



BUILDING RESILIENCE

When There's No Going Back
to the Way Things Were

Alice Updike Scannell

Foreword by Stephanie Spellers



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This book is dedicated to my sister-in-law and my brother
Lillian Sturgis Updike and Edwin Hoyt Updike II
who as individuals and as partners in more than six decades
of marriage are exemplars of radical resilience.

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Contents

Foreword by Stephanie Spellers	vii
An Introduction to the Rev. Dr. Alice Beekman Updike Scannell.....	xiii
Introduction.....	xv
1. Radical Resilience	1
2. Mindfulness	12
3. Courage and Perseverance	25
4. Flexibility.....	37
5. Reframing.....	50
6. Creativity.....	66
7. Realistic Optimism and Hope.....	84
8. Physical Activity	97
9. Spirituality	112
10. Putting It All Together.....	130
Acknowledgments	135
Resources.....	137
Notes.....	149

Foreword

A few years ago, I traveled home to Kentucky to lead a Women's Day luncheon at my mom's Baptist church. It was just a few months after the killing of Philando Castile, an innocent black man murdered by police in St. Paul, Minnesota. The whole trip I was wracked with nerves. What could I say to a room full of black women in their sixties and seventies, many of whom had known me since I was in diapers? What word would resonate with a community of elders experiencing fresh trauma and deep frustration?

God gave me one word: "resilience." Rather than preach, I invited the women into a time of reflection on the histories and stories of our resilient mentors and ancestors. We cast back to our African forebears, the men and women captured centuries ago and forced to march on foot for hundreds of miles to the western coast of Ghana, where they were herded into slave forts worse than most prisons. Then they were stacked into ships like cargo. Some survived the deadly months-long Middle Passage across the Atlantic; some did not. Those who lived went on to endure the terror and dehumanization of slavery. Their children lived, created, and struggled through Jim Crow, poverty and disenfranchisement, racism and sexism, the War on Drugs, and mass incarceration.

As our sharing concluded, I summed up what the group already knew: "It takes resilience to resist the forces that would harm the beloved children of God," I said. "But I'm not worried, because I know we've got it. We wouldn't be here today without it. Our ancestors were among the most

resilient people to ever walk this planet, and that power lives in us.”

It’s true for people of African descent, and for indigenous peoples who crossed America on foot with tears in their eyes and backs unbowed. It’s true for immigrant families who cross deserts and mountains into America only to be shoved into detention centers.

It’s also true for any number of people who have suffered a host of life-altering experiences and demonstrate a hope and strength that makes no sense given all that they have seen. These resilient people didn’t just bounce back from pain and loss. They rose up, more creative and flexible, more spiritual and mindful, more courageous and wise, and they embraced new realities with what can only be described as grace. If we learn from them, we become more resilient too.

I didn’t discover Alice Updike Scannell’s term for this phenomenon—“radical resilience”—until recently, but from the first page of this book, I instinctively recognized the practice. It did not matter that Scannell studied resilience in people who reckoned with adversity and loss related to age, physical disability, and illness. The lessons are universal.

The wisdom of radical resilience is even more vital given this moment in our common life. While I write these words, America is gripped by twin pandemics: COVID-19 and systemic racism. Both have the power to take and crush the lives of entire communities. Both have proved durable in the face of government intervention. Healing both depends on relationship and mutuality, since even people who appear to be “ok” may still be carriers of a disease that means death to others.

The COVID pandemic has left us exiled from our sacred spaces and sacraments, just when we most need tangible,

spiritual sustenance. The racial reckoning in the wake of George Floyd's murder has stripped away the innocence of Americans who thought certain horrors could no longer occur in the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Though these are early days for both pandemics, they appear to have the power to reshape at least some of the fundamentals of how we understand being church and living in community. People are asking, "What do we do if we can't go back? And would we even want to go back if we could? Who are we in this new reality?"

Though she passed away in 2019, Alice Scannell's guiding words are uniquely attuned to just this moment. She had already captured the stories, done the research, engaged in sustained and systematic reflection. She knew the difference between bouncing back from hard times and getting on with your life *and* radical resilience, which is so much more profound. Radical resilience is what you exhibit when your life takes a radical turn and there's no going back to the way you've understood yourself and your surroundings, and you find a way to not only survive but also thrive.

Scannell offers winsome tales and practical steps for developing the ten "skills" we need to cultivate if we seek to be resilient. Those skills are mindfulness, courage, perseverance, flexibility, reframing, creativity, realistic optimism, hope, physical activity, and spirituality. Each skill relies on other skills to come to full flower—if I can become more flexible and creative, I will find it easier to experience realistic optimism in a situation where I might otherwise be hopelessly stuck.

Each skill is also best practiced with a supportive community gathered around. I picture the circle of women at Mama's Baptist church. I picture small groups in Episcopal churches

in urban centers and farm towns. I picture Twelve-Step groups gathered in basements and on Zoom. I picture protest movement organizations. Resilience-building communities take so many forms. The point is to find one.

When you do, I hope someone like Alice Scannell is in the room: a wise elder who understands radical resilience because she has made it her life's work, a generous spirit who helps to nurture mindfulness, courage, flexibility, hope, and deep spirituality in you. Whether you face a global pandemic, systemic oppression, social upheaval, or a devastating loss that is yours alone, you can learn to rise up. We all can, because that power lives in us all.

The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers
Canon to the Presiding Bishop for Evangelism,
Reconciliation, and Creation Care
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Radical Resilience

When my friend LouAnn asked me what this book was about, I told her that it's about resilience—not so much the kind where you rebound from difficulties and get on with your life but the kind when there's no going back to what was before and you have to figure out how to be yourself in that new reality.

“Oh my gosh,” she said. “That’s huge.” She told me that she had surgery on her neck about a year before and some of the nerves to her tongue were bruised. For several months she couldn't move her tongue enough to talk or chew food. “I'm a storyteller,” she said, with a tone of alarm in her voice. “What was I going to do? I couldn't be myself. It was a terrible time. If I'd thought it would be a permanent condition, I really don't know what I would have done. It would have felt like I could never really be *me* again.”

We usually think of resilience as the ability to recover from an adverse experience and pick up our lives where we left off. It is that too. LouAnn was fortunate that her tongue muscles eventually recovered. But there are times when adversity permanently changes our reality and we can't go back to the way things were. We can't do the things we used to do that were part of our identity—the things that gave meaning and purpose

to our lives, that gave us a reason to live. It feels as though our quality of life has been smashed to pieces and is gone forever. Fear for our future wrenches our insides. We don't know what we'll do.

When adversity permanently changes our reality, there is no going back to the way things were. Resilience then becomes the work of *coming through* the adversity so that, at least on most days, we see our life as still worth living. With this kind of resilience, we come through the adversity knowing that we're still ourselves, even though things are very different for us now. I call this *radical* resilience.

Jan Schumacher is an example of radical resilience.¹ She was the owner of a high-end bridal shop before a blood infection nearly killed her. In the painful and lengthy process of treatment and recovery, Schumacher lost parts of both thumbs and all or parts of her fingers on both hands. "But I really got a miracle," she said as she held up her hands to show her prosthetic appendages. The prosthetics didn't look much like hands. They looked more like the claws of a lobster or a crab. But they gave her the ability to grasp, to pick up and hold things—something she hadn't been able to do for months. They felt like a gift. For Schumacher, they're a miracle.

After almost a year, she was ready to move on to the next chapter of her life. She exuded vitality as she wondered what she would do next. However, she didn't think it would be the person-to-person sales she loves. Those sales are usually sealed with a handshake, which she thought would be awkward for her customers. Schumacher was certain that she wanted to do something that would help others. And because she loved running her own business, she wanted whatever she decided on to be something that she could still do herself.

Radical resilience is a challenge. It's *radical* because it connects with the roots of our being. Radical resilience draws from our essential self, demanding that we engage with meaning and hope in new ways in order to feel that our life is still worth living. It's radical also because it's accompanied at some point by a surprising sense of gratitude, as Jan showed as she held up her awkward mechanical hands and called them her *miracle*. And it's radical because it transforms us, both inwardly and outwardly. We learn that wholeness is a state of being, that life can have meaning and purpose under many different circumstances.

Unlike Jan Schumacher, Virginia wasn't able to engage the skills of radical resilience after she fell and broke her hip. Virginia was my first boss right after my college graduation. She was the director of education in a large, urban congregation and she loved her job. She was my mentor during a one-year apprenticeship program before I started my seminary training to be a lay director of religious education. A widow in her mid-fifties, Virginia had abundant energy and enthusiasm for life. She not only had a friendly and engaging personality, she seemed like a human dynamo. She moved fast, talked fast, and could do more visits in a day than anyone else on the staff. People of all ages, including me, loved and admired her.

For many years I thought of Virginia as a model of resilience. She simply refused to be held down by any adversity that came her way. When one senior living arrangement didn't work out the way she expected it to, she left and found a different one. When her shoulder became a problem, she had surgery to fix it and was back to her former activities in record time. She handled other challenges the same way, always getting back to where she'd left off. Yet in retrospect, I see now that Virginia

never learned how to *move through those challenges* toward a deeper understanding of herself. She didn't look for meaning in her new realities; instead, she refused to live in them, and she endured the passage of time in recovery or discontent as best she could until she could get back to living life as she used to. Then she broke her hip.

I visited Virginia several years ago when I was in her city for a meeting. Although we'd corresponded through occasional letters, I hadn't seen her in more than ten years. She was living in the same retirement community as on my last visit, though she now had a live-in caregiver who greeted me at the door. Virginia reclined on the sofa the whole time of my visit. A walker was visible across the room but not handy for immediate use. It seems that Virginia hated to use the walker, and so she did as little walking as possible.

Soon into our conversation, I learned that several months into recovery from hip surgery, when Virginia didn't get back on her feet as easily as before, she realized that she probably would never move as well as she wanted to. So she stopped going anywhere at all. She wouldn't leave her apartment except for medical appointments. Rather than go to the dining room for meals, she paid extra for meals to be brought to her apartment. She didn't want to go to any of the interesting lectures or discussion groups that she'd previously loved. I was surprised and asked why she didn't want to do those things anymore.

"I'm not depressed," she told me vehemently. "This is just not the way I want to be seen."

A number of years before, I'd learned that Virginia had been very pleased and proud to be part of a long-term research study on aging. In this study, participants were interviewed every few years from the time they joined the study,

around age fifty, through to the end of their lives.² Over the years, Virginia had enthusiastically told me about going for the study interviews and about the various brainteaser tests and other measures that were part of the data collection. So I asked her about it.

“Oh, I dropped out,” she said.

“You dropped out?” I said. “I thought the purpose of the study was to learn about what real aging is like for real people, from the time you’re in until you die.”

“I know,” Virginia said, “but I’m not good at getting old, so I decided to drop out.”

As our conversation continued, I mentioned to her that she was still able to think well and that she still had her ready wit and sense of humor. She smiled and said she was glad I thought so. I asked her to think about going to an occasional lecture or discussion group in her building because it would be invigorating and give her back some energy. I even encouraged her to consider getting back into the study so she could express honestly how she felt about her experience with aging. But she wasn’t interested in talking further about any of these things. We spent the rest of our time together sharing memories of the past.

I left the visit sad and discouraged. Virginia had always been my model for resilience, and suddenly she was not. I wonder now if that experience wasn’t my first awareness that there’s a different kind of resilience than the bounce-back kind, the kind of resilience that gets us through not being able to do what we used to do—the *radical* resilience that empowers us to find meaning and purpose in our lives when our life’s journey takes a new turn, and our familiar ways of being and doing suddenly become obsolete.

Ten Skills for Radical Resilience

My research helped me develop the list of ten aspects of resilience that I call *resilience skills*: mindfulness, courage, perseverance, flexibility, reframing, creativity, realistic optimism, hope, physical activity, and spirituality.

Why do I call them “*skills*”? Because it takes awareness, intentionality, and practice to develop them. Other people might call them practices or attitudes, but I prefer to call them skills because we get better at them as we apply them. Alone or in combination, these ten skills, when used intentionally to respond to any kind of change, open up the path to resilience by helping us to see and do things differently. They are important skills that are useful in many settings—so important, in fact, that I’ve seen them in many business books on management and leadership.³

Whenever we’re challenged by change in our daily lives, we can intentionally practice a resilience skill. When we’re anxious or distracted, we can center ourselves by practicing mindfulness. When we come upon a detour or need to adjust to a sudden change in plans, we can neutralize our frustration by choosing to see these as opportunities to practice flexibility. As we learn how each of the skills can strengthen our capacity for resilience, we’ll become aware of abundant opportunities to practice the skills that hone our capacity to be radically resilient.

I’ve engaged these skills often as I’ve been writing this book. My own experience concurs with evidence from research—these skills help enormously to move us out from a place of despair, frustration, and loss into a more fruitful place of centeredness and inner strength. They help us let go of the

past. Moreover, they help us move forward, with hope and a sense of self, into the future.

Five Important Conditions for Radical Resilience

To make the best use of the ten resilience skills, there are some other things we'll want to focus on. These are self-awareness, supportive relationships, openness, reflection, and humor.

Self-awareness. It's important that we stay in touch with—and expand if we need to—our capacity for self-awareness. In order to respond with resilience to changes in our lives, especially the changes that require radical resilience, we must be able to face the truths (both positive and negative) about ourselves and see ourselves as others see us. This includes awareness of our attitudes that are judgmental or biased, awareness of how well we communicate with others, and awareness of how well we listen.

It also includes awareness of experiences in our lives that might influence how we interpret situations, how we behave in response to confrontation or criticism, how we view people who are different from us, and how we handle disappointment and loss. All of these, unless acknowledged and understood, may limit our capacity to engage in the work of radical resilience.

Supportive relationships. It's hard to do the work of radical resilience alone. Whatever the circumstances of our adversity, we'll do much better if we have people to whom we can talk, with whom we can share our thoughts, and from whom we can request specific assistance or support. Sometimes the people who serve in those roles are not our closest friends or family members. Often they'll be professionals who have specific

training to help us come through our adversity. Or they may be organizations and support groups specifically formed to help people who have experienced similar adversities. It's important to avoid isolation and to find acceptance through a group or a trusted confidante. Having at least one trusted person with whom we can share our deepest concerns and with whom we can be completely honest is central to our sense of well-being not only when we're recovering from adversity, but also throughout our life. That person may be a counselor or a spiritual leader. Or he or she may be a close friend and confidante.

Openness. Openness is being willing to hear honest feedback from people we trust. However, openness also includes being willing to express our thoughts, feelings, doubts, fears, and truths to those people or others we trust. Sharing the stories we're ashamed to tell about ourselves with someone who will accept us as we are, respect our stories, and hold our stories in confidence liberates us from the bonds of secrecy and embarrassment. Sharing our stories with trusted others is a step forward in the healing process of radical resilience.

Reflection. This is the capacity to think about our experiences and learn from them. Reflection is not simply going over and over an experience in our minds. Rather, it is contemplating the experience in order to gain insight from it. Reflection includes naming the emotions we felt before, during, and after the experience, and asking ourselves what the experience has to teach us. Sometimes reflecting on a current experience will call to mind an experience from the past that links to it, leading us to a deeper understanding of ourselves and how we process some of the things that happen to us. Insights that result from reflection broaden our awareness not only of ourselves but of

possibilities, and they help us to see multiple ways that we can understand or do things differently.

Humor. A gentle sense of humor and an ability to take ourselves lightly when we are stressed increase our capacity for radical resilience. Both gentle laughter and spontaneous guffaws help dissolve inner tension. They help us relax, and that in itself can give us a refreshed perspective on life. Years ago, when I was hospitalized for several weeks with severe back pain and pregnancy complications, a friend brought me books that made me laugh in spite of myself. This surprised and confused my elderly roommate, who asked me, “How can you laugh when you hurt so much?”

I was surprised by her question. “Because this is really funny,” I said. I was very glad to have something lighthearted that drew me into a different world and took my mind off my pain.

Moving Forward

When change strikes us hard and there is no going back to what was before, self-awareness, supportive relationships, openness, the ability to reflect and to learn from our experience, and a sense of humor become a framework for our capacity to respond to life’s changes with *radical* resilience.

The people and stories of resilience here continue to inspire and encourage me. From them, and from my own experience using these resilience skills, I’ve learned that we don’t have to lose hope when we find ourselves in an undesirable new reality. We don’t have to despair when limitations cut us off from doing the things we love to do, the things that give us energy,

that help us be ourselves, that give us a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. Resilience skills bring us to a place where we can see a positive future for ourselves even in a different, unplanned reality. Resilience skills teach us how to explore ways to create that future. Practicing them as we respond to changes and challenges in our daily life makes them readily available to us when we face the challenges of adversity and the challenges of growing old.

Although the resilience skills work together well, they are also independent. We can start practicing them in any order to build or strengthen our capacity for resilience. May the following chapters be a catalyst and a guide to move you forward toward building your own set of radical resilience skills.

Summary for Chapter 1: Radical Resilience

What is radical resilience? Skills needed to *work through, rather than bounce back from*, life-changing adversities.

What are the radical resilience skills? Mindfulness, courage, perseverance, flexibility, reframing, creativity, realistic optimism, hope, physical activity, and spirituality.

What often characterizes the radical resilience process? As we come through adversity into a new sense of self and well-being in our new reality, it is normal to experience setbacks, plateaus, and times of discouragement. The ten skills help us get through these times too.

What qualities support the radical resilience process? Self-awareness, supportive relationships, openness, the ability to reflect on our experience, and a sense of humor.

Who needs radical resilience skills? We all do. The sooner we build the skills into our daily lives, the greater capacity we'll have to handle change of any kind, including the difficult changes that come from adverse happenings in our lives.