

# True Resilience is Robust Vulnerability

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*“Live to the point of tears”*  
[vivre et créer. jusqu’aux larmes]

**Albert Camus**

The film director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck was playing in his mind with the question: If I could go back to 1933 and had one minute with Hitler, what would I do or say that could change the course of history? Into this tilling of the soil of his soul by the question came a seed. It was the recollection of a conversation with Lenin recounted by Maxim Gorky. This conversation described how Lenin had to stop listening to music, his favorite being Beethoven’s *Appassionata*, in order to finish the revolution. Listening to music made him want to be kind and pat people on the head whereas the revolution required him to hit people on the head. Out of this musing was born the academy award winning film *‘The Lives of Others’*. This film portrays the transformation of a Stasi agent in East Germany who has the task of spying on an actor and his girlfriend to detect subversive activities. In the central scene this agent is listening in to the actor receiving news that his close friend, a playwright, has committed suicide. The state had banned his friend from working and he succumbed to despair, unable to bear living in the world without the life’s breath of his art. The grief-stricken actor begins to play a piece of music on the piano. This music touches the Stasi agent and a single tear falls slowly over his frozen face. For the first time he experiences that people and life and feelings are real. The story from there reveals how he is no longer able to be an obedient agent of the state and secretly acts to protect the lives of others.

The word resilience means to jump or leap back, to rebound. In the realm of the soul it refers to the reshaping of myself when events of the world have impacted or pressed in upon me. It is in essence an ability to respond. Programs developed to increase our capacity for resilience often focus on the activity of responding.

However before I can respond I must first be

impressed, moved by the world in some way. The transformation of the Stasi agent begins with the capacity to feel the impact of the lives of others in his own soul, to be inwardly moved. This capacity to allow myself to be moved by the world can be seen as a capacity for vulnerability, sensitivity, empathy. This capacity is deeply connected with the middle sphere of our being, our breathing. In order to stop feeling we generally stop breathing, we freeze. Music works powerfully on our rhythmic system, moving our middle sphere, keeping it alive and responsive, hence its central role in the film.

Once we have been moved, there is the activity of responding. Angela Dixon from the Children’s Hospital in Sydney has pointed out that when our response to an anxiety provoking event is short-circuited by someone who rescues us, the physiological cycle does not complete itself and we are left with chronic anxiety in relation to that situation. However when the anxiety is allowed to peak and we survive the experience through our own response, then we experience trust in ourselves and our ability to respond.<sup>1</sup>

One of the core diagnostic criteria for PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) is a feeling of helplessness. This is the experience of being unable to respond or the experience that this response is not received by the world, that it does not impact the world in some way. The more traumatic an event is, the less impact we generally have on the situation. However it can be enough that the response is witnessed and given value by other people.

A narrative therapist working with children who experienced bombing raids in the Gaza strip interviewed the children about the ways they had discovered to respond to this experience. She then helped them draw up a document for other children about how to manage the effects of a military attack. Their responses included:

<sup>1</sup> Dixon, Dr. Angela. Children’s Hospital Anxiety Clinic, Sydney Australia. Lecture material.

- keeping your mind on the future,
- looking at each other's faces and
- talking to someone if their face is red and upset,
- caring for each other and
- inviting kids who are suffering to play with you,
- inventing games that make you laugh and help you breathe, and
- eating olives because they are the symbol of peace.

The children discovered something called the "relief breath" which was very important each time the bombs stopped and they invented games to bring this about. In this work she is becoming a witness to their ways of responding and in drawing up the document she gives their responses acknowledgement in the community<sup>2</sup>. The children become robust in the face of trauma through knowing that even if they cannot stop the bombs, they can respond. This approach to trauma focuses on strengthening the experience of our capacity to respond which can easily be lost if attention is not focused only on the pain.

Resilience implies that something that was in danger of being lost in a situation reemerges strongly. In essence it is our ability to have a living relationship with the world, to engage in a conversation with the world that honours both ourselves as unique human individuals and the world as a meaningful other. This relationship breathes between experiencing inwardly the outer world and letting the outer world experience our human soul's response. For this conversation to be living it needs to be free from programs and protocols.

David Epston is a family therapist who works with adolescents for whom their conversation with the world has become one in which self loathing, or rage towards the world is the primary experience. A childhood experience was formative in the way he works to reengage these young people with the world. As a young boy of about eight he stole some money from his father. His father told him the money was missing and without giving him a chance to confess asked him to help him find

it. After a sending his son to various locations to search, he finally sent him the bedroom where the money was sitting on the pillow. His father congratulated him on being great at finding things. This repeated itself every day for the next week. David never did confess but he stepped up to his new identity as a finder. As a reader you may well be wondering if this is really such a good strategy for responding to stealing. However it is not the details of this response that are the main message but rather the impact of what David calls a ritual of 're-grading' rather the degrading<sup>3</sup>. His father had given him an alternative identity in his conversation with the world that his soul could expand into. In his work with communities for whom crime is an issue he creates voluntary 'honesty tests' by which a young person can lay claim publically to an honest identity and disavow a reputation as untrustworthy. Between the in-breath and the out-breath of resilience are decisions about who we are, what we value and what we stand for in the world.

We can encourage children to learn new ways of responding to difficult situations but not just as a formula to be applied. For this to be alive they need to see how our human soul responds in living breathing color! It is most powerful when we do this out of our capacity to breathe rather than freeze when face to face with something pressing us, and out of our capacity to stay in touch with our soul's deepest values and commitments. This is a process whereby we dare to find our true response, to go to the dark edge of what we know of ourselves as human beings and respond out of our humanity in freedom. When we stop breathing we are not free, and our soul cannot feel its humanity.

In the words of David Whyte<sup>4</sup>:

*You must learn one thing.  
The world was made to be free in.  
Give up all the other worlds  
except the one to which you belong.*

*Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet  
confinement of your aloneness to learn*

2 Mitchell, Sue (2006). "Debriefing after traumatic situations – using narrative ideas in the Gaza strip" in Denborough, David (Ed.) "Trauma: Narrative responses to traumatic experience" Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide.

3 Epston, David (2008). "Community approaches – real and virtual – to stealing" in his book "Down Under and Up Over: Travels with narrative therapy." Warrington, England: AFT

4 Whyte, David (2007) "River Flow" Langley, Washington: Many Rivers Press

*Anything or anyone that does not bring you alive is too small for you.*

If not for ourselves, then for the children in our care we need to live in an expansive world that invites us into a living conversation and not a prison of requirements that freeze the soul.

Rudolf Steiner tells us that children around 11 will often engage in anti-social experiments with the world and the ability of adults around to respond with an understanding is essential<sup>5</sup>. We need to see that the child is not a thief but is researching their humanity. We can then respond creatively with the next experience the child needs to have to stay in conversation with the world. When the world around goes into meltdown the conversation can close down and invite a withdrawal into a secret realm of anti-social activity fed by humiliation and self hate. A true inner response cannot be forced or trained but arises in true conversation with the world out of the moment we choose who we want to be. Every choice requires alternatives. The inner side of resilience is the decision to live in a way that we choose.

Nelson Mandela underwent an initiation ritual at sixteen involving circumcision. The required response to the pain of the procedure was to say 'I am a man'. Nelson Mandela managed to say these words but experienced himself as faltering

in the crucial moment. No-one told him that he had done this. He experienced it inwardly. He discovered that he was not naturally brave but would need to learn how to be so. He decided to be someone who did not falter at the crucial moment and that made a tremendous difference for both him and the world<sup>6</sup>.

True resilience is what the poet David Whyte calls "robust vulnerability".<sup>7</sup> It allows us to keep our soul in touch with and moved by the world, and to draw strength and inspiration to respond from our deepest intuitions, from what we really value and want to stand for in the world. Children need to see us moved by the world and not indifferent. They need to see us responding out of our deeply held convictions not out of protocols and conventions. Then our conversation with the world is alive. We can dare to live to the point or the edge of tears as Camus suggests, knowing that we can respond to anything in a way that our human soul can stand strong in and feel fully alive. ♦

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5 Steiner, Rudolf () cited by Jorgen Smit in a lecture given to a Waldorf Teachers Conference, 1989.

6 Mandela, Nelson (1995). *Long Walk to Freedom*. Chap 4

7 Whyte, loc cit

## **VISIT OF FLORIAN OSSWALD TO AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND**

**Florian Osswald**, the new co-coordinator of the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum, will be visiting for 5 weeks in July and August, 2011.

The themes are:

*"Activating Inner Life for Outer Work with Children and Young People"*

and

*"Finding Ways for the Spirit of the Subjects to Shine through our Teaching"*.

July 15th-17th      Queensland/Northern NSW Regional Conference  
July 20th            Sydney

Dates to be announced for the other venues, including New Zealand

August 9th-13th    Perth

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