

Chapel Talk  
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## Strong Women

This is, quite simply, a tribute to the strong women in my life. That is not to say, of course, that I do not have strong men in my life, that I don't have men whom I admire, respect, whom I try to emulate—after all, I am married to one. But in recent years, I have watched some incredibly strong women deal with adversity in remarkable ways, and I have been trying to understand what they all fundamentally have in common, what has pulled them through these tragedies with such grace.

One thing that is certain in life is that we will all face adversity: stressful work, bad days, a sports injury, sickness, death of loved ones. . . These women, however—in my family and in this community—have had to face the ultimate adversity: their own life threatening diseases and/or the loss or tragic sickness of their child. Many of you know these women: Nan Mein, Carol Simendinger, my mother, my sister, Jennifer (the mother of Griffin), Mrs. Duprey. I marvel at these women and how they have survived and endured and how, somehow, they have also been the strength for everyone else around them.

At St. Andrew's, we talk about how important it is that we teach all of you to be resilient, to be strong in the face of adversity. We believe this because we know how easy it is to become soft, entitled, and blind to discerning the difference between day to day stress and essential moments of tragedy and adversity. We believe this because, in the end, an education must help us prepare for the ultimate tests of our humanity, our strength, our intelligence, our compassion. But exactly how do we become resilient? How did these women develop seemingly superhuman resiliency? Do we learn to be resilient incrementally—first we learn to deal with small disappointments (a bad test grade, a

girlfriend/boyfriend breakup, a college rejection) so that we can be ready for the real life and death tests? Or do some people just possess a core, inner something?

As I have thought about these questions, I had to dismiss the last possibility—that some people are essentially born with an extra coping mechanism, an intangible strength. Otherwise, it would mean that the rest of us would have an excuse to just sit back and say, “Oh well, I wasn’t born with that gene, so I have an excuse to be not as strong, not as resilient, not as tough.” I have decided, instead, that yes, probably these women did learn along the way, that they grew stronger and more capable of dealing with adversity. If you ask these women about their strength and resiliency, they will mention their faith; they will mention inspiration and support from family and friends; they will say that they are doing the best they can. I think all of these things are true. But what I have ultimately realized is that these women share a certain approach to life that we can all learn from and emulate. Ironically, such strength and resilience come not from assertion of individual power but rather from a radical redefinition of the concept of self in the context of community. It is not an insistence on one’s own way; it is about the connection to others. This approach has something to do with being selfless, but it is something a bit different as well. Mostly, it has to do with not always seeing themselves as the center of the universe; instead, they have an awareness of others and the world around them and this awareness of others, at the same time, allows them to know themselves very well. And in their understanding of others and in their knowing themselves, they build strength and resiliency, the ability to overcome and endure.

In his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College, David Foster Wallace, a brilliant writer, began with this funny little parable: “There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?” In his speech, Wallace argues that as educated adults we have the choice of how we think and what we think about everyday of our lives. We can frame everything in terms of ourselves, Wallace writes:

“Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real.”

OR we can be more conscious, more aware of the world and the people around us:

“The real value of a real education has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: This is water. This is water.”

We often do miss the water around us, the inescapable fact that binds all of us together as human beings: that life is fragile, that everyone is dealing and coping with his or her own fears, own challenges, own issues (big and small) in life. None of us can possibly know what another person is actually feeling or what difficulties another person is struggling with from one day to the next. But we can be aware that everyone shares in the daily act of getting through the day. As Foster Wallace says, “It is unimaginably hard to do this, to stay conscious and alive in the adult world day in and day out.”

This awareness, consciousness of others is challenging for all of us, for we can always find excuses for tremendous self-absorption. V formers know that when faced with great pain and disillusionment, Hamlet has a difficult time thinking of anyone but himself. During the course of the play, he evolves from a more self-absorbed frame of mind to a wider perspective only when he can see his mother's own pain. Once he looks at her and empathizes with her, he moves outside of himself and begins to understand the world and himself much better; he also becomes tougher and more resilient as a result. Because the more you can live outside of yourself, the more you are aware of the world around you, the more you can see the possible challenges and difficulties and sadness of other people,

the more you will know yourself and the more ready you will be to face your own moments of challenge--

Heather Casteel, in her incredibly powerful chapel talk a few weeks ago, said it beautifully: “We all need to be more sympathetic, to operate under the unusual assumption that everyone around us is already working hard and doing their best.”

What I am actually suggesting is a radical repositioning of our perspective: try taking yourself out of the role of the main character in the narrative of your life and making others’ lives and narratives the focus—move from a first person to a third person narration. Again, I am not talking about a loss of self and identity, but rather a building, a strengthening of self. If we try this, we might all be surprised at just how strong we are.

So what does this process of learning resilience have to do with women, in particular? Historically, women have had to be more sympathetic, have had to think about others before themselves. For the survival of the family, women have had to be strong and resilient in the face of overwhelming adversity, whereas men, historically, were encouraged to be strong in a different way: independent, successful, more solitary in their pursuit of identity. Of course, I am not saying that resilience is reserved for those of us with female chromosomes (and certainly there are many women who are not resilient). But we can learn from these strong women: we can learn to see the world differently; we can work to understand others, to be more aware.

We do have a choice every day about how we deal with obstacles and challenges. We can crumble; we can stop pushing ourselves, retreat and revert to self-pity or repression. But both self-pity and repression lead us to become frozen, unable to think through complex moments, unable to feel what we need to feel and experience, unable to look to others.

Perhaps the reason why women embrace this ethic of compassion, responsibility and empathy so naturally is their experience of pregnancy and childhood and motherhood.

Suddenly one is responsible for another's life, well-being and health; suddenly our desires affect another human being in a direct and tangible way. Consider how these amazing women dealt with adversity when they did not have a choice. My sister had a completely normal pregnancy for the first 5 and a half months; suddenly there were complications, overwhelming complications—there were tests, examinations, consultations, new doctors, even new teams of doctors working on her unusual case, many questions, many unknowns, many decisions without easy answers. And yet at this time of incredible anxiety, she found the strength to deal with every twist and turn with unusual calm, insight and clarity: she focused on her baby, on another's well-being. And even as Griffin continues to battle adversity, Jennifer remains unwavering in her resilience, optimism and love for others.

We all witnessed Mrs. Duprey as she has survived as she said “the worst year of her life,” and yet she too has never wavered--her strength came from God, her family and from friends across the world. But in her darkest moments of grief and sadness, she intuitively thought of others, acted for others--her injured daughter, her 3 other children, her extended family and friends, the children in need of organ donation. She taught us that love means an act of supreme self-sacrifice and acceptance of that which is unfathomable, that love means an embrace of the thoughts, fears, and anxieties of others. I watched Stacey in the hospital a year ago and marveled at how she took care of all visitors to the intensive care unit from morning to night. She fielded phone calls, made important decisions, and held her family together in her loss. Last Friday she stood before the school to thank us for our love and support—it was, for me, one of the most beautiful and powerful announcements I have ever heard at St. Andrew's.

All of these women, these mothers, continue to keep their families together, continue to push through and do what they need to do, what they have to do, all the while giving to others and maintaining their own sense of self. In light of their strength, we really have no excuse not to be resilient ourselves.