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Creativity, Resiliency, Dignity, and a Good Life
Third Annual Wahlstrom Lecture –
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When I received the invitation to do this lecture I was equal parts honored, excited and terrified. Honored, because I have a world of respect for my colleagues who believed I had something noteworthy to say about the value of a liberal arts education; Excited, because I genuinely love to share about the work that has inspired and energized me over the past four years; and terrified because quite honestly as a first generation college student and even midway through my 29th year at this institution I have always felt a bit like a “poser” in academia.

In saying yes to this invitation, and in acknowledging the interdisciplinarity of the liberal arts, I have invited all of me – the scientist, the artist, the storyteller and even the touchy-feely woo-woo out there yogi - to speak with you this afternoon.

I begin with the storyteller.

In February 2013, I was diagnosed with invasive lobular breast cancer. It is safe to say my entire world tipped slightly off its axis. As my anxiety kicked into overdrive, I felt all physical awareness of my body shutting down. I have spent my entire career integrating the life of the mind and the wisdom of the body yet in the days immediately following my diagnosis, all I experienced was disintegration.

Intuitively I knew I needed to stay present in my body to make good decisions so I practiced yoga and sought out hands on work. Concurrently the inner academic got on board and began to explore the research on factors influencing survival after a cancer diagnosis. I was so grateful for my own liberal arts education, and my years of working in this academic community, for both had given me tools to critically evaluate the evidence presented in the copious articles and books readily available, and the tools to evaluate the ample advice shared by well-meaning friends. This investigation led me to the Berkshire Mountains, to Kripalu Yoga and Wellness Center, to study with Dr. Maria Sirois, a clinical psychologist, who spent the early part of her career working the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. My time at Kripalu bolstered my yoga skills, and studying with Maria introduced me to a wealth of evidence-based research within the field of “Resiliency.” Once again, my world tipped slightly off its axis, only this time it pointed me in the direction that would energize and inspire the next chapter of my life’s work.

That original three-day workshop has turned into a four-year immersion, which began with a review of the existing literature in the area of resiliency, and has evolved into the opportunity to be in conversation with some notable researchers within the field. This afternoon I want to share with you a slice of what I have discovered during this journey, why I believe it is relevant not only for cancer survival, but also for college survival and

how a liberal arts education can provide the framework for increasing this capacity for resiliency.

So perhaps it is good to begin with a definition of resiliency.

Resilience has been defined as the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy and significant or cumulative sources of stress.

Trauma can be defined as an event that falls outside the range of usual human experience that causes distress. I like a much simpler definition. I view trauma as an event after which everything is different – it is the dividing line in the trauma survivor's life. I also like to group trauma into two categories: big T and little t. A big T trauma is an event that most people would find traumatic, a sexual assault or the unexpected loss of a loved one. A little t trauma is something that is experienced as traumatic on a more personal level such as moving to a new city, or the ending of a relationship.

(Image of trauma on wellbeing)

When we experience the distress of a trauma, for example, the grief of losing a loved one, it is usual and expected that there will be a loss of overall functioning. It is not uncommon to be sad and disoriented, to have difficulty concentrating, difficulty sleeping, experience a loss of self-efficacy, and cry regularly and frequently at unexpected times.

However, over time, most people begin to climb back up toward their level of pre trauma functioning. This is what we generally mean by resilience. But how does one bounce back from a life-shattering trauma?

Since the 1970's we have seen many images and depictions of veterans who did not return to their level of pre-trauma functioning. For some, their impairments were modest, for others they were completely debilitating. The term, post traumatic stress disorder or PTSD, has become part of our shared vocabulary. While incredibly tragic, difficult to treat, and deserving of attention and support, it is important to note that only a relatively small percentage of people who experience trauma actually develop full-blown PTSD. (About 7-8% of the general population, 10% of women, 4% men, 15 – 30% Vietnam vets, 10% Gulf War vets, 11 percent Iraqi and Afghanistan Vets.)

Until relatively recently, that is where the discussion around trauma ended. Beginning about the mid 1980's a group of trauma researchers began noticing patterns that did not fit into the simple narrative of either being resilient or non-resilient.

About half of the trauma survivors involved in their research reported positive changes as a result of enduring their traumatic experience. Sometimes they were small changes such as reporting that they felt their life had more meaning or they felt closer to their loved ones. Sometimes the experience was completely transformative and sent survivors down career or life paths they never could have imagined. The term *post traumatic growth*, or PTG, entered into the realm of possible outcomes.

The term *post traumatic growth* was coined by two Psychology Professors from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun. As they tell the story, they were driving together to a conference in Atlanta, Georgia and they started musing, "Wouldn't it be really interesting to talk to old people and just ask them, 'What have you learned about life that is useful, and you'd like to pass on to others?'" This musing evolved into a research plan. Their first study involved speaking to a group of widows who were between 50 and 80 years old. They asked open ended questions and just listened to what these women had to say. As expected, the widows talked about their grief, their loneliness, their still frequent tears. But they also talked about discovering their own strength, meeting new friends, growing closer to their children and doing things they never could have imagined – like getting their driver's license!

Tedeschi and Calhoun, thinking they were on to something and went on to research individuals who had been disabled through injury or illness. Again, and again, a substantial number of their subjects talked about positive changes that had occurred in their lives as a result of experiencing this particular trauma. So Tedeschi and Calhoun started digging through Psychology journals trying to find other research studies that would support their findings. Here they unearthed a study by a psychiatrist named William Sledge, done in the late 70's. Sledge, who is currently a professor at the Yale School of Medicine and medical director of Yale-New Haven Psychiatric Hospital, had studied aviators captured during the Vietnam War who had been held by the North Vietnamese in the infamous Hanoi Hilton. Sledge had access to these veterans entire classified debriefings so he knew exactly what horrific treatment they had endured. Yet when he interviewed these veterans, he heard veteran after veteran say some version of, "It was an intense experience. I learned a lot from it." He went on to do a bigger study that paired Air Force veterans who matched the profiles of his POW veterans in terms of age, rank, and time spent in Vietnam. He then ran a larger study using the vets who had not be captured as a control group to compare with the POW veterans.

Sixty-one percent of the POW's responded that they had undergone beneficial changes as a result of their military experience, whereas only thirty percent of the control group reported this. Sledge published his findings in 1980 and was invited to present at trauma research conferences. The response to his work was underwhelming to say the least. He tells one story of being invited to participate on a panel with other trauma researchers, in a venue that would accommodate 300 people. Fifteen people came to hear him. Sledge's research with POW's was all but ignored until Tedeschi and Calhoun found it and gave it new life in relationship to their research.

Here is where I return to my own story. I am not comparing my own experience with cancer to the experience of being a POW, and I am not suggesting trauma as educational modality to increase the resilience in college students. However, I knew, even as I was recovering from surgeries and chemotherapy, that I was situated in the post traumatic growth camp. I wanted to understand the factors that contributed to my own resiliency and, of equal importance, I wanted to know if this was a teachable subject. I understood

how to teach dance so my student would become better dancers. I wanted to know if it was possible to teach resiliency so that students could become more resilient individuals.

Fortunately for me, far greater minds than mine had been exploring this question since the 1990's.

Martin Seligman, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania emerged as a key player. When Seligman was elected as president of American Psychological Association in 1998 he decided to use his role to promote his ideas about Positive Psychology. While the term positive psychology was first used by Abraham Maslow, Seligman was the one who shepherded it into the mainstream.

In his inaugural address at Summit Hall he made the radical pronouncement, " that psychologists need to study what makes happy people happy! He went on to say, "that psychology was half-baked, literally half-baked. We had baked the part about mental illness [...] The other side's unbaked, the side of strength, the side of what we're good at." (Address, Lincoln Summit, Sep. 1999.)

Over the past twenty years there has been an explosion in researchers baking that other half. Positive Psychology has been defined as "the scientific study of human flourishing, and an applied approach to optimal functioning. It has also been defined as the study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals, communities and organizations to thrive."

Here I would like to share a few of those key findings.

Ring One: **Choice**

Foundational to resiliency is the belief that we have a choice in how we respond to our situation. This idea was embodied and articulated by psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl. Frankl was a successful, young, newly married young neurologist when he, his wife, his sister and his parents were captured by the Nazis and taken to Theresienstadt Concentration Camp. He was separated from the rest of his family and moved multiple times. He was the only survivor within his entire family. He tells a story about a pivotal moment during his internment. While he was thinking the day to day thoughts of survival – such as if he should try to hide a crust of bread and eat it later, or eat at that moment – he imagined himself after the war giving a lecture on the psychology of survival in a concentration camp. In describing that moment he wrote, "All that oppressed me at the moment became objective, seen as described from the remote viewpoint of science. By this method I succeeded in rising above the situation, above the suffering of the moment."

Perhaps the most famous quote by Frankl summarizes this key finding:

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

I think foundational to a liberal arts education, is reinforcing time and time again, that there are always choices. I have had multiple conversations with students that include the student saying, "I don't know what to do, just tell me what to do." And with the student lamenting that they can't study abroad because they have two majors and three minors and their schedule is completely set for the next two years and they really don't have any choices. I have also had conversations with students prior to seeing the disciplinary review board, and sat quietly while the student talked their way from "This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me", to "I guess this is an opportunity rethink some the choices I have been making." Sometimes we just need to get out of the way and students will grow wiser and more self-sufficient right in front of our eyes. When you work with students in a liberal arts setting this is what you do - you invite students into a thoughtful conversation about the choices before them. And then you sit back and listen, as they find their way forward.

Which brings me to the second ring: **Mindfulness**

Back in the late 60's and early 70's Jon Kabat-Zinn was working on a PhD in Molecular Biology when he was introduced to meditation by a visiting Zen Missionary. He went on to study with other meditation teachers, and in 1979, he recruited a group of chronically ill patients who were not responding well to traditional treatment to participate in participate in his newly minted eight-week stress reduction program. That program is now known as Mindfulness-based stress reduction or MBSR. Kabat-Zinn defined mindfulness as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment."

Since then, a substantial body of research has emerged demonstrating how [mindfulness-based interventions improve mental and physical health](#).

While imprisoned, the POWs in Sledge's research, certainly were not thinking, "now I am going to meditate to reduce my stress." However, their captivity forced them to spend hours, days, weeks, and years with little to do but reflect upon their situation. Sledge wrote, "These were people who were not used to thinking about themselves or reflecting or being introspective and now they are in a prison cell where they won't see another person with hours and hours to just sit there and think."

Once again, I am not advocating for captivity as a method to force contemplation, but I am advocating for teaching our students how to pause, and pay attention to the moment they are experiencing.

There is a quote frequently attributed to Viktor Frankl that states, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

The origin of the quote is actually a bit sketchy. Author Stephen R. Covey, a writer known for his popular book the *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, used the quote regularly in speeches and said that he found the quote in a library book and thought it described Frankl's views - but he did not take note of the actual book title or author.

Regardless of its sketchy origins, the quote that gets to the heart of mindfulness. The stressors and obstacles in our lives will keep presenting themselves. However, there is a space between each and every adverse event and our response to that event. And, it is in that space that instead of mindlessly reacting, we can choose to mindfully respond.

And this is a teachable skill, one that gets better with practice. The more practice we have being mindful, pausing to gather and weigh evidence, analyzing the evidence against what we are thinking and feeling, and then choosing our response, the more expansive that space between stimulus and response becomes. As we teach students to think critically about how they craft their academic work, we are also teaching them the skills to think critically about how they craft their lives.

My third ring: **Signature strengths and flourishing**

Returning to the pioneering work of Martin Seligman, many of you may be familiar with the DSM or Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. The DSM is how the American Psychiatric Association classifies and lists psychological disorders.

In keeping with his commitment to focus on the unbaked half of psychology, Seligman and his colleague Christopher Peterson set out to develop a list of human strengths that have proven valuable across time, religion and culture. They identified six core virtues and twenty four character strengths, and they developed a survey called the “Values in Action” or “VIA” survey, that individuals could take to identify their individual character strengths. Here is an overview of the strengths they identified.

1. Wisdom and knowledge – cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge. .
 - Creativity
 - Curiosity
 - Open-mindedness
 - Love of Learning
 - Perspective
2. Courage – emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal.
 - Bravery
 - Persistence
 - Integrity
 - Vitality
3. Humanity – interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others.
 - Love

- Kindness
 - Social Intelligence
4. Justice – civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
 - Citizenship
 - Fairness
 - Leadership
 5. Temperance – strengths that protect against excess
 - Forgiveness and mercy
 - Humility/modesty
 - Prudence
 - Self-regulation (self-control)
 6. Transcendence – strengths that forge connections to other people and the larger universe and provide meaning
 - Appreciation of beauty and excellence (awe, wonder, elevation)
 - Gratitude
 - Hope
 - Humor
 - Spirituality

The key finding here was not that resilient people possessed a specific set of these character strengths. The key finding was that resilient people had a sense of what their internal strengths were and could lean into them when facing traumatic events.

I have no doubt that many of the aviator POWs drew on their courage, their bravery and their persistence to survive horrific realities. Viktor Frankl's fantasy of lecturing on the lessons he learned in the concentration camp, tapped into his ability to hope, and find greater meaning beyond his suffering.

I have taken the VIA character strength survey a few times and my top character strengths remain the same – Creativity, Curiosity, Humor and Love of Learning. I have leaned into those strengths over and over to carry through these last four years.

Understanding our signature strengths, is not only useful in bolstering our capacity to be resilient through challenges it can also provide guide posts for finding what Aristotle called the 'good life' and Martin Seligman calls flourishing. In fact, this continues to be the main focus of Seligman's current research and was very much the work of his original research partner, Christopher Peterson. Up until the time of his death (in 2012) he was a regular contributor to Psychology Today, where he wrote a blog called "The Good Life." One tribute to Peterson stated, "by maintaining a regular blog, Christopher Peterson reveals the true power of an authentic search for meaning, not only for himself for the larger team he is rooting for and vouching for – humanity. (Michael Hogen, PhD, Pursuing the Good Life: Reflections on Positive Psychology.)

And once again, I will argue that this is what we are work so diligently to do when we teach at liberal arts college. From first term seminars through capstone courses, across all disciplines, we ask questions, craft assignments, provide experiential opportunities, and assign reflective practices to guide students into identifying their individual strengths and values, and encourage them to recognize how can they use those strengths and values not only shape their own lives but also contribute to larger team, what we often call the greater good.

Barbara Fredrickson, a key researcher in the area of positive emotions sums it up this way. “Flourishing goes beyond being happiness, or satisfaction with life. True, people who flourish are happy. But that’s not the half of it. Beyond feeling good, they’re also doing good – adding value to the world. “

The fourth ring: **Creativity**

Because creativity is my top character strength, and because I believe creativity is essential to our own resiliency and the resiliency of our communities, I will just make one quippy point and move on. Between stimulus and response there is a space. And that space is the place for choice. What creativity teaches us is that if your first choice is Plan A, and plan A does not work out, there are 25 more letters in the alphabet.

The fifth ring: **Connection**

Not surprisingly supportive relationships are critical in understanding resiliency. The research shows that resilient people are more adept at reaching out when they need help. However, here is the piece that is much more interesting to me. It was not the receiving of support, so much as the giving of support to others that increased the capacity for resiliency. You see examples of this over and over – Candace Lightner, who founded Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, after her 13 year daughter was killed by a drunk driver; the countless veterans who have lost limbs, and go on to develop rehabilitation facilities for other veterans, the examples are plentiful.

I want to pause for a moment and link these two last rings together before I move on.

Back in 2003, the editor of *Psychology Today* wrote an article titled, “The Art of Resilience”. In it she states, “At the heart of resilience is a belief in oneself – yet also a belief in something larger than oneself.” (Hara Estroff Marano)

And not because I am trying to earn brownie points with President Bergman, but as I sit with that statement I hear echos of our new strategic plan,

- “Every action at Gustavus moves students toward the discovery of self . .
- Our students discern their vocation, think deeply and critically,
- Our students are aware and engage with real-world concerns

At the heart of our enterprise is mentoring students to believe in themselves, and also to believe in, and commit themselves to something larger than themselves.

Sixth Ring: **Well being**

Neuroscientist Richard Davidson, founder of the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, has stated emphatically, "Well-being is fundamentally no different than learning to play the cello."

1. Choice – that in almost all situations we have a choice
2. Mindfulness – the pause, the focused attention to this moment, moving from reacting to responding.
3. Authenticity/ Signature Strengths – Who am I in the face of this?
4. Creativity – There are 25 more letters in the alphabet
5. Connection – a belief, a connection to oneself and a belief, and a connection to something larger than oneself.
6. Wellbeing

While some people might be born with more musical talents, no one innately knows how to play the cello. Similarly, while some people are born with a higher capacity for resiliency - Wellbeing is a construct. It is the active belief that we have choices and that we have the capacity to determine our responses to even grave situations. It involves the decision over and over and over again, to pause and bring focused attention to this moment and to move from reacting to responding. It is the practice of identifying our inner strengths and using those strengths to respond to not only to our individual stressors, but to respond to challenges facing in our communities. It is actively cultivating our creativity, so that when plan A doesn't work, and plan B doesn't work, and plan C doesn't work we know we still have more options. It is the insight and resolve to use our signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than ourselves.

The Seventh Ring: **Happiness**

For a long time I struggled with the concept of *happiness*. I frequently ask my advisees, "What do you want to do with your life," and quite often they would answer, "I just want to be happy." In the past, I would try to maintain a nonjudgmental face, while internally I would rant, "You need to do more! You have so many privileges! Now you are getting this amazing opportunity of a fine liberal arts education, you need to use those gifts to serve this world!" Or as we frequently hear at Gustavus – make your life count! For many years "seeking happiness" felt not only self-centered, it felt selfish.

Circling back to my first visit to Kripalu in 2013. The class I was taking was called, *Radiance: Building an Amazing Life after Cancer*. I remember one class when the teacher, Dr. Maria Sirois, drew a teeter-totter on the board, and said something like, "happiness is when that which gives your life meaning is in balance with that which gives your life joy." She went on to say that if the scale is tipped toward chasing after one good time after

another, your life begins to feel meaningless. And, if you tip the scale the scale in the other direction, all work, all service, you become world-weary.

It was one of those “Ah-Ha!” moments for me. I realized that I had been devaluing “Joy” for a long time and I had, in fact, grown weary of my life. I wanted to be taken seriously as an artist and I wanted to be taken seriously as an academic and that combined with years of caregiving a young child and elderly parents, had led me down the road of too much serious and too little joy.

I have come to realize it is those experiences of joy that nourish me and give me the strength to do the work I want to do in this world. Now when a student says, “I just want to be happy,” I ask them, “What does happiness means to you?”

I am reminded of this wonderful quote about self-care from Parker Palmer, “Self-care is never a selfish act - it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.”

I would like to weave in just one more thread– the concept of Dignity. When writing this lecture I could not figure out where the concept of dignity fit into my stack of rings. That was when I realized dignity was not a ring, dignity was the spine that kept all the other rings in alignment.

Spine: **Dignity**

Donna Hicks, an associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, at Harvard University, and someone who has spent over 20 years working in the area of international conflict resolution defines “Dignity” as “an internal state of peace that comes with the recognition and acceptance of the value and vulnerability of all living things. “

She goes on to clarify that dignity is what we feel when we are treated as if we are worthy of care and attention. Dignity is what others experience when we treat them as if they are worthy of care and attention.

As promised, the woo-woo yogi is showing up to bring this lecture to a close. As is so often the case, I understood Dignity on a body level before I understood it on a head or heart level. And where I experience Dignity is in my spine. When I physically experience dignity, when my belief in myself is that I am worthy of care and attention, when I see and believe in my inherent value, and where I feel I am being treated by others as if I am worthy of care and attention, as if my life indeed matters, my inhalation stays soft and during exhalation my spine stays elongated – I stay tall. When my dignity is threatened or violated, my inhalation is characterized by the embodiment of the fight or flight response, and my exhalation embodies despair. Go ahead and try it. If you are comfortable – close your eyes and imagine a moment when you felt you were being treated with dignity. Feel how you can remain both soft and tall.

I believe it is on the axis of dignity, with the recognition and acceptance of the value and vulnerability of all living things, that we are able to align our belief in ourselves, with our commitment to the greater good and truly move in the direction of flourishing.

Thank you.