

When Resilience Becomes Ugly

By Pastor Christopher Seah

The student had a single word emblazoned on her school T-shirt. Printed in uncompromising navy blue on white, it read: “Resilience.” Organizations these days know the power of words to inspire. They know that single words can become ideas can become life philosophies can become lifestyles can become destinies. So they try to carefully select words that inspire. If these students live by those inspirational words, they will become those words. They would then be ready to meet whatever challenges life throws at them. I like one-word slogans. They are easy to digest. And their power is intensified by their unadorned simplicity. But what bothered me this time was not that a one-word slogan was used. It was the word that was used.

In my humble opinion, resilience is overrated in our society.

Resilience has become something of a guiding principle in our culture. But when it is not put into the service of other higher virtues, resilience can bring out the worst in people. Resilience is simply one’s ability to endure difficulty and recover quickly from it. It is “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change,” as Merriam-Webster says. It says nothing of *what* you are resilient about, *for whom* you are resilient, or even *why* you are resilient. So we have many resilient people today. But they are tough and cold. They have put on enough mental toughness to stop a speeding bullet. But they are the last people you want to be near.

I have a theory about those teenagers who stun the nation with their suicides (or failed attempts). These, I suspect, are the products of highly resilient parents who have long mastered the art of ignoring pain. But somewhere along the way, these parents have also learned to cease entering into the pain of others, especially their own children. Their logic is brutally simple: “If I could do it, so can you. Just suck it up and all will be well!” These parents are not able to empathize with their children, who are at a stage in life where love and acceptance are most needed at home due to the intensifying storms of life. Feeling betrayed and unwanted, these kids take to the plunge. Yes, suicide is a form of murder and it is inexcusable. But from time to time, godless resilience does lend a hand.

Now please do not misunderstand me. Resilience is an important virtue. It is necessary for excellence in any field. Christians need resilience if they want to reign with Christ (2 Tim 2:12). But whatever its merits, resilience is not to be cultivated on its own. It must be nurtured in the service of other greater virtues: Holiness, compassion, faith in Christ, gentleness, justice, longsuffering, etc. Resilience shines brightest when it protects what is good and wholesome, what gives life to our loved ones and to our society. Therefore we ought not to seek resilience alone. Instead, we ought to seek resilient love, resilient joy, resilient peace, resilient patience, resilient kindness, resilient goodness, resilient faithfulness, and so on (Gal 5:22, 23). Resilience is at its most radiant when it stands firmly against evil (Eph 6:11). Resilience is at its ugliest when it’s all about *me*. Paul puts resilience in perspective when he says, “if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor 13:3).

The next time your organization wants “Resilience” or some likeminded word on its apparel, ask if they could also add “Compassion.” Incidentally, I was able to see the other complementing T-shirts from that student’s school. Some said “Strength.” Others said “Speed.” When you stand up for “Kindness” or “Gentleness,” you may well need resilience, strength, and speed to handle whatever comes next! But at least you’ll be putting those lesser virtues to good use. Without love, resilience is pagan and ruthless. With love, resilience reflects the covenant faithfulness of our heavenly Father. “Heavenly Father, God of grace and mercy, make us resilient in doing good. Keep us from hardening our hearts in a show of strength. Grant us endurance for the good of others. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.”