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Christy Wenger

Shepherd University, cwenger@shepherd.edu

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CONNECTING

Responding Together and the Roots of Resilience

Christy I. Wenger

As 2020 came to a close, the promise and hope of a new year felt tangible. Professionally and personally, the past year was challenging for me, as it was for so many other academics—especially academic mothers who found the pandemic shattering any tenuous attempt at work/life balance they had previously struggled to establish. My struggle is validated by news reports warning that working mothers enduring the pandemic are at their “breaking points” and are under unprecedented pressure “just trying to make it all work...[with] no social safety net to catch them” (Pearson). This year was not about balance so much as it was about doing everything at once and under a cloud of constant worry as I was “trying to make it work.” I learned how to guide my five- and seven- year-old children through virtual school from the dining room table while simultaneously running my writing program and teaching my own college classes at that same table. Like many others, I mastered new teaching technologies this year on a dime; racing since March to learn Slack so my students could build community even if we were virtual; using Flipgrid for the first time so we could create meaningful class discussion even if some of my students couldn’t login consistently at a specific time for class; experimenting with new-to-me audio recording and video editing programs that would allow my students to hear and see me even if we couldn’t occupy the same space together on campus.

And Zoom. Of course, so much Zoom.

And for each new program I learned, my students learned it too, rolling with the changing landscape of higher education and doing so with grace and dexterity. Recently, I laughed as I helped my seven-year-old with her “technology” homework because wasn’t it all technology homework these days? The fact that her day is punctuated with Microsoft Teams meetings with her teacher and classmates, SeeSaw work on her iPad to complete her homework and countless other apps in between seems to invalidate the need for a separate “technology” class. Though, if she needed one, it would easily come in the form of helping her pre-K sister navigate her Google Classroom, which, of course, has its own suite of entirely different programs we’ve all had to learn so they can help each other when I’m teaching or unavailable. We’ve struggled, for sure, while making it work, but we also persevered. Through it all, I was resilient, my kids were resilient, my students were resilient. WE were resilient together.

That’s the thing about resilience that we often get wrong. We tend to think of resilience as the property of the individual working alone. Heroic and independent and rising above the challenges of life. But resilience is better understood in terms similar to those we’ve used about the pandemic itself. The pandemic has reminded us that we are dependent on each other and that we are only as strong as our community. Think about the rhetorics of mask wearing during the pandemic: we mask up to help protect those around us, and in so doing, hope they return the favor since our personal health and safety are dependent just as much on their actions as our own. We depend on each other; our lives are linked to those around us. While resilience has been ever-present (just ask

a working parent), the pandemic has cracked it open for a better view, one informed by this transformative realization of the “we” resilience rests upon.

Resilience is born from the challenges we face as individuals. It “suggests attention to choices made in the face of difficult and even impossible challenges,” note Elizabeth A. Flynn, Patricia Sotirin, and Ann Brady in their study of resilience for feminist writing scholars (1). But resilience takes root from the ways we face those challenges together. Resilience is “not a state of being but a process of rhetorically engaging with material circumstances and situational exigencies . . . not as a quality of the heroic individual but as always relational” (7). Our resilient responses are dependent on each other; I can be a resilient teacher by learning new, interactive digital platforms and programs for my classes, but the limits of that resilience are the ways my students engage those programs and face our challenges as a learning community together with me on new platforms. I can be a resilient mother by juggling the seemingly endless demands on my time as I care for my kids, work from home and oversee their virtual learning, but the limits of my resilience are the ways my kids join me to face our challenges together and find new opportunities as a family to live and learn together.

Resilience provides us agency because it allows us a new response not because it denies the need for one, as the heroic narrative of “conquering our limits” and “rising above” traditionally suggests. Resilience is a powerful feminist action because it transforms the “way a life is lived,” not necessarily the material circumstances of that life. My students, my family, and I were resilient because we actively chose to stand together and change our actions and habits to work with our challenges. The center of those challenges was, of course, the pandemic itself, which is not so easily conquered by grand individual action. Instead, we were resilient because we worked together to transform the day-to-day actions of our lives, to find new perspective in those actions. We exercised the “ongoing responsiveness” that Flynn et al. claim to be the hallmark of resilience (7). This responsiveness illustrates how resilience is a process, not a product, repeated over and over and collectively achieved as opposed to being solely a property of a single individual. Resilience changes the ways we respond to our environments and the people within them; it is itself a result of relationality and not borne from the individual but instead from the collective.

I’ve long been interested in Flynn et al.’s notions of resilience and how they could transform our academic work cultures and help us bring attention to emotional labor and communal well-being within those cultures. While resilience is especially illustrated in many of our pandemic pedagogies, adopted to respond to the situational exigencies of COVID, resilience has always been at work in academic cultures, though it is often overlooked—often residing as it does in the margins of our workspaces. Understanding how we work together to bring about and maintain resilience replaces the individualist narratives of the academy and opens the door for a larger discussion about the relational ecology of our workplaces, an ecology that defines how and to what ends emotional labor is attended and the ways we understand our well-being as teachers and academics as connected to our students, our colleges and our colleagues. Both essays in this section of “Connecting” demonstrate how we might begin to voice our resilient ecologies at work. While they do not mention this term, both essays demonstrate the authors’ resilience as ongoing responsiveness to their material circumstances. Both essays reveal how their

authors are motivated by a shared, underlying purpose to find meaningful, relational connections with fellow academic colleagues as well as with students, connections that will help them live well within the spaces of their work and attend to the well-being of others who are impacted by their actions. Both reveal the emotional labor involved when their values don't quite align with what is expected of them in their workplaces. Notable too is that both essays are penned by female academics who are working still within the margins of their academic workplaces based on their interests and identifications which diverge from the mainstream.

Sarah Heidebrink-Bruno's essay reflects on being a first-generation graduate student who is slowly coming to terms with her working-class background as she takes on the task of writing her dissertation's acknowledgement page. Heidebrink-Bruno's resilience leads her to acceptance of and gratitude for her family despite their trouble in recognizing her new identifications as a scholar and an academic. Her reflection illustrates her resilience by providing snapshots of how she has worked to bridge her dual citizenships in both her blue-collar family and her white-collar academic workspace; these snapshots flood me with memories of a similar struggle of identifications I too had as a working-class graduate student embarking on a lifetime of knowledge work.

Heidebrink-Bruno recounts the emotional labor involved in finding herself reborn in the challenging but rewarding world of graduate school, where she could leverage her love of writing and reading and her humble upbringing to help other working-class college students validate their experiences and find new ones through challenging texts, like she did. Importantly, the emotional resilience she demonstrates to "come out" as working class to her peers and mentors in graduate school, many of whom had more affluent upbringings, is relational, connected to the networks of family and friends that brought her to graduate school and the networks of colleagues and mentors who helped her navigate through school as a first-generation student.

Next up, Ellen Scheible's piece, "Collaborative Writing for Publication in Undergraduate Literature Seminars," exhibits her pedagogical resilience. Schieble rallies against typical pursuits to strengthen our majors' individual writing skills. Swimming against the trend of typical capstone classes that ask students to create publishable work on their own, she develops a course for seniors built on a collaborative, critical essay students must approach together while engaging in a collaborative writing process steeped in peer review and workshops. Schieble recounts feeling like a stranger in strange lands because of her commitment to the collaborative, something her fellow humanities faculty do not value—because in large part, they are not taught to and are instead validated by an individualist system of promotion, tenure, and publication. And so the cycle continues.

Schieble attempts to break this cycle but faces significant challenges along the way, including student resistance to collaborative writing, a lack of model pedagogy for her class, and power imbalances between her and her student writers, making it hard for her to collaboratively write with her students even if she can still guide their collaborative writing. Like Heidebrink-Bruno's, Schieble's resilience reveals the power of her community in the end: she finds value in the community created in her class and the sense of belonging that collaborative writing fosters among her students.

Finally, two poems round out this issue's "Connecting" with the work of Naomi Gades and Paul M. Puccio. Gades's tongue-in-cheek poem about plagiarism reminds us that there is always time for humor when placing the individual amongst her community, especially when she forgets to cite that community in her writing. And Puccio's reflection on the passing year through poetic allusion is a fitting tribute to our resilience and our humanity.

One day, the pandemic will end, but what hopefully will remain is that forged resilience. Let us hope we remember, as Katy Butler notes, that "resilience...is the outward and visible sign of a web of relationships and experiences that teach people mastery, doggedness, love, moral courage and hope (qtd. in Flynn et al. 6). In our haste to return to life as "normal," our pre-crisis state, let us not squander the opportunity to continue to recognize the relationships that root our resilience and to find our purpose with and through our communities.

Works Cited

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