

To hell and back: Lives lived and the lessons we can all learn

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Abstract

Through case study analysis, the examples of three women (each facing a personal 'trial by fire') are used to analyse the path to personal self-fulfilment through self-knowledge and, perhaps most importantly, resiliency. People who overcome obstacles and handicaps in order to progress to activities that fulfil them are considered within the limitation that life has handed them. The stories of Susan, Caroline and Joyce (names have been changed) are explained and their personal achievement and individual greatness, within the concept of resiliency, is considered in light of those achievements. Their journeys are all the more important as lessons for the rest of us.

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Introduction

Life's progress can be referred to as a journey, from the person I was, to the person I am now, and will one day become. This paper presents case vignettes of three women, who each faced very different tragedies. The stories of these women are compared with the resiliency characteristics in order to determine how they survived their personal tragedy and, perhaps, were made stronger by it.

Literature review

What are we when we are ourselves? When we think, reason or consider options to make decisions these actions are done in the context of a history of memories and ideas that make up our accumulated *self*. Our self-image is made up of an ever-evolving conglomerate of how each individual views their social roles, physical appearance, personal history and personality traits (Wilson, 1989). Self efficacy too is borne from past experiences.

In practical terms, self efficacy can be described as our belief in our own ability to perform a task, self-image helps to determine our confidence in that ability, and resiliency is our ability to carry on living a functional life no matter the adversity we are asked to face (Turner, 2001). Living a functional life may well be a goal for all of us and knowledge of the desired outcomes and expectations can help to explain motivations behind behaviours. The importance of self efficacy can be viewed in the role it plays in, for example, both academic performance and career choice (Hackett & Lent, 1992). Individual's self efficacy can be linked with goal

setting and as a major determinant to the persistence with which we develop and pursue these goals (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Dewitz & Walsh, 2002).

But what about when we do not know what life will throw at us next? Nor, how we will cope with what is thrown? The capacity of an individual to survive against odds that another may find insurmountable is remarkable. Where one person overcomes another is caught in depression. A resilient person has the capacity to bend, without breaking, and can spring back once bent (Valiant, 1993). Is a childhood spent in fear or neglect a better training ground for resilience than one spent in imagination and joy? Research suggests that children who have grown up in less-than-ideal situations have an inner strength that enables them to survive and a mental health that is both innate and directly accessible (Mills, 1995). But what if your childhood was great and your adulthood is not?

Resiliency, as a theory, is built upon several theories and practices. An amalgamation of concepts such as *self* and mutuality (Genero, Miller, Surrey, & Baldwin, 1992) where mutuality is facets of personality such as empathy, responsiveness towards others, understanding of others and authenticity. In these scenarios the self is helped through the relationship with others, and the understandings between people as a result of those relationships. Thus, an individual person, or self, gains “vitality and enhancement” (Surrey, 1991, p. 62). Perhaps the most important characteristic of a resilient person is being able to maintain an ongoing relationship with a positive adult (Surrey).

Resiliency also draws on social work practice where the focus is placed on the strengths of a person (their talent, knowledge, capacities or resources) rather than focusing on their problems (Saleebey, 1997). For example, a task in strength-based counselling encourages a client to select word and picture cards which they feel best describe themselves. The options range from helpful and friendly, to proactive and energetic. This exercise encourages a client to focus on what is good about them and what is going well in their life and enables a firm base upon which to expand into coping strategies for the areas that are not going so well.

Finally, resiliency draws from cognitive behavioural theory (Beck, 1976) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1991, 1986, 1977). The way a person cognitively views the world impacts their behaviour, for example, negative thoughts may equal negative behaviours and positive thoughts may equal positive behaviours (Beck, Rush, & Shaw, 1979). Human behaviour is viewed as a continuous, reciprocal interaction between cognitive behaviour and environmental factors within the social learning theory, an extension of cognitive behaviour theory (Bandura). With social learning behaviour might be observed in another and adapted into the behaviour of the person watching, in addition to the behaviour learned from their own experiences (Bandura).

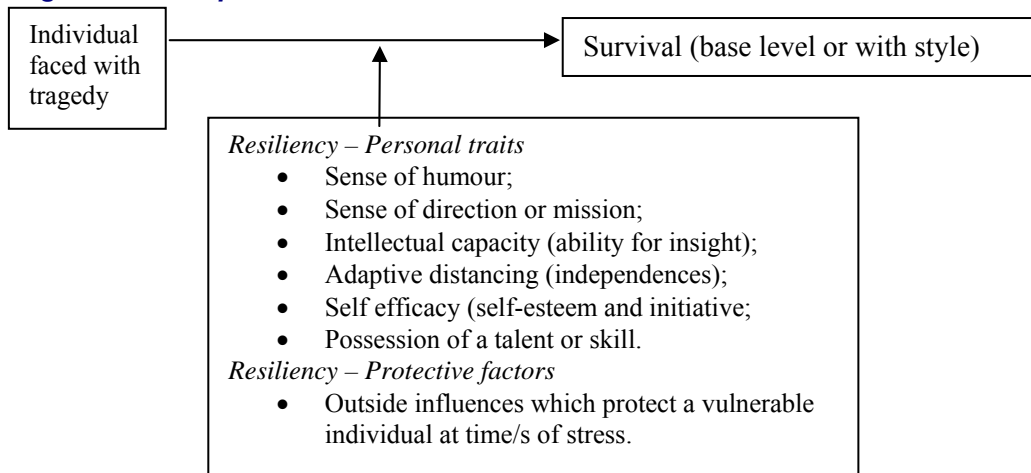
Research issue

In brief, the research issue considers the role resilience plays on the dimension of life journey (life survival). People can survive a terrible tragedy, but never quite be the same again, they exist rather than live. They cannot survive, choosing to either completely ignore the situation (either in the metaphysical sense of washing hands and moving on to something else) or a person cannot survive in the sense that they give up completely on life, either through suicide or some other realised exit from the world. The opposite of these choices is to survive with style, meaning the tragedy is faced and overcome (either a positive or negative solution but the

situation is dealt with – an ending rather than a happy or sad ending), and the human who emerges is stronger and achieves their own personal greatness. The authors hoped, going into the interviews that all three women would be in this latter category.

The characteristics of resiliency were then compared with the three women’s life journey to determine the role, if any, that resiliency plays in survival. The potential benefits of this conceptual research are that any links between resiliency and life journey (hopefully life survival with style) would provide useful insights for other people; both those faced with tragedy and those watching someone faced with a tragedy. A conceptual framework to guide this study was developed as shown in Figure 1 which was developed for this research.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



Resilient characteristics are divided into two main themes, those within the individual (Wolin & Wolin, 1993; Kumpfer, 1993; Anthony, 1987; Wallerstein, 1983; Werner & Smith, 1992, 1982; Werner, 1989) and those outside of the individual (Werner & Smith). Research suggests that the internal resiliency traits help a person to survive times of stress and therefore, times of higher vulnerability. External resiliency is developed through protection given by others towards an individual. For example, for children and adolescents this protection is most commonly given by parents or guardians and can help to offset the shifting balance between stressful events and an individual’s development. Thus, many hugs over cuts and scratches can help an individual develop into a well balanced child able to better deal with, for example, the death of a beloved pet later in life. During adulthood ongoing relationships with positive adults (who are not necessarily parents or other relatives) with continue an individual’s development and enhancement of resilience (Werner).

Methodology – case study

Case study research has been defined as a description of a situation over time (Bonoma, 1985) which offers a rich description of the research situation (Kaplan, 1986) or as an empirical enquiry (Yin, 1994) that “investigates a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple evidence” (Robson, 1993, p. 53). A summary of most case study definitions (Merriam, 1998, pp. 11–15) suggests that a case study has five essential characteristics of the methodology:

1. specific, for case studies focus on a *particular* setting or phenomenon;
2. *descriptive*, for case studies depicts real, dynamic, rich settings;

3. use of multiple sources of evidence to converge on a phenomenon to achieve *grounding*;
4. *heuristic*, whereby illumination or potentially new insight is sought; and
5. *inductive*, whereby relationship and understanding emerge *from* the data.

For this research, a case study approach offered the opportunity to discover deep, rich understandings of a phenomena (that of identifying resiliency evidenced through personal tragedy) (Gilmore & Carson, 1996; Patton, 1990; Perry, Alizadeh, & Reige, 1997; Stake, 1995, 1994). In addition, the case study approach provides ‘a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomena within its real life context’ (Robson, 1993, p. 52).

The researchers drew upon information presented at the Women in Research Conference in 2003 and extended interviews conducted at that time. A case study approach allowed for anonymity, deeper understanding (of entire lives) and comparisons between theory and context. The three women were selected based on the authors’ knowledge. Interviews were conducted by the authors.

Notes made during the interviews were compared with the literature on resiliency to determine the overall strategies which might be followed by others facing similarly difficult life journeys. While the authors would not wish anyone to have to face a difficult life journey, this research may help to reduce the stress and difficulty of a future journey.

Three women’s stories

Susan’s story

Self thinking and awareness for Susan was a painful process forced through her brutal experiences with verbal and physical abuse (Maher, 2003). Raised in rural New South Wales by two parents, the church was a dominant part of Susan’s childhood. She attended Sunday school every week and was taught that children obey their parents and that wives submit to their husbands. She grew up thinking that the man was the head of the house, and that one day it would be her duty too to raise a family and work the way that her mum did.

Susan’s Mother worked uncomplainingly in raising four children defining for Susan a role model who was worn out and had no time for herself. Care of family and husband came before all else. Males in the household received less chores, something which Susan rebelled internally against. “I often felt like it was really unfair. Why did my sister and I have so many chores to do and my brothers got off basically scott free? Why did my mum run around after everyone else. Why did she serve herself last and the smallest piece of meat? I did not understand.”

These beginnings of social feminism were further developed through a harsh childhood. As an overweight child Susan was often singled out by well meaning relatives. She has a clear memory of a relative passing around a plate of biscuits and having her four or five year old hand slapped and told “Susan, don’t eat another biscuit, you will get big and fat, and no man wants a fat wife. If you keep eating you will die lonely. No man loves a fat woman.”

The overweight child was also bullied at primary school, and her memories of this time are filled with confusion and pain. One of her coping strategies is to recall

such memories with an attempt at humour, Susan suggests that she had heard every fat joke there was and by high school had accepted that she was ugly, unlovable and would never be accepted by her peers. Her response was to isolate herself and to hide herself in her school work. Through this burial, she found she could feel better than her peers through beating them in grades. For example, “If I got an A and they got a B, I was worthwhile. So I started to work really hard and based my self worth on how well I could achieve.” Susan also began to circumvent her own feelings and instead, focussed entirely on others, for example, “I ... bent over backwards to please people ... my teachers, my family, the few friends I had, and the congregation at church. I never, ever told anyone no if they asked something of me.”

This unhealthy environment produced a confused and unhappy, overweight adolescent and teenager. Susan suggested she hated being a girl and could not understand the pressure for all girls to look a certain way. This manifested into home life, why should she do chores? Poignantly, Susan describes this time, “Why couldn’t I just be me? But, then again, did I really want to be me, whoever me really was?”

Upon leaving high school Susan was accepted into the military, feeling joy at beating her school colleagues for a coveted place. However, the military was a far more controlling and unhappy environment than school had been. While fellow school children teased Susan about her weight, the military held a weekly ‘fat parade.’ Military training required the wearing of training gear, designed for men that left little to the imagination. Female soldiers on fat parade were weighed in front of their divisions and their weights called out aloud. Gaining 500 grams in a week resulted in being called “sluggo” or “squass” (square arse). Women who had gained weight or who were thought too fat had to rise an hour earlier than their division and run. To escape this new level of pain and humiliation Susan began to consider suicide. She recounts “I often thought about following three of my colleagues who had thrown themselves out of their windows in an attempt to free themselves for good of the situation that they found themselves in. My body, the squishy bits, the female bits, became the enemy.” Susan tried laxatives to control her weight but her body could not tolerate the chemicals and she often fainted. Next, she tried smoking having heard it was an appetite suppressant. Susan was at war with herself.

From the military Susan gained a place in the University of Queensland and lived in a girl’s Christian college. Susan was raped and, although she went to a counsellor, was advised not to go to the police. She was told that going to the police would be traumatic for her, and in any case, she had been drinking, so how could she be sure she hadn’t said yes, or given off signals. Susan’s religious upbringing was compromised. She describes this as “From my upbringing sex before marriage was completely taboo. I felt unclean, disgusting, like I was the biggest filth on earth. I was all set to pull out of uni and run away, anywhere. I couldn’t tell my Mum or Dad, what would they think of me?” But Susan was saved from this dramatic step when a friend gave her a copy of Naomi Woolf’s *The Beauty Myth*. She explains this revelation, “I read it, and became angrier and angrier, the fog started to lift. All this stuff that had built up started to make sense. It was not my fault, I was not a bad or inferior person. This was society. I somehow made it through that year. I couldn’t disappoint my parents, nor let the kids who ridiculed me win, so I completed my studies and then transferred to Rockhampton, to CQU the following year.”

While the breakthrough had been important, it was not yet complete. Susan withdrew from her studies and married a man who turned out to be abusive. Susan took their daughter and left after one more abusive act became one too many, she explains this decision; “I decided that enough was enough! There was no way, that a daughter of mine would be raised in this environment and grow up thinking that it was OK for men to treat women like dirt. So when she was six weeks old, we left. We moved to Emerald to live with my Mum and Dad, as staying in the same town with her father would have been too unsafe.”

Susan’s journey was almost over. She became involved with the Emerald domestic violence centre and worked through their free self esteem courses for survivors of domestic violence, a program based on a feminist framework. This prompted her to return to Naomi Wolfe and find out more of this type of thinking. And, perhaps most importantly to her journey, Susan made her greatest discovery of all. She is a strong person. She explains, “I now had a daughter, and I would be damned if she ever had to go through the experiences that I had. I had to make difference. If not for me, than for her!”

Returning to her studies, after a six year absence, Susan worked within social construction, Foucault, power, discourse and feminism. She based every assessment piece she could on women; rural women, eco feminism, women in health and medical sociology, the division of labour and the effects on womens’ health. She found her niche. The passion and interest she has for her newfound topic results in the best average grade of her career, earning a grade point average of 6.8 out of 7. During this time she tells herself “Why should I feel so bad all the time? Why measure myself against a white male standard? I pushed, and felt good. For example, no longer did I bother to tell people that I was a sole parent because I was divorced, and try to show that I did not fit into the societal stereotype of the sole mother. Let people think what they wanted.” Her newfound strength was further displayed in everyday actions, for example, Susan reverted to her maiden name and “... did not flinch when shock horror, my Medicare card had two different last names for my daughter or myself on it.” Further, Susan begins to stand up for herself, telling a family member to mind their own business when she received criticism about the raising of her daughter.

Susan recounts this time in terms of feeling free and whole. She felt she was no longer damaged or inferior goods and she grew to like herself. Her body bore stretch marks, and she was proud of them. She states, “I am whole person, not just bits and pieces of anatomy that can be separated from my thoughts, my feelings.” Susan continued her studies into an honours degree (on a feminism topic) and continues to work towards the goal of “maybe I can make a difference too!” Talking with Susan it is easy to get caught up in her excitement and enthusiasm.

Caroline’s challenge

Caroline is legally blind as the result of a rare hereditary condition and while she has limited vision she describes her sight as “akin to wearing thick eye glasses and smearing the lenses with Vaseline” (Casey, 2002, cited in O’Loughlin & Dobeles, 2003). As an undergraduate student studying archaeology Caroline was fascinated by the topic but the diagnosis of her illness and the resulting loss of sight meant she was unable to complete her studies and must put away the lifelong dream of working on a dig. Caroline switched to a Diploma in Business Studies continued on to a Master of Business Studies (first class).

First class honours helped to secure a position with Andersen Consulting, showing to herself and everyone that such achievements were for everyone, not just the able bodied. However, Caroline recalls that what should have been a fantastic time for her was not as “something was missing”, but she did not know what. The continual feeling that something was wrong, something was missing, is a period in her life that Caroline calls “her darkest hour.”

In an effort to gain perspective for herself and highlight the achievements of the disabled Caroline set off on her own adventure. Inspired by the Mark Shand book *Travels on my Elephant* she travelled 1000 km across India on the back of her elephant Bhadra. She became only the third ever woman mahout (elephant handler and also a term of respect for those who have achieved this level of skill) and raised over 250,000 euro for a variety of charities.

Returning home she felt proud of herself (and her training with Bhadra) and the raise in awareness of disabled people she had achieved. The trip also provided Caroline with the strength to analyse herself and her resulting discovery was a new confidence in what she could achieve, of what she was capable. This new found confidence led to the formation of the Aisling Foundation; a charitable organisation whose mission is “to inspire through adventure, to create awareness of ability, not disability and to encourage employment.” As a driving force behind the foundation Caroline’s efforts have attracted support from business and industry.

In a second awareness generation program Caroline became a member of a team recreating the adventures of Phileas Fogg, *Around the world in 80 days*. Comprising four disabled travellers the team travelled the world using 80 different forms of transport. Cars, planes and trucks, ostriches and puffer boats were used. One memorable part of the trip was swimming five miles across the Red Sea, which actually involved pushing a wheel chair across the sea bed for one member of the team, an amputee. Caroline was even able to drive a car for the first time; it just so happened to be a Formula One car. Caroline’s daily journal was published online and the team spoke at over 26 international events. The trip resulted in raising both money and awareness and tested the limits of the members through the challenge of overcoming the many trials inherent in such a trip. Caroline suggests that all of them came out of the experience with a new belief in themselves.

Joyce’s journey

Joyce grew up in a small town in a small country, in a large family. Her relationship with her older brother was based on mutual respect and love, but also a healthy sense of competition. Being older, Joyce’s brother always seemed to be ahead of Joyce and she fought to keep up. Upon graduating from a local university Joyce was accepted in the graduate program of a prestigious university in the same location as her big brother now lived. She felt, for the first time in her life, that she was catching him up. And what should have been an exciting time was suddenly marred by his decision to tour India for 18 months.

Joyce struggled against the absence of her brother, but also with the loneliness and isolation she felt so far from home. Her first year was painful but she met it by throwing herself into her studies. Her studious efforts caught the attention of a staff member and upon graduation Joyce was offered an academic position. Joyce’s commitment to her new position was extraordinary, still driven as she was, with the need to belong, to fit in. However, Joyce did not feel she belonged no matter how hard she worked and she grew to believe that the only way she would be accepted was to achieve success in a commercial environment.

It is within these feelings of isolation and the belief that she was not achieving within her job that suddenly the once regular letters from her travelling brother stopped, without warning or explanation. Joyce's brother had been travelling for about 12 months and had regularly communicated with Joyce and other family members during his travels. Enquiries with government agencies met with both a distressing lack of concern and little assistance. The disappearance of a tourist in the country was not given the priority Joyce and her family felt it deserved. Four months later, still without word, and authorities seemed content to discount the entire situation as a "problem with the post."

Joyce's family went public in an effort to gain information and a three-month campaign, comprising television, radio and newspaper interviews and information, generated widespread assistance from Joyce's home country. Sufficient funds were raised to send two people to India. Joyce, and her sister Elaine, were the only family members able to travel. Their inexperience in travel and leading searches contributed to the trials they had to face, but the trip was also fraught with many other problems, including vehicle breakdown, food and insect allergies, altitude sickness, lack of food and open and continued hostility from the authorities, including threatening them with machine guns.

In surviving these trials the sisters learned as much about each other as themselves. They survived the hostile and foreign environment and they did so together. Unfortunately, the formal search revealed nothing of their brother and no explanation for his disappearance. In surviving their own journey but returning home empty handed they slipped into survivor guilt. Joyce battled overwhelming emptiness and sorrow for the failed trip, and yet seemed to feel a new strength of character which was at odds with her pain. The feelings of inadequacy in her job and the need to achieve commercial success faded, to be replaced by a need to work within charities and not-for-profit agencies. In time, Joyce came to realise the trip had taught her enough about herself to survive this and anything else in her life. To this day, she feels that her brother is no longer ahead of her, but beside her and she keeps him with her wherever she goes.

Resiliency

All three women, Susan, Caroline and Joyce faced their personal challenges and survived. We are not talking about a perfectly happy ending, but certainly a positive outcome for each woman, although Susan's retreat from suicide is certainly a happier ending than the alternative. Resiliency has played a significant part in this outcome. The internal and external resiliency characteristics are matched to each woman and summarised in Table 1.

During their interviews the characteristics were matched with their statements. For example, evidences of a sense of humour are provided from all three women as they joked through their interviews. For example, Susan compares herself to the peacock who meets a traveller. The traveller, having never seen this kind of bird before, mistakes it for a genetic freak and taking pity on it, which he was sure could not survive for long in such a deviant form, he set out to correct nature's error. He trimmed the long colourful feathers, cut back the beak, and dyed the bird black. "There now," he said, with pride in a job well done, "you now look more like a standard guinea hen." "But I was a peacock the whole time. And this peacock's tail is standing bright and tall!"

Table 1: Resiliency characteristics matched with Susan, Caroline and Joyce

<i>Resiliency characteristics</i>	<i>Susan</i>	<i>Caroline</i>	<i>Joyce</i>
Internal			
Sense of humour	√	√	√
Sense of direction or mission	Now	√	Now
Intellectual capacity (ability for insight)	√	√	√
Adaptive distancing (independences)	√	√	√
Self efficacy (self-esteem and initiative)	Now	√	Now
Possession of a talent or skill	√	√	√
External			
Outside influences which protect a vulnerable individual at time/s of stress	Gained through the journey, not before and not from traditional sources (family)	√	√

Legend: WiP = Work in Progress

From Resiliency characteristics derived from Wolin & Wolin, 1993; Werner & Smith, 1991, 1982; Kumpfer, 1993; Anthony, 1987 and Wallerstein, 1983 applications developed from this research

A sense of direction or purpose was most clear in Caroline. Even from the onset of the deterioration of her eyesight, and the resulting loss of her dream career, she continued with her education (switching degrees) and gaining employment. While the career path she is on now is fundamentally different from the one she envisaged, she remains determined and focussed. For Susan her direction is very clear, through her position in a government agency she helps others faced with tragedy and leads a team of staff in this enterprise. Joyce's career change and focus provided her with some stability and she enjoyed the work much more than her previous incarnation.

All three women have the intellectual capacity to analyse themselves and determine their own wants and needs. They were all capable of the insights necessary for self-understanding (self-illuminations!) and were able to direct much of their own learning progress. Further, all three women are very independent and today maintain a part of themselves that is just for them. Whether this is a safety net or a necessary feature of their survival, time will tell.

Self efficacy, when considered in line with self-esteem, shows a slightly different story. Caroline, once again, stands out amongst the women. She never doubted her ability to survive her blindness and she set about proving that to everyone else. A deeper read into her behaviour shows Caroline putting herself into potentially dangerous situations, and yet, this appears to stem more from the proving-it-to-myself basket, than the I-want-to-die-in-a-creative manner one. Susan and Joyce have developed confidence from their survival and research. As a result of their experiences both women understand more about themselves and their confidence in themselves improved.

All three women had a significant talent or skill, in addition to the will to survive. Certainly all three women are capable of the career paths they have chosen, for example, Caroline is exceedingly capable of securing funding and donations and being a public face for the charity she has started.

External influences were, sadly lacking in Susan's childhood. Support from parents and family members was of the cruel-to-be-kind school (obvious attempts to 'help' Susan lose weight) and the lack of supportive adult relationships continued during much of her life. Caroline and Joyce both grew up in supportive and loving families and had adult relationships that provided a balance between vulnerability and stress. It is interesting to note that of the three women, Susan was the only one who considered suicide, and she lacked significant external relationships.

Conclusion

Primarily, the main outcome from this conceptual study is the link between the resiliency characteristics and the survival of Susan, Caroline and Joyce. They have, the authors suggest, survived with style. Once each woman had reached their personal 'rock bottom' the characteristics of resiliency could be utilised to best effect to help the women gain control of situations not of their making, and help them to survive. While Susan, perhaps, had the most ground to recover, all three women possess a sense of humour, intellectual capacity, the ability to distance themselves from their surroundings (the tragedy) and talent. When next faced with a personal mountain to climb, we may first wish to reaffirm our resiliency characteristics, and hit the mountain running.

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