

Good morning, friends. It is so good to see you, even if on Zoom...scrolling through your videos, faces, and names has been an encouragement to me this past year and a half, new folks and old folks...It is so good to be together in all the ways we can! And it feels good to be helping out Bob and Angela. This pandemic has been terribly stressful for ministers of all denominations...with burn out, illness, exhaustion and early retirement numbers away up..I want to take care of my ministers!

Because of that, retirees who can are being pressed into service as temporary, virtual, and interim ministers, and that's what I've been up to this year. It's been a long learning curve of new tricks for this old dog, I can tell you! And you know, it's not true that you can't teach an old dog a new trick; it just take more patience, and the same is true of people. So...Here we Go!

This morning I want to talk about resilience, which is a physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual skill that allows us to keep on keeping on...living our life fully through all of the changes, disasters, stresses, illnesses, and losses of our lives. As I start I need to remark that my task yesterday was to muster a good deal of resilience in the face of a problematic internet connection. If it starts acting up today, Bob is ready to read this text for me. Let's cross our fingers!

These days every new challenge does seem like a pile on. The past 18 months have been, it seems, just one thing after another; pandemic, politics, police, storms and fires, lies and insurrection, and then, more pandemic, more lies, more disasters. The inability of our nation to unite around a common threat and get most people vaccinated is a current crisis and it feels like a terrible predictor of our future society and world.

But...here I am. And here you are. Worshiping together on a platform most of us had not even heard of and would have rejected as a poor substitute if we had been asked, two years ago. And I hope, that in spite of all the bad news, the conflicting advice, and the privations, you realize just how ...resilient you have been! Here you are! Being resilient doesn't mean being upbeat and ready for anything with a smile, all the time. Not at all! It means, coping, most of the time, and sometimes while fighting a bad mood, but still living, growing, learning.

A year ago May, just as we started to realize just how long and slow "ending the crisis" was going to be, and I started wondering how much resilience I had to cope with it all, my dog Mosby had a crisis, and I got to watch how he coped. I was inspired, and I want to share his story and the things he reminded me of, with you.

**SLIDE1 with voice over** So. This is Mosby. Isn't he cute? And.... notice the attitude? Mosby thinks his job in life is to protect his family from all threats. For instance, pickup trucks, skateboards, bicycles, and especially any member of that extremely dangerous species Canine.

It makes peaceable walks a challenge! So, we walk him in the early morning and installed a doggie door for him so he can have quality outside time in the safety and privacy of our small, walled back yard.

One morning, I discovered him in our nice safe back yard with blood all over his face. The vet said it was probably a racoon he had tangled with, and she commented that he was lucky to have come out of it with just a slashed face. She brought him back to me with a cleaned-up face, antibiotics, and a cone. Want to see? **SLIDE2** Aw, poor Mosby. All he was doing was protecting his family.

I'd heard plenty of jokes about dogs and cones, but watching a dog get accustomed to a cone, ...it's pathetic.

They bump into everything...which jerks their head.

They have to learn how to get at their food and water  
they can't use their doggie door,  
can't groom themselves, or scratch their ears.

They can go on walks but their senses of sight, hearing, and smell are all changed.

And if they are a dog of short stature, their little necks get tired...but if they droop even a little, their cone catches on the ground and trips them up.

A cone, in other words, is a major adversity for a dog, totally puts masks to shame, and well worth all the anger and frustration Mosby could throw at it. Which he did at first. He tried over and over to escape all these changes by charging out his ....now too small....doggie door. (Doggie Denial) He growled at us when we tried to help. (Doggie Displaced Anger) He curled up in his bed and stared at us with his big eyes. (Doggie Depression). Denial, Displaced Anger, and Depression are three enemies of resilience, and I bet they sound familiar!

Oh, gosh, we felt for him! We pampered him and fed him his favorite fancy food from a spoon while he alternately moped and tried and failed to do things the old ways. Poor little guy! Lots of changes to cope with, lots of learning to do, and his nose probably hurt too. We went to bed with heavy hearts that night!

But the next morning, cone and all, Mosby was ready for his walk. Insistent even. So I leashed him up and off we went. And from that moment on, in spite of all the bumps and annoyances, the changes and the aggravations, which went on for a week, Mosby by gosh led his life. He's fine now. **(SLIDE3)...let people get a good look at it, then, then morph back to me.**

Material objects...like elastic, show resilience when they snap back to their original shape after they have been stressed by stretching. This is simple resilience and it is very important! A

few weeks back, when I hauled out the cloth masks I'd stashed away, that their elastic, which was very resilient during Pandemic Phase One, was, well, flabby. I could relate. I did not feel quite as snappy about starting in with the masks again, either! However, with no resilience, the old elastic just wasn't doing the job anymore. After a few days of procrastinating, due to lack of my own snap-back, I made some new ones.

Living beings are more complex than elastic bands, of course, and snap back isn't all there is to resilience. In our case, resilience is not just going back to the old normal, it is learning to cope with the new normal. Mosby's resilience showed, not only when he got his physical energy back and his face began to heal, but when he learned new things...

- To manipulate his cone so he could get at his food and water bowls.
- to not try to go out his doggie door,
- to let me know he wanted me to let him out or scratch his ears.

We know we are showing resilience in the face of adversity when we are learning...learning about the new situation and its demands, learning the new skills we need to cope, or learning how to keep up our spirits in hard times. What did you learn during the pandemic? Most of you learned to Zoom! Since I learned about Zoom in my first post-retirement gig with the UUA, I spent March and April, 2020, helping folks...most church folks, and especially our older folks, master Zoom, and I have to say, it was inspiring. We fought with old hardware and weak internet connections, and a bunch of frustrations and a learning curve that seemed pretty steep and ....we got everybody on line. Congratulations! That is resilience.

Here's another way Mosby showed resilience. In spite of what must have been a sudden, baffling, and very annoying set of changes in his life, he went right on living it. Eager for his walk in spite of not being able to hear or see quite right, eager for his food even if he had to relearn how to get to it, eager for affection and even eager to get out in the back yard and bark at his neighbor canines.

Of course, Mosby is a dog. And dogs specialize in living in the moment. They do not tax themselves with worries about things to come, or how things have changed, or how they are going to live. One of the ongoing spiritual lessons of our pets is observing this wholehearted way of living. We humans don't come to that naturally. What we come to naturally is anxiety, worry about what might happen next, anger about what should be and isn't, and dissatisfaction about what is. That inner restlessness and ability to plan...that sort of the essence of who we are, uncomfortable as it is! That's what sets us apart from the dogs, and why the dogs rely on us totally to shop for their food and get them to the vet and stay stocked up with poop bags, right? It's our real purpose in life, along with scratching their ears. It's what we are good at.

But if anticipating, worrying, and being dissatisfied is the ONLY thing we are good at, we may have a lot of purpose, but we will have precious little joy. We have to learn, then, to be like our dogs. We need poets to remind us, as Mary Oliver does, that, the past is the past, and the present is what your life is.. So come to the pond, or the river of your imagination, or the harbor of your longing, and put your lips to the world. And live your life.<sup>1</sup>

How did you live your life during Pandemic Phase I? I myself reverted to type, it seems! I jumped into virtual ministry. But, I also tried out personal training, I became addicted to jigsaw puzzles...which reminds me, anybody want to do a trade? You have to be living in the moment to focus your mind on those tiny pieces! Last Summer, I dug up all the obsolete grass in my front yard...inch by inch. Last Spring I worked as a volunteer usher at one of the vaccination centers. What fun that was! I even saw some of you there! Thanks! Your vaccination helps us all! Well, I bet you did that sort of thing. You lived your life in spite of masks and lock downs, worries and unwelcome restrictions. You lived you life! Your dog would be so proud! Most of you have been through plenty in your lives....crisis, change, illness, relationship and work issues, and you've learned a thing or two! And you know that your ancestors went through much worse, survived, and passed some good resilience genes down to you. So let's ask ourselves how we can nurture that resilience...so that we can move on in good health from COVID19 and be better prepared for what comes next in our lives.

Now my Mosby didn't give a thought to how he could increase his resilience! That's a very, well...human question to ask. But...let's ask it!

To be resilient, you need some basic habits of mental and physical health. You know...enough sleep, exercise, good food, social interaction, care with the chemicals we so easily become dependent on. You need to go on your morning walk every day...or whatever your version of exercise is. If you are a little Yorkie who must suddenly carry around a great big cone, it is good to start with a strong neck...even if it now has to get stronger. So....take care of your health, physical and mental.

The second set of habits that promote resilience are habits of clear, logical thinking as well as heart-felt emotional intelligence. It's hard to bounce back when you indulge in fuzzy cognition...from wishful thinking, conspiracy theories, to denial and willful cluelessness. Fuzzy thinking, I'm afraid, is more endemic than the pandemic these days and that means that our own individual, group, and political good thinking is all the more critical. So, resilience means checking our facts, remembering our logic, knowing the ways we are likely to try to kid ourselves, and conversing with others who look to finding truth over being doctrinaire. Those are practically articles of faith in this congregation. Yeah, Unitarian Universalists!

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<sup>1</sup> All We Can Save (p. 348). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Mosby's first reaction to his cone was to go on as if nothing had changed. Denial. It is one of the most powerful kinds of human fuzzy thinking. In denial mode, he tried repeatedly to escape out his doggie door, now too small for his increased diameter, with painful results. He was in no mood to pay attention to me, either, although I could have helped. Thinking he knows it all is a persistent cognitive bias of his of which, I'm sorry to say, he is completely unaware. You are smarter than that, right? Wisdom is knowing what you don't know and getting help when you need it. Intellectual honesty and facing the facts is, in the end, the key to finding solutions and learning what we need to learn in a new or stressful situation.

That's no fun...just necessary. Being resilient, you see, doesn't mean you will feel great all the time. It means you will be able to live your life, learn, and grow, in spite of feeling bad. Want to hear that again? Being resilient does not mean you will feel great all the time. It means you will be able to live your life, learn, and grow, despite feeling bad. While your nose still hurts and your ears don't seem to work and you have maneuver a strange new obstacle to get to your own water dish, the way to keep your spirits up as well as to master your new situation, is to learn something. Figure it out. Make something work.

And that is a matter of attending to our spiritual life.

We UU's use the word "spiritual" very broadly; here's one definition. The spiritual part of our lives is our attention to meaning and cultivating a sense of mental and emotional calm.

So if somebody had clapped MY head in a cone and wouldn't take it off, I would not be a happy camper. I would be...disabled and that would take adjusting to. Pain and Problem! Mosby would understand. But if I wasn't careful, I'd add to my own pain and problems with my undisciplined mind. "How dare they!" I might say to myself. "This is so unfair." "I must have done something wrong to deserve this." "What's wrong with me!". Mosby knows nothing of such self-talk, but I do...and you probably do, too. I have had to practice shutting down such talk, or talking back to it, which I learned to do in meditation and in therapy. I'm still subject to all the painful disappointments, disabilities, and changes that we all are, but I work at not making them worse, by cultivating calm and reminding myself not to believe everything I find myself thinking!

And I pay attention to the things that give meaning to my life and try to live out what I think of as my purpose. I'm more complicated than my little dog, of course, who is not able to sooth is cone sufferings by remembering that he got them doing what the thinks of as his duty. But I can remember that...and believe, me, during the week that I was up and down letting him in and out of the back yard, scratching his ears, and giving him his pills, I reminded myself that he got into this condition earnestly...if misguidedly... protecting me from a predator who could

have easily been three times his size. Remembering that love and meaning was an important part of MY spiritual life that week, as I remembered what is important to me.

Another skill that fosters resilience is the skill of keeping the end in mind...that is to say, to be able to act on your values and goals even when you are distraught or depressed. I learned the crucial value of this....from you!

You have probably heard that the first dozen years of my ministry here were not smooth. Some wonderful things happened, but also, we kept getting bogged down by controversies, some of which were pretty serious. But somehow, each time I started thinking, "if this goes on for another season, I'm out of here," or "if they keep doing that, people are going to start leaving this congregation...nobody wants to belong to a church that is so conflicted," or some such thing, the conflict stopped. Not because I'd voiced my thoughts, but...because it seemed that there was some group wisdom that kept the congregation from going so far into its conflicts that it really hurt itself. Somehow, at those moments, someone or some group would say or do something unexpectedly wise, and they would be unexpectedly followed.

Eventually I linked this group behavior to the church's very early history, when, the elders told me, they faced all kinds of adversities but kept on going. They said, we told each other, "Just keep the doors open, Whatever happens, just keep the doors open!" There was a lot of adversity and conflict in the first 30 years of the congregation's life, and then in the next 12 after I arrived, but this was also a congregation that knew down to its DNA what its primary goal was...Keep the Doors Open....and was able to act on it even in hard times. And look what came of that! Wow!

What's your end in life right now? Mine is to continue to be of service, and to keep in touch, virtually, if necessary, with my friends and loved ones. Hence, a little work, some computer gaming with my siblings and our young adult kids, some volunteer work for the city, and living as lightly on the earth as I can. What are your goals and ends?

By the way, institutions, societies, and nations also experience resilience, and because they are made up of people, their resilience resembles the human kind; it is not only a matter of bouncing back, but of learning, growing, and developing greater ability to face the future effectively. So a resilient congregation, in these COVID Phase 2 days, for instance, would be a congregation that was not clamoring to go back to the way things used but rather is a congregation asking, "What have we learned? Who can we serve now? What is the purpose of this congregation and how can we fulfill it in current conditions? How do we keep the doors open in these strange days? I know that you are that kind of congregation, and I honor you for that.

And I honor each of you! So far in your lives, each and every one of you...even those of you who feel very battered right now, have ridden the waves of life successfully, resiliently. With a little help from friends, faith, and our basic habits of self-care, in part because we discipline ourselves to live out our values, think clearly, and to cultivate peace in our minds and hearts so that we don't make feeling bad any worse than it is, we mostly manage to be resilient enough to ride even the big waves of change which are a part of all that is our life. Blessings in these hard days. May you use this time resiliently: to heal, to learn, and to grow in wisdom and in spirit.