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Advancing Women In Leadership

Successful Women Leaders: Achieving Resiliency through Rituals and Resources

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"Women who are resilient and successful have incorporated creative rituals into their daily routines."

Stories of successful women often reflect the struggles they have overcome to reach great heights of excellence. What made the difference in these women when many others were unable to tame the demons that invaded their lives? This article examines the resiliency factor of several successful women and identifies their ability to rebound from early hardship to lead normal, fulfilling lives through the use of rituals and relationships.

Webster's (1989) definition of resilience is "an ability to recover from or adjust easily to change or misfortune. Roget's Thesaurus (1985) uses the word "elasticity" when listing synonyms. Resiliency is defined by Higgins (1994) as the ability of "subjects to negotiate significant challenges to development yet significantly 'snap back' in order to complete the important developmental tasks that confront them as they grow". Walsh (1998) simply defines resilience as the "ability to overcome life's challenges". However we define the term "resilient", most definitions focus on the strengths of the individual versus those traumatic events they may have encountered in their past.

In psychological and sociological literature, resilience describes people who possess the ability to recover from adversity while retaining a positive self-image and view of the world or who, because of their early home life, are at risk for developing personal and social problems (O'Gorman, 1994). Holocaust victims and children growing up in abusive homes have been described as resilient because of their ability to retain a positive self-image and view of the world. Psychological resiliency, according to Patricia O'Gorman (1994), encompasses all aspects of the self: emotion, intellect, and spirit. How resilience manifests itself depends upon the individuals/s own worldview and means of coping with life. Literature

addressing work with survivors of troubled families, identifies the ability, this inner strength to weather life's challenges and consistently come out on top as the quality of resilience (O'Gorman, 1994 & Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

Other studies on resiliency mention an easygoing temperament and a higher level of intelligence. Rutter (1985) identified a strong sense of self-esteem as the critical component for being resilient. Seligman (1990) described learned optimism as an important individual trait in which people believe their actions and efforts can yield success. If we examine the literature on resiliency, we find the repetition of terms in describing this attribute. Studies mention an easygoing temperament, and a higher level of intelligence. Rutter (1985) identified a strong sense of self-esteem as the critical component for being resilient. Learned optimism (Seligman, 1990) is an important individual trait in which people believe their efforts and actions can yield success.

Rituals

The case studies of the successful women presented in this article describe how each was able to access rituals on a regular basis to maintain balance in their lives. Rituals are the repetitive acts that we perform daily and in special times to create this precarious balance. Incorporating these rituals consists of preparing for them, experiencing them and reintegrating them into everyday life (DeTrude & Stanfield, 1998). This repetition of the ritual helps create a much-needed sense of continuity in our lives by linking generations to one another and then becomes the lens to viewing family and close friend relationships. Using rituals help a person create a protected time and space to make meaning out of how their lives have been and where they are going, and when we are discussing individuals who have experienced trauma and pain, this consistency of the ritual helps to guide them emotionally to a "safe" place. Our self image and the image we have of others are developed in part through a process of identification between the individual and larger groups, be they ethnic, religious, political or whatever; rituals allow us to preserve ties, even during turbulent times (Imber-Black, 1992).

There are four basic types of rituals. The daily ritual creates an organized framework from which people guide their lives. This type of ritual is perhaps the most significant when we speak of individuals being carried through everyday trauma. The other types of rituals are also very important and serve as strengthening tools for individuals, but they may be less influential in developing "hardiness" or "resiliency" simply because they occur less often in life. The second category is that of the family ritual and focuses on how families celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. They are strictly celebrations of the family and not printed on any commercial calendar. The third type of ritual is that of holiday celebrations that are common to the community and the larger system as a whole. The last type of ritual is for those events that take us from birth to death, how the family recognizes the birth of a child, graduation, marriage and death. While this last type can also be very significant in overcoming trauma, rituals of this type occur less often.

If we focus on the daily type of ritual, we can summarize some rituals mentioned by successful women leaders. They refer to playing soft music, keeping flowers or candles in their offices. They also mention rituals to avoid stress - not listening to the news before bedtime, driving "backroads" to avoid freeway traffic. Regardless of the examples given, women who are resilient and successful have incorporated creative rituals into their daily routines.

Resources

The second factor that seems to explain how women can achieve resiliency when facing multiple problems is that of being able to access resources. For the purposes of this article, we will define

resources as significant others/mentors in the lives of resilient women. In their study of successful academicians, Bland and Schlitz (1986) register mentoring as one of the criteria responsible for guiding their careers. Mentoring is described as a process of noncompetitive teaching and guidance for those who share one's interests. Aspy and Sandhu (1999) assert the importance of developing "good old women" networks aside from the connections usually associated with volunteering.

Case Studies

The following case studies represent a diverse group of women, but the one factor that ties them together is resiliency that has persisted through difficult times.

Maya Angelou - Poet Laureate

When her parents' marriage ended, she and her brother went to live with her grandmother. In that community there was a strong network of African-American women who participated in church-related activities and who served as powerful role models for compassion, grace and courage (Ashy & Saddhu, 1999). One of these supporters was a woman named Mrs. Flowers who encouraged and helped Maya with her reading. Uncle Willie, the grandmother's disabled brother, also lived in the home. These family members and Mrs. Flowers were the resources that encouraged and supported Maya throughout her childhood.

When Maya was eight, her father took her to her mother's home for a visit, and during that visit she was raped. This was such a traumatic experience for her, and she did not talk for two years after the event. During this silent period, the ritual of writing poetry served as the healing process. Her grandmother and Mrs. Flowers continued to encourage her in reading this poetry which was the vehicle for ending this period of silence. When Maya found herself in periods of turmoil throughout her life, she relied on this creation of poetry to guide her out of the pain. The poem, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" is an account of her childhood up until the time of the birth of her child when she was 16. In an interview given in 1995, Maya was asked what she would say to a sixteen-year-old who sees the world as so bleak. Her response was, "I would read. I would read everybody, all the time" (Kelly, 1995).

Years later, Maya's son, Guy, had experienced a terrible accident and was undergoing emergency surgery. Maya immediately fell back upon a ritual that had sustained her throughout life - prayer. She immediately reached out to a support and prayer network of friends from all denominations to pray for him. The doctors had told her he was paralyzed and would never walk again. She told them he would walk out of the hospital and said, "I'm going so far, so beyond you, you're not even in it" (Kelly, 1995). Maya's dependence on writing and spirituality supported her through many instances of trauma and is still mentioned by her today as the sustenance that provides her with strength and continuity.

Sandra Day O'Connor - U.S. Supreme Court Judge

When one first looks at Supreme Court Justice O'Connor, one sees success and many firsts for a female who has attained such a high position in the courts. Upon examining her life, this view changes to let the reader know resiliency was a key component for reaching the current status on the highest court. Sandra grew up on an isolated ranch that had no phones and no neighbors. She learned from a very early age to be self-sufficient (Aspy & Sandhu, 1999). Her daily rituals at a young age consisted of animal care on the farm. She learned to brand bulls and perform other necessary farm chores. Recognizing the intellectual potential of their daughter, her parents sent Sandra to live in El Paso with her grandparents when it was time for high school, because their local school did not have all the academic resources they wanted for their daughter. As a child and then as a teenager, her supportive resources continued to be family

members who wanted her to be challenged academically. She went on to Law School at Stanford, graduating third in her class, but back in 1952, she was in male territory and was offered a legal secretarial position while her male classmates were placed in prestigious law firms. She detoured her own professional career to travel and live overseas with her husband. She started to accept limited roles in political campaigns after returning to this country and gradually climbed through the ranks in these political campaigns to achieve the position she has today. In the presidential election between Reagan and Carter, the polls showed that Reagan was trailing Carter, so Reagan made the announcement that he was going to appoint a woman to the Supreme Court. After that announcement, he never trailed in the polls again (Aspy & Sandhu). When a vacancy occurred on the Supreme Court in 1981, Reagan followed through with his campaign promise and interviewed O'Connor. Reagan's Attorney General, William French Smith, was the responsible party for calling O'Connor and offering her the position. Ironically, he was also the attorney who had offered her a secretarial position years before when she had graduated from law school (Aspy & Sandhu, 1999).

Sandra also underwent a mastectomy and chemotherapy in 1988 and was courageous in sharing this with other women. Sandra has had multiple resources in her life, one being the MPU (Mobile Party Unit), an organization which does not allow husbands at their activities. The rituals of caring for animals as a very young child provided her with discipline; the isolation on a ranch solidified her self-reliance.

Sally Ride - Astronaut

Sally Ride was born in 1951 to parents who truly valued education, her father was a professor and her mother a teacher and a counselor at a women's correctional unit, so in this family environment Sally knew how to read by the age of five. She was also very much interested in sports and was often the only girl in the neighborhood to play with the boys. As she got older, her daily rituals in practicing tennis provided her with discipline and a high level of skill so that she went to college on a tennis scholarship (Ashy and Sandhu, 1999). At times she did encounter prejudice for her interest in physics which was viewed by others as a major for only males. Dr. Elizabeth Mommaerts who introduced Sally to the significance of science and problem solving was a major resource and mentor for her (Aspy & Sandhu 1999). Sally continued to be a promising scholar and became interested in the astronaut program. She was one of the first women to be inducted into the astronaut program, and the first American woman in space. She saw herself as a resource and mentor to all the other women in the space program who were aspiring to follow in her footsteps. After the Challenger explosion, Sally did not have the opportunity to fly in space again, but she actively served as a consultant on safety issues with the space program and went on to academia where she is a Professor of Physics at University of California, San Diego.

Conclusion

These three case studies reflect the importance of resources and rituals in obtaining success and providing the foundation for overcoming racial, cultural and sexual discrimination. One interesting commonality with these three women is their desire and ability to mentor others and give to others those crucial resources that they had experienced through their journey. This "giving back" is an identified factor that defines who these women are today.

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