

## METAPHORS TO REAWAKEN RESILIENCY IN PATIENTS

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*Is it possible for a small puff of wind to restore a soul after a tsunami? Is it possible for a metaphor, with its lightness, to help a patient pass over the weight of his pain? Is it possible for a metaphor to represent the way to recover the sweetness of life after having tasted much bitterness? I believe it is. Through metaphors, as therapists, we can send messages which are the fruit of a combination of scientific reasoning and therapeutic intuition to strengthen in patients the resiliency needed to face and overcome pain and to regain enough self-confidence to undertake new action. In this article I demonstrate how stories about life and living can assist patients in tapping into their innate resilience or to draw on that of others, real or imagined. Only the metaphor “The Loss of a Teddy Bear” is a creation of mine; the others are old stories read in many books rewritten and readapted for the purpose of this article. The References list indicates the works from which I have drawn ideas and examples.*

Metaphors are impertinent and outside the logic used by patients. They are irreverent and provoke mental elasticity which stimulates the patient to set aside his ideas, convictions and rigid emotions. They create, therefore, new views and renewal, destabilise habits, and bring forth unusual but plausible comparisons. Metaphors are also a method and an enigma: a method because they open up a new path which takes you elsewhere and beyond; an enigma because they stimulate magical and mysterious awareness of others’ answers. They offer an exercise in mental creativity and vitality, in that they express existing likenesses and generate something which did not exist before. For these reasons, therapeutic metaphors may help patients find the resiliency they need to overcome their problems.

Resiliency (from the Latin word meaning “to bounce back”) is a process

fed by the conviction of being in control of oneself and being able to influence future events. It is a process that leads one to work hard in existing activities and transform pain into a challenge: If pain forces a person to lower his head, challenge instead helps that person to lift it up. It helps relate and contextualise, transform adversity into the development of one's potentiality, realise that one is stronger than desperation, and discover, in suffering, an important agent of change and self-realisation. Resiliency designates not so much an aptitude for happiness as a stimulus to react with empathy, calm, courage, optimism and emotional intelligence to the suffering imposed by destiny. This stimulus leads to abandoning sad and destructive emotions and adapting positive emotions, as well as flexible and efficacious behavioural and cognitive strategies. The story below represents resilience in tough times.

### The Donkey in the Well

*Once upon a time a donkey fell in a deep well. It started to bray so loudly that all the villagers went to see what had happened. When they arrived at the well, they realised that it was impossible to help the donkey to get out of the well, because they didn't have any suitable tools. So they sadly decided to help the donkey not to suffer too much and to die as fast as possible. So they started throwing earth into the well to bury the donkey. After a while, the donkey stopped braying. Assuming the donkey had already died, the villagers looked at the well and saw the donkey on top of a pile of earth. What had happened? As soon the donkey realised what was happening, every time it received a shovelful of earth, it shook the earth off its body and put itself on top of the soil.*

The metaphors, which are told with the specific aim of reinforcing resiliency in patients, contain stories in which the characters overcome their difficulties by using attitudes typical of resilient people: the conviction of possessing self-control, of being able to influence future events, the ability of feeling fully involved in the activities needed for change. Metaphors may also represent a model of flexible responses, as well as supplying ideas on how to solve problems.

The characters in metaphors demonstrate resiliency and show that it helps them solve their problems more easily. The characters in metaphors may either have gifts of active wisdom, such as extroversion, availability, reliability, emotional stability and maturity, or passive virtues such as patience, hope, renunciation, and detachment.

This article contains a selection of metaphors with the aim of bringing messages of resiliency to patients. These metaphors communicate the acceptance of reality, control of one's emotions, and senses of responsibility, self-determination, confidence, compassion and altruism, which are all appropriate in depicting the main characteristics of resiliency.

## **Acceptance of Reality**

Simple factual truth is sometimes difficult to accept. It is, however, an indispensable ingredient in starting out on the road to recovery through resiliency. An ancient Zen proverb states: "Inclement weather does not exist, only unsuitable clothes exist." And Homer points out that not even Zeus can change what has already happened. Resiliency begins by accepting reality for what it is and in the way it has manifested itself. The resilient person, well aware of his powerlessness, becomes powerful by accepting reality and finding in it the teachings for change.

When something serious happens, the resilient person does not wonder "why did this happen to me?", or "what have I done to deserve such suffering?"; nor does he complain about it being unfair and that it should not have happened to him. He does not ask questions about the past, searching for causes and explanations that cannot be found, because life deals out ambiguities and uncertainties which need to be accepted calmly. The following story is one such example.

### The Loss of a Teddy Bear

*Once upon a time a child was in despair because he had lost his favourite teddy bear. His nearest and dearest tried to console him by making him understand that it was useless to cry for an object which could be purchased again. They tried to teach him detachment, encouraged him to be strong and hold back his tears, to act like a man, lose without getting upset, and not become attached to objects. The child listened to the consoling words of his loved ones. He listened and understood their good intentions. He realised they understood his genuine pain and interpreted his suffering as love for his teddy bear. He also realised, however, that nobody understood that his despair was not so much due to the loss of the bear, but above all to the loss of being able to hug its innocent softness and naïve warmth. Thanks to this loss, the child understood that his childhood had finished and that adulthood, with its reality challenges, had begun.*

## Control of Emotions

A resilient person wonders: What shall I do with my wound? How can I manage it? What can I, or must I, change? How can, or must, I change it? How can I change the situation? The resilient person starts with what has happened and gathers her resources to find a remedy or solution. She does not look for explanations but acts.

The resilient person does not exaggerate her suffering with sad passions or destructive emotions, such as despair, resentment, rancour, envy or pride. Although she feels the distressing and incessant pain, she does not waste energy in sterile complaints. Instead she confronts the challenge as an ordeal which is both character-forming and ego-strengthening. She readies herself to cooperate with destiny. On the one hand, she detaches herself from what has happened, and on the other hand she observes her own reactions, studying the effect of her thoughts on her emotions and behaviour.

Resiliency is the ability to fight back, to acquire reflective awareness. It is not merely survival after great trials. What matters is no longer survival, which is only an extension, but how much we thrive emotionally: The growth conditions themselves become an object of reflection. Suffering and pain are transformed by being considered relative, contingent and temporary. We face suffering and pain to understand their complexity, as well as the mysteries of life, and use them to reinforce compassion, gratitude, joy and wisdom. The next story underscores these points.

### The Two Wolves

*Once upon a time, a little girl asked her grandmother why they had nicknamed her "Two Wolves." The grandmother replied that on several occasions she seen two wolves fighting each other inside her. "One wolf is a growling, ferocious, hungry animal, thirsty for revenge, recognising only its own needs, and prepared to do anything to get quick satisfaction, in any way possible. The other wolf is tame, playful, sly and happy. The two wolves are in conflict with each other, because the ferocious one is aggressive and wants to bite and win, whereas the tame one is able to wait and be patient, generous and trusting." The little grand-daughter asked: "Which one wins?" The grandmother replied: "The one I feed the better."*

## Sense of Responsibility

After having accepted reality and managed his own emotions, the resilient person shifts attention, detaches himself from the situation and concentrates

on his only true power, which is to react intelligently; that is, to make appropriate and wise decisions. He does not allow pain to stun him, he does not let unanswerable questions confuse him, nor does he look backwards. He concentrates on his own attitude and reactions and strives to act efficaciously in the changed situation proffered him by life.

The resilient person does not stubbornly persist to return to the past, he does not deceive himself with trying to change what cannot be changed, but he channels his energies in the direction of feasible change, striving to transform adversity into realistic and feasible objectives. The futures begin as soon as the trauma occurs, after we decide what to do and how to use our resources and energy. The future begins with an act of faith and hope as well as with planning what we want to become, as the story of the broken jug depicts.

### The Broken Jug

*Once upon a time, a man went every morning to draw water from a well in his village. The man had two jugs: one intact and the other cracked. By the time he arrived home, some of the water in the cracked jug had leaked out along the way. One day one of his neighbours said: "I don't understand why you keep on using that jug which makes you waste so much energy. Don't you see that when you get home, the jug is almost empty? Why don't you buy a new one?" The farmer replied: "When I saw the jug was cracked, I planted some seeds along the way home. The cracked jug waters them every day and the path home is always decorated with fragrant flowers, thanks to my cracked jug."*

### **Self-Determination and Confidence**

The resilient person can be recognised by his sense of responsibility, self-determination, and confidence; he cultivates an optimistic attitude, so that he can overcome difficulties and turn them to his advantage. He can verify that courage is stronger than destiny and the pain can be entrancing. He understands that stupidity, blindness and deafness are only permitted in routine situations, but are absolutely banned in situations of danger.

The resilient person, therefore, determines to govern himself with caution and to grasp the value of life and its limitations. He chooses to smile in the face of adversity and to use moderation and trust. Moderation aids the resilient person to bear losses and grief without transforming them into resentment or envy. Trust and confidence stimulate a positive approach to the future, build

tolerance in ambiguous situations and activate appropriate behaviour. The resilient person sets himself realistic and feasible objectives, both short and long term, and makes a serious commitment to reaching them. He is grateful for the extension that life has offered him. He is not downcast, but proceeds with uplifted spirit along the path of life.

### The Eagle

*An eagle will die at 40 years of age, unless it breaks its beak in order to renew it, uses its beak to crack its claws in order to renew them, and uses its claws to pull out its feathers and renew them. By doing this for five months, an eagle can live another 30 years.*

## **Compassion and Altruism**

The resilient person understands the value of compassion and tolerance. Compassion means understanding that no one is immune to the twists of fortune, that everyone has similar chances to suffer misfortune and that tolerance brings acceptance. Compassion means being able to identify with the suffering of others. Compassion is a precious means to extending ethical awareness and comprehending the human value of painful events.

In addition, altruism, dedication to others and compassion take away our concentration on ourselves and empower us help others. For the resilient person, self-realisation can only happen through collaboration, acting together with, and for, others. In this way, the resilient person grows and becomes fully himself through giving himself to others, and taking upon himself the consequences that his actions have on him and on others. The following story about the monk demonstrates this.

### The Monk Who Recovered His Health

*Once upon a time, there was an old monk who saw death approaching in a young and sick disciple. He therefore decided to send the young man home, so that he could end his days with his loved ones. After three months, the disciple returned, beaming with life and health. The old monk was filled with curiosity about what had happened in those three months to so change a destiny of death into a destiny of longevity. He therefore asked the young man to tell him how he had spent his time.*

*The young monk told him that it had taken him a long time to get home, because he had to walk bent over with his eyes on the ground because of pain.*

*And while he was walking slowly, he heard the wail of an animal. He followed the sound and found a hare that had fallen into a hunter's trap. The young monk helped the animal get out of the trap, nursed its wounds, and finally set it free. Later on his way home, he found a little boy on top of a big tree unable to get down. So he stopped to help him learn how to come down. And still later he arrived in a village which was being flooded. So he stopped to help the villagers build a protective wall, and then continued on his way until he reached his home. The old monk understood that he who is useful to life, deserves to live long.*

Before concluding this article, I would like to present a case in which, besides other hypnotherapeutic means, metaphors were useful to help the patient create a better destiny for herself.

Valeria, a beautiful 45-year-old woman, came for therapy as a result of suffering caused through being jealous. Francesco, her partner, is very fond of a friend's daughter. The little girl is like a daughter, although he is not her father. When the little girl calls, he runs to her side, is anxious for her; he gives her many gifts and is at her disposal. He has behaved like this since the girl was born. Now this seems strange on the surface of things, because the child's mother had been briefly Francesco's girlfriend, but they had quickly separated because of incompatibility. Additionally, the ex-girlfriend had the little girl to another man, and subsequently married someone else with whom she had a second child.

Valeria had met Francesco many years ago; first they had been friends and later had fallen in love. When Valeria came to me for therapy the couple had been together for four years. My first question was why had she fallen in love with him, well knowing his fondness for the little girl. And why had she decided to come for therapy at exactly this time? The reason given was that Francesco had asked her to live with him, and she was undecided. Other reasons for getting together came over time.

In telling her story, Valeria said that initially she accepted the relationship between Francesco and the little girl, but with the passing of time, a mixture of jealousy and envy arose due to the excessive attention awarded the child ... and seemingly away from her. She hoped that with time and with the strengthening of their ties, the relationship with the little girl would change, but this did not happen.

Very sensitive to being downgraded, Valeria described a life of pain, lack of love, deceit, lies and manipulation. She spoke first of the happy years of her early childhood with her hairdresser mother in a village on the outskirts

of Milan. However, when she was about four, her father arrived. She was sent to boarding school where she spent hours behind the bars of the school gate crying in despair. Many years passed without any gesture of love from her father, only much criticism. She was unable to study and so at a young age went to work as a pedicurist. She married, separating after a few years when she discovered that her husband had taken a lover.

After reconstructing her past, lightening the shame of a fragile ego, and overcoming the sense of guilt for no reason, Valeria discovers the right to know and claims the right to happiness. After three years in therapy, Valeria is ready to ask her mother if there is a family secret that perhaps now, as a mature woman, she can know.

Valeria's mother reveals that the person she has always believed to be her father is not her real father. Valeria is the daughter of a past employer—a married but childless man who desired a child. But when the baby turned out to be a girl, the father did not want her. He disappeared and only saw little Valeria a few times. The mother had made a mistake in saying to Valeria, "This is your father" instead of saying, "This is my husband."

By revealing the secret that had been hidden for 40 years, the mother spilled her shame and at the same time freed Valeria. Valeria had been carrying inside herself both her mother's and stepfather's shame. The mother was ashamed of being an unwed mother (we need to imagine a village in the outskirts of Milan about 45 years ago), and the husband was ashamed of being a polio victim and of having married an unwed mother. The mother thought she was protecting Valeria from a traumatic truth with her silence, but in so doing she created in Valeria's head and heart enormous confusion which prevented her from fully expressing herself.

The therapy helped transform images and sensations from the past into words, and to make sense out of them. We began to understand why Valeria felt so much jealousy and envy about a little girl who was receiving so much love from a man who was neither her father nor the mother's husband. This was not what had happened to her. Francesco represents the type of father/non-father Valeria had wanted, but didn't have. By choosing Francesco as her partner she was able to relive her trauma, resolve it and free herself from unnecessary suffering.

Valeria understood why she felt unloved and manipulated: It was the fruit of her experience. For this reason, she had been unable to study; her mind was confused and she was unable to concentrate. After her mother's revelation, Valeria repaired her childhood and started to feel better, see opportunities and

find within herself a desire to study. In the space of one year, she went through a four-year high-school curriculum. She passed all her exams, and in the following year she was awarded a school certificate. Now Valeria is attending university at the age of 45. Valeria's suffering was not in vain and she finally has some satisfaction. Valeria is the demonstration of the saying, "It is never too late to have a happy childhood."

## CONCLUSION

With this article, I have offered readers a few metaphors which are useful in awakening resiliency in suffering patients. Metaphors with their irreverent and irrelevant lightness point to different flexible and fluctuating destinies which help loosen the rigidity of patients. Metaphors are an indirect and gentle instrument that prepares the unconscious of patients for the therapist's messages.

We should be aware that at times the most useful therapeutic message is the one that manages to awaken, on the one hand, common sense and, on the other hand, new aspects, such as in Valeria's case.

### White Roofs

*One cold, but sunny, winter's day, a Zen master and his disciple were going through a snow covered village. The master was enjoying the beauty of the blinding whiteness and of the harmonious silence, when his disciple asked: "Master, all the roofs are white, covered with snow. When will the roofs regain their natural colour?" The master meditated a little, because he wanted to give his pupil not a reply, but a lesson. And when he had found the appropriate message, he said to the young man: "When the roofs are white, they are white. When the roofs are not white, they are not white."*

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