

## **“Nature’s Students”**

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
February 2, 2020

*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.*

### **Readings**

Nature is Resilience (video): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQOIQ1yaGcg>

“Optimism” by Jane Hirshfield

### **Sermon**

In talking with some of you about this month’s theme of “Resilience,” many of you expressed a sigh of relief and affirmation that this theme seems so appropriate to the month of February in Vermont.

By this point in the winter season, many of us are needing some “resilience” to keep on going strong. And, the events of our shared, public life are also amplifying the need for resilience.

“Resilience” is an important word and concept in many facets of life. The term has a particular meaning in the realm of science, especially the natural sciences as well as in the realm of psychology.

In both fields, resilience hinges upon the response to sources of stress, or things that cause a significant change in the status quo.

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress...It means ‘bouncing back’ from difficult experiences.”

The Resilience Alliance, a research organization studying social-ecological systems defines resilience as “the capacity of a social-ecological system to absorb or withstand perturbations and other stressors such that the system remains within the same regime, essentially maintaining its structure and functions.”

For our own exploration here, we can try to come to an understanding of what spiritual resilience might involve - what approaches and practices can help us to be spiritually resilient.

I think it's important to first be able to notice the sources of stress and adversity that might be impacting us at any given time impacting our psyches and our spirits.

On the macro level, we are facing a climate crisis, a crisis whose impacts seem to be moving at a pace that feels hard to grasp. The recent bushfires in Australia constituted another sounding of the climate emergency alarm. Dr. Joëlle Gergis of Australian National University recently wrote: "As I've watched the events of this summer unfolding, I've found myself wondering whether the Earth system has now breached a tipping point, an irreversible shift in the stability of the planetary system...Rapid climate change has the potential to reconfigure life on the planet as we know it."<sup>1</sup>

This is a hard reality to face and one that we need to become increasingly accustomed to if we are to take any meaningful action.

We are also dealing with the decay of our democratic systems and what can feel like chaos and instability in other parts of our shared public life.

Regarding this new state of being that we find ourselves in, the Movement Generation writes:

"Instability has become a defining feature of our times. In many ways, this instability is the new landscape of social struggle. It is useful to classify the economic and ecological disruptions that make up this 'new normal' of instability into two groups: shocks and slides.

Shocks present themselves as acute moments of disruption. These are, for example, market crashes, huge disasters and uprisings.

Slides, on the other hand, are incremental by nature. They can be catastrophic, but they are not experienced as acute. Sea level rise is a slide. Rising unemployment is a slide. The rising costs of food & energy are a slide.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/03/we-are-seeing-the-very-worst-of-our-scientific-predictions-come-to-pass-in-these-bushfires>

While they share a set of root causes, the scale, pace and implications of shocks and slides differ and, therefore require different responses by social movements. One of our key roles, as social movements, must be to harness the shocks and direct the slides--all towards achieving the systemic, cultural and psychic shifts we need to navigate the changes with the greatest equity, resilience and ecological restoration possible.”<sup>2</sup>

Identifying examples of resilience is important in developing our own resilience and making the shifts that Movement Generation describes.

If we look closely, nature provides many examples of resilience at work.

On the recommendation of a couple of people here in the congregation, I went and saw the Louis Schwartzberg film, *Fantastic Fungi*. And, I was not disappointed. I learned how truly fantastic fungi are.

This film illustrates how there are amazing natural processes happening well out of the sight of the human eye on a regular basis.

There are, for example, the mycorrhizal (MY-koe-RY-zull) fungi. I hadn't thought too much about this particular type of fungus before watching the film. They surround the roots of plants and act as a kind of extension of the root system allowing the plant to draw in nutrients they might not otherwise have access to. In exchange, the fungi are well fed with photosynthesized sugars from the plant roots.

Mycorrhizal fungi are ancient. They have been working in symbiotic relationship with plant roots for over 460 million years.

Underground these living beings are working hard to maintain healthy soil and also healthy plants. One experiment has shown that, through the network of these fungi called mycelium, tomato plants can communicate with one another and warn another plant about diseases so that it can start preparing its own defenses and immunity.

This network of life-sustaining mycelium goes unnoticed, but it is ever present.

Another creature that is often found underground is the rat. Most of don't like to think too much about rats. According to the Chinese lunar-based calendar and zodiac, however,

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<sup>2</sup> as quoted in *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Shaping Worlds* by adrienne marie brown

we are now in the Year of the Rat. The rat is known to be the most adaptable and survival-oriented of all of the twelve animals associated with the Chinese zodiac. Anyone who has observed rats knows how intelligent they are and how they are oriented towards group living and survival.

Vietnamese-American community organizer, Angela Kim Nhien writes this of the new Year of the Rat: “Rats thrive in community, working together to protect their home, making a way from no way. This past year drew upon deep stores of ancestral resilience. Rats interweave burrow-networks to protect & keep their own safe, carving out spaces of care/belonging...Part of the Rat’s magic comes from facing and accepting its shadows and realizing what’s underneath teems with life, possibility, healing, and magic. After all, the below ground is the realm of intertwined Roots, Fungi, Mycelium ~ Eating away rot, dismantling unfit structures, bringing justice to nature so that life may emerge & flourish.”

As I set out to write this sermon, I wasn’t sure which exact examples of nature’s resilience I would want to highlight. Somehow, these examples emerged. Examples of life at work beneath the surface. Life figuring out how to sustain itself through networks and mutual care.

We, humans, are, of course, also part of nature. And, much of what we do on a daily basis is also part of this underground, sometimes imperceptible network of life-saving, soul-saving, democracy-saving activity. We, too, form intertwined roots to dismantle unfit structures and bring justice to nature so that life may emerge and flourish.

We do this when we show up for one another when any of us is the target of hateful rhetoric. We do this as we gather around food and share vulnerably how we want to talk with our children about climate change. We do this when we organize with neighbors and friends to take the next action and the next to defend our democracy.

Like the broader natural world, we, too, are geared to adapt resiliently to changing circumstances even when those changes seem immense and unbearably disruptive.

Marine biologist Bill Graham writes, “Resilience, in reality, is the act of adapting to change. Change and resilience go hand-in-hand. Resilience thinking is about understanding and engaging with a changing world. By understanding how and why the system as a whole is changing, we are better able to build a capacity to work with change, as opposed to being a victim of it.”

Working with change is the name of the game. And, our spiritual resilience is developed as we embrace and work those spiritual muscles of adaptation.

“Intentional adaptation,” as adrienne marie brown describes it, is the kind of adaptation that makes us resilient in the way of the “sinuous tenacity of the tree.” Brown describes this kind of adaptation as “the combination of adaptation with intention, wherein the orientation and movement towards life, towards longing, is made graceful in the act of adaptation. This is the process of changing while staying in touch with our deeper purpose and longing.”<sup>3</sup>

For a moment, I want to turn towards our work as a congregation in shaping the Building for the Future Project. I believe that this shared ministry of envisioning and planning for the future asks us to embrace a resilience-orientation. By that I mean, we are called to recognize the “shocks” and “slides” that are now shaping our existence as a mission-driven, religious community, and we are called to adapt and grow resiliently to shape our future together.

We can ask ourselves: How are we, as a religious community, adapting to the rapidly changing environment we find ourselves in while retaining what is at our core? Can we be nimble and shift even while seeking to uphold the key parts of our identity and purpose?

We can look with depth and clarity at this beloved building and ask ourselves sincerely how we can best adapt and grow this shared, sacred space to meet not just our present but, more importantly, our future needs.

While we can't predict the future, we can proactively embrace resilience in our discernment. We can make this a place where this generation of churchgoers, members and friends as well as future generations are welcomed, are living by our lives, are offering hospitality to those known and unknown to us, and that takes seriously our charge to protect the earth, our home.

Embracing a resilient future will also mean embracing change. This can be hard to do, but as nature shows us, it is also necessary to survive.

Here are a few examples of species adapting to climate change for their own survival:

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<sup>3</sup> *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Shaping Worlds* by adrienne marie brown

Large banded snails in Europe come in many shades, and there is a documented shift in proportion of these snails with light-colored shells. It has been shown that snails with light colored shells have a lower body temperature, and light colored snails are becoming more prevalent over time in the Netherlands.

Wild thyme in France has evolved in response to fewer extreme cold events since the 1970s, producing more pungent oils to deter herbivores.

And, pink salmon in Auke Creek, Alaska, which is warming at .03 degrees Celsius per year, are now migrating out of the creek earlier allowing them to take better advantage of their spawning season.<sup>4</sup>

There is still so much for us to learn about and from nature and its resilience.

May it continue to be an inspiration to us as we walk and move gently across the earth, building up community, taking part in the rooted, beneath the surface work of cultivating flourishing communities for us all.

I close with these words from the poet Wendell Berry:

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/5/140506-climate-change-adaptation-evolution-coral-science-butterflies/>