. A reflective reading of scriptures like the *Lectio Divina* that was popularized in the monastic rules of Saints Pachomius, Augustine, Basil and Benedict is a recommendable practice that is fast gaining acceptance in contemporary times for facilitating intimate dialogue with God and enabling the discovery of special spiritual insights. Such readings offer a person greater meaning in life by shaping a world view which prepares a person for life’s ups and downs; and may strengthen one to be more resilient in the face of adverse circumstances. The wisdom literature of the Bible is helpful in this regard. Wisdom literature of the Bible comprises books like the Psalms, Proverbs, Book of Wisdom, Job, Ecclesiastes, Solomon’s Canticle of Canticles and Ecclesiasticus. There are inspiring passages like Psalm 126: 5: “Those who sow in tears will reap with cries of joy.” To derive strength from the scriptures we need to express our faith by increasing our energy level to put into action our positive meditations.

Expressing an Action-Filled Resilient Faith

As Christians, we are followers of Jesus and should always adopt the Jesus’ strategy for survival popularly known as *solution-oriented spirituality*. Jesus was a practical man with practical solutions to problems. At the same time holding our spiritual balance to find meaning in suffering beyond the “here and now,” we should on the other hand avoid living on luck. Evolve a plan to get out of the current predicament. As an action oriented person when Jesus wanted to feed a multitude, He first got bread before asking a blessing from the Father (Mat. 14:13-21, Mk 6: 30-44, Lk 9:10-17, Jn 6:1-14). Another example is in the healing of the man born blind; “He spat on the ground, made some mud, and applied it to the man’s eyes. Then He told him, ‘Go, wash in the Pool of Siloam’ (which means ‘sent’)” (Jn 9:6-7). In the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30, Lk 17:11-27), the problem was with the man who did not invest but buried the allotted talent. Applying analogical imaginations in

biblical interpretation (Tracy 101-107), one can surmise that the Lord ‘blesses our effort’ and doing nothing could become doing wrong, thus, following Jesus in its practical understanding could mean striving for a solution by doing our best possible and leaving the rest to God. In following Jesus’ *solution-oriented spirituality*, however, this article recommends the following steps in post-traumatic experiences that are helpful in handling dangerous memories:

- ♦ Be *clear* on what you want to do going forward. We all have capabilities. The father of strength psychology, Donald O. Clifton “noticed a major problem: The field of psychology was based almost entirely on the study of what is wrong with people. He wondered if it would be more important to study what is right with people” (Caterson, Liesveld and Pace 18). Remember therefore, that difficulties, when taken positively will not destroy a person but help him/her realize hidden potentials.
- ♦ Be *concise* in what you want to do. The problem is people often do not know what they want or what is good for them. During those times, you can seek the help of a counsellor or spiritual director.
- ♦ Be *compelling* by being rational enough to distinguish between conditional optimism and faith. Conditional optimism places limits on God and gives God deadlines, for example, a person without a serious relationship may pray “by this time next year I know I will be married in Jesus name” or “as you leave this church, all your problems will be solved in Jesus’ name.” On the other hand, faith opens us to unreserved possibilities no matter what it takes and for how long: “stepping out in good faith, we create the bridge to the next place in our lives” (O’Hanlon 35). To give an example, Jesus would pray “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42).
- ♦ Be *consistent* with your strategy and do not give up. The value of consistency for personal and professional development cannot be emphasized. Jesus says “whoever endures to the end shall be saved” (Mt 24:13). Already, psychology studies have associated consistency with high performance and success (Nuutila et al. 73-83): “And let [your] perseverance be perfect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4).
- ♦ Be *committed* to the end. The saying goes, ‘nothing good comes easy.’ Note; whatever paths you undertake in life, there are going to be obstacles. In spite of the ups and down, hold on to the one thing of most value – that is the one thing that connects you with your inner passion, no matter what it is, hold onto and keep on pushing – always push on. Our faith tells us that Jesus will not abandon us. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8).

Taking these practical steps leads to the faith of the young innocent Mary: “May it be done to me according to your will” (Lk1:38). This is a self surrender that is well experienced with Jesus’ theological abandonment on the cross: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk23:46). Despite the fact that an innocent suffering and death, which constitutes some dangerous memory, in Metz’s call for joining our suffering to the *memoria passionis* of Jesus, it means like Jesus’ experience, God will not abandon us “to final humiliation and defeat. There is still a future [even] for the dead. The new life and creation illustrated in Jesus is offered to all. We are part of a community that transcends time, space, life, and death” (McLean). We shall rebound with resilient faith.

Conclusion

Having a resilient faith is not about fashioning a world without problems or challenges. It is rather responding in a positive way, whether in the short, medium or long term, to the adverse situations/events that occur in our lives with an inner vitality vivified by faith. This is exactly what resilient faith does in the face of dangerous memories that could have crippled us. The beauty of resilient faith is that it awakens one to discover one’s inner strengths and build on them. At the same time as not denying the importance of negative emotions for survival at times, resilient faith holds that people live happier when they are unconditionally optimistic and have good social connections wherever they find themselves in life. At the same time as relying on the graces of God, we ought to cooperate with divine graces by expressing an action-filled faith in the midst of tragedies: “work out your salvation” with “God who works in you both to desire and to act,” says the Apostle Paul (Phil 2:12-13). Why? There is a strong connection between religious faith and resilience which leads to healing of dangerous memories, while still trusting in God.

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