



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

I Wish I Had Been Born a UU

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In some ways I wish I had been born a Unitarian Universalist. I know my life would have been a lot different if I had been that lucky. However, I also know that the experiences of my life, including not being born a UU have shaped and formed me into the person I am today. And I know that I would have turned out to be a different person because I probably wouldn't have developed some of my own personal resilience. And most of the time, I'm pretty content with who I turned out to be.

Each of us has our own capacity for resilience and potential for tapping into that. Wikipedia defines Psychological resilience as the positive capacity of people to cope with stress and adversity. Resilience is most commonly understood as a process. Most research now shows that resilience is the result of individuals interacting with their environments and the processes that either promote well-being or protect them against the overwhelming influence of risk factors. These processes can be individual coping strategies, or may be helped along by good families, schools, communities, and social policies that make resilience more likely to occur. In this sense "resilience" occurs when there are cumulative "protective factors". People who cope may also show "hidden resilience" when they don't conform to society's expectations for how someone is supposed to behave.

So, let's consider these questions: Does Neighborhood Church provide a space for resilience to occur? Is there a "protective factor" here that promotes well being? And is this a safe environment for people who don't conform to society's expectations to develop hidden resilience? In my experience, we do provide a space for resilience to occur and it is a safe environment and I will explain how I came to those conclusions. I grew up in Indiana in the 50's and 60's and was raised in a fundamentalist Christian family. In some ways, my childhood was great...I lived in a small town, had a huge extended family, mostly living close by, and enjoyed the privileges of middle class. My parents didn't drink or abuse me in any way and I definitely felt loved. My own personal process of resilience was made somewhat more difficult by what appeared to be a positive environment. One of my earliest memories is of walking down the street with my Mother and her best friend Wilma when I was five years old. Wilma, who was usually pretty condescending with children looked down at me at one point and said, "So, when you grow up you're going to get married and have babies just like your Mommy aren't you?" I looked up at her and with all my years of wisdom said emphatically, "NO, I'm going to live with one of my girlfriends!" This triggered Wilma's aforementioned condescension, at which point she literally patted my head and said, "Oh, you'll change your tune." I knew in that moment that feeling the way I did was absolutely unacceptable to others. And I was equally clear that if I did feel that way, I was not supposed to talk about it. So, I didn't, for the next 13 years.

I went through all of my childhood and adolescence feeling like my family didn't really see me for who I was and also being afraid that if they did figure it out, they would stop loving me. If you can imagine me as a young person in the 1960's in Indiana and remember what a different world it was then you will can also imagine how isolating it was for me to be trying to figure out my sexuality. There was no OWL or Gay Pride or Ellen on TV. And I promise there were no beautiful signs in front of anywhere, especially a church, proclaiming support for Freedom to Marry. I pretty much only had access to clinical descriptions of the feelings I was having and those were certainly not portrayed as healthy or positive. It was awful for me to feel forced into my culture's prescribed role for me. It was equally difficult to be fearful of their approval and love being conditional on my ability to successfully negotiate that prescribed role.

Let's consider some examples of resilience:

We all know stories of people who have been handed the hard and cruel side of life or a horrific accident or illness and somehow still manage to find things to be thankful for and positive about. I know of many stories like that here in our congregation. There are those of you who have lost your lifelong spouses, whose children have become ill or died, or who have grown up during the depression and survived war and hardship. These are the kinds of things that can cause serious depression or test a person's capacity to find within themselves the ability to stay positive and choose to carry on. And, just as we hear these stories

from each other we also experience your courageous ability to keep trying to make sense of life even with the challenges. It's inspirational to hear these stories of survival. Each of you has the story of your life that is an example of your own personal resilience that can be shared.

There are also so many represented in the media. For example, President Obama. He overcame poverty, an absentee father, racism, and other hardships to attend Harvard Law and now has created history by being President. Another example is Oprah Winfrey who grew up very poor in the South and was sexually abused as a child and went on to become one of the most successful self-made women of our time. If you look up "rags to riches & media" on the internet you will get plenty of other examples.

I had relatives who were farmers who continued to rise before dawn each day, work their fields, fight blight, dust, insects and the sun and yet persevered with the enduring hope of a better crop each year. In my work as a therapist I have heard many stories from survivors who have been physically, emotionally and sexually abused, often by the very ones who were supposed to love them first and best. The amount of resilience it takes for these courageous folks to just survive, let alone thrive, is astonishing.

My family and I just returned from a vacation that ended in New Orleans where a whole city has had to find their resilience these past six years in rebuilding since Hurricane Katrina. I know we were all impacted when we heard the personal stories of loss and devastation from folks we met there.

I feel it's a different type of resilience that's required in risking losing approval and love from your family and or community. It's daunting to realize that having that love and approval is conditional upon fitting into the role that your family or community has prescribed for you. It's one kind of resilience that's required when there is abuse or neglect and a different kind needed when one's positive relationships are threatened. For me personally, when I realized that in order to continue having the love and approval of my family, I would have to either lie about who I was or deny the very essence of who I was to myself.

When I came out as a lesbian at 18 I had been given enough messages by my family, church and community to be crystal clear that by doing that, I was in danger of losing their acceptance and love. If I had any doubts about that, which I didn't, the significance of those messages was driven home when my parents threatened to put me in a state psychiatric hospital. This was the point at which my process of resilience kicked into high gear. I was sent to talk to our family physician who was luckily a Quaker and was ultimately able to help me squelch that threat and encouraged my parents to ease up a bit. I then figured out how to get myself out of Indiana and how to survive, in spite of the fact that I had had the safety net of family yanked out from under me. That surviving part was pretty significant, especially, as you are probably aware, since lots of adolescent kids don't survive the coming out process, particularly, when it includes being rejected by their family and church communities. It certainly wasn't an easy process and there were some periods of time when I didn't have a lot of contact with some of my family. But, over the course of the next ten years we worked through a lot of it and got to a much better place.

I started coming to Neighborhood Church about eight and one half years ago when I started dating Melinda. By the time I landed here my journey had been one of healing and forgiveness to try to become whole from that trauma. The world had changed over those 25 years to the point where being a lesbian wasn't as much of an issue as it had been. Hearing the message of acceptance and welcome from this pulpit was, as you can imagine after hearing some of my history, a bit mind-boggling and unbelievable to me. I didn't totally trust that this community actually walked the walk until I experienced how you all came together to fight Prop 8 three years ago. We did a phone bank here every Monday night for several months and there were consistently a majority of straight allies showing up to fight this proposition with us. That experience touched me in a deep part of my core and challenged me to finally be sure about the community here and believe that I had indeed found a home and family. A community that truly offered love, support, and acceptance AND validated and rejoiced in my marriage and our family. Whew....this is a long, long way from that little five year old girl in Indiana! And yet, maybe not. For as it turns out, my Mother's

friend Wilma and I were both right...I did grow up to live with one of my girlfriends and we did get married and have babies!

I would love for all of us to consider claiming Neighborhood as that kind of safe haven for anyone who walks through these doors. I think that feeling – the one of feeling like we've found a safe home and family here and wanting that sense of belonging is a common experience and one that I have heard many articulate in New to Neighborhood Meetings, Bridging Groups, and Chalice Circles. It was certainly echoed in the survey done last year. Every single one of us has a story, a life filled with events that have shaped us and tested resilience. We always talk about sharing our joys and sorrows and I believe that ultimately that is what really brings us together, genuinely sharing in each other's highs and lows. I know this is a safe place for resilience to occur and I believe that we can reinforce the foundation of providing a space for resilience to occur. So, let's keep hearing each other's stories and honoring the resilience that each of us has experienced to bring us to this sacred place. I know for sure that it's a positive community for my boys Trevor and Logan and I hope when they grow up they will be glad that they were raised a UU!