

Chalice Lighting

Being a candle

By Jayne Jacobs, April 2023

Rumi wrote: "Being a candle is not easy.
In order to give light, one must first burn."
But sometimes we refuse to light
Because burning can bring suffering, hurt.

Some candles burn more bright and yet
the flame can often be hard to bear
and we hide ourselves beneath the bushel
to shield others from a flame we fear.

Some flames are buried deep within
consuming us from the inside.
Frustrated sadness lashes hot
with potential not yet realized.

Being a candle is not easy
And we are all candles in our right
Each with a tiny spark to share
To bring the world that much more light.

Reading (after hymn 108)

The hymn "How Can I Keep from Singing," often has disputed origins, some considering it to be an old Shaker or Quaker hymn. However, it was authored around 1868 by Robert Wadsworth Lowry, who was an American hymn composer and Baptist minister.

The theme of hope amidst tribulation is a common one in hymns and gospel music, and this song in particular recognizes the idea that both may coexist together. Sara Cardine, a blog writer for the hospice organization Seven Ponds, writes, “We need not rid ourselves of the tumult and the strife to hear the music ringing; we must simply train ourselves to listen to that which calls out to us and from within us.”

Above the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing.

My grandma Annette chose this song for what she calls her “going away party.” She is a musician, a retired music therapist, and music has always played a central role in her life. I reached out to her and asked her to share why she chose this song and perhaps discuss some examples of how music may have helped her foster resilience in herself and those she shared it with. She told me about a particularly difficult time when her mother, my great-grandmother, was in the final stages of death after enduring a long battle with Alzheimer’s. Grandma Annette writes,

“I was unfortunate to get a really bad cold the first of the week. Sitting up at nights with Mom and trying to keep working took a toll on my health. I took off Thursday and Friday to wash and iron Mom’s burial clothing, finish the casket lining, and make mortuary and cemetery arrangements. I wasn’t able to really rest for wondering if I needed to be over with Mom and Dad, but when I was there it was so hard to watch her struggle and suffer. When I did go, I took my tape player and my most calming music—adagios and meditative classics and forest sounds. It certainly helped me through the long hours, and I believe it was a soothing balm to her also. One aide who came in said, “It feels so peaceful in here. There must be angels here.” There was—at least one.”

Service

Drops of Water Turn A Mill

Verse 1:

Am

Step by step, the longest march

G Am Em Am

can be done, can be done

Am

Many stones can form an arch

G Am Em Am

Singly none, singly none

Am

And in union, what we will

Dm Em

can be accomplished still

Am

Drops of water turn a mill

G Am Em Am

Singly none, singly none

Verse 2:

Step by step, the longest march

can be done, can be done

Bit by bit, each battle fought

can be won, can be won

Tiny streamlets join and grow,

'till the mighty rivers flow

Many wonderous things were small

when begun, when begun

This song actually is in the hymnal, #157, but I wanted to sing it with you today in this format in the hopes that we might connect a little more to the lyrics. In my work as a music therapist, I will often do something called lyric analysis with clients, especially when working with groups or individuals where there is a goal to develop insight. Like all art, the poetry in songs is usually written to reflect a feeling, an idea, or other experience. Despite the name, "lyric analysis" when applied correctly within a music therapy session, this technique usually goes beyond the actual words. It examines the meter (how the beats are organized), the key or tonality, the phrasing of the melodic line, the pushing and pulling qualities of the underlying harmonies, and sometimes even examines the history of the song, the songwriter or cover artist themselves, including different versions of covers—what makes them different and where the artist's mind may have been when creating or re-creating. When a client in a music therapy session is able to find something

meaningful within a song, they can use that as a springboard into developing insight over their own experiences, situations, struggles, and successes.

The song, *Step By Step*, has a melancholy aura about it. I've heard it described as a bit of a funeral dirge. True enough, the opening is very steady, slow, and march-like. But the melodic line near the end pulls it upward and forward with something that might be hope or determination before returning to the original steadily marching phrase.

April's theme is indomitable spirit.

When I hear the word, indomitable, the immediate image is one of a superhero. "Mr. Indomitable" to the rescue! Someone indomitable possesses some sort of extraordinary ability to overcome a great threat. Of course, most literal superheroes only exist in the world of fiction. So then I wonder, who else might fill the shoes of that, arguably intimidating word, indomitable? Perhaps it may be an athlete who, despite limitations, sets a new record. Or maybe a mountaineer reaching the summit of the Matterhorn or a swimmer traversing the English channel, or a scientist who discovers a cure for an incurable illness. Not exactly superhuman, but a show of strength that may certainly seem superhuman to the average population.

Indomitable certainly carries the connotation of being insurmountable, if only achievable by the extraordinary few. But that second word, spirit, has a gentleness to it. The word spirit sounds like something invisible, mysterious, and with immeasurable potential. In mystic practices, spirit often appears as a fifth element. It is the element of divine intelligence—the energy that binds and transforms. Unlike water, air, fire, or earth, spirit is not physically tangible. Rather it is immaterial, yet always present whether or not we realize it.

Indomitable spirit, then, within all of us, does not mean able to rise to the status of a superhuman. While swimming across the English channel or finding an elusive medical cure may be impressive manifestations of indomitable spirit, so may be simply getting out

of bed in the morning when discouragement feels like a 2-ton weight. Indomitable spirit may be my grandmother, going about preparations for her own mother's "going away party" despite the pain of loss and illness as devastating as Alzheimer's. I see indomitable spirit in my music students as they dare to try a new technique or persist in learning to play a difficult song. I see it in a young girl with cerebral palsy receiving music therapy services, as she focuses immense effort into the simple act of picking up an egg shaker. The pride and joy on her face is just as valid as placing a flag on the summit of the Matterhorn.

Indomitable spirit is something we all have, at least the potential for. Like the spirit element in mystic practices, it is always there, whether or not we are aware. It can change us, but we have to tap into it first, and to do that usually requires the introduction of an obstacle. In this sense, it is akin to the concept of resilience—something that cannot be directly quantified but we know it exists because we can see its effect in the aftermath of difficulty.

In my graduate studies, I took a seminar on the topic of Risk and Resilience in human development and psychology. While a highly fascinating topic, resilience is one of those concepts that, the more you know, the more you know you don't know. It is a topic that continues to be studied in psychology simply because it is so complex and multifaceted that we cannot objectively measure it. Probably because humans, in turn, are complex and multifaceted creatures. We can predict what might contribute to resilience and it is usually a balance of what resilience researchers refer to as protective factors and risk factors.

Consider, for example, a child who is raised in a high income family, a safe neighborhood and a community that offers the best of everything in terms of schooling and extracurriculars. They reside in a highly controlled and contained environment and all their activities are carefully structured because their parents want to provide the least stressful environment possible. They are coddled. Protected. Every need is met and stress is a rare, if not non-existent occurrence. Are they on a path to develop resilience? Probably not because while there are many protective factors, there are few risk factors. They will never learn how to cope with stress and difficulty if they are never exposed to it.

Of course, I'm not saying a child should be bombarded by stress while being deprived of any protection. Consider an alternative scenario. A child growing up in an environment scarred by violence, poverty, and their earliest memories are of death and destruction. Their parents may be absent or inattentive. They have few resources at their disposal and most of the time are left to fend for themselves. They don't feel loved or valued and they have to struggle for everything they need simply to survive. Their life is one stressful event after another. Are they on a path to develop resilience? Again, without some kind of intervention, it is unlikely because the risk factors outweigh the protective ones.

My brother, Benjamin, is a 3rd degree black belt in TaeKwonDo—a martial art that lists indomitable spirit as one of the tenets of their sport. I asked him to speak a little on what it meant for him in the sport and how it applied outward to his everyday life. He said, “Indomitable spirit means never giving up, despite difficulties. It takes persistence to learn patterns and it gradually gets more difficult, so a student needs to accept there will never be perfection. Even black belts mess up sometimes.” When I asked if there were any community-directed applications, Benjamin mentioned that, “service to the community is required for a black belt. Additionally, peer tutoring and being an assistant instructor is often a big part of Taekowndo. Teaching helps us appreciate the work and the journey and we can empathize with others who might be struggling. It helps humanize a process to see others struggle.”

I like that. It helps humanize the process. Some months ago I saw a video of an artificial intelligence playing a beautiful piece on piano. It was on the Classic FM website and pretty amazing to hear. Most music played by robots sounds, well, robotic. However, this rendition sounded uncannily human and to be honest, I wasn't sure how to feel about it. On the one hand, developing AI technology to that point of being able to imitate human creativity is impressive. But does it, in some sense, de-value the art at its core? Is not art the expression of the human experience? What happens when we hand over something so valuable to a robot, refining it to the point where we cannot tell the difference between the human creation and the artificial one?

My mom has a CD of Vladimir Horowitz performing live. If that name rings a bell, Horowitz is one of the most renowned concert pianists of the 20th century and one of my favorite performers to listen to, even if he's a bit before my time. This particular CD was titled, "Horowitz, Live and Unedited." It's special because, like many musicians today, Horowitz would often have his mistakes edited out of recordings with the idea that either mistakes are unacceptable or tarnish the listening experience. As a young musician, I found it refreshing to hear such a famous pianist making what were very much obvious mistakes, discernible even to someone with little musical training. Believe me, when you're playing something like a Bach invention, there's nowhere to hide! But for Horowitz, every song, mistakes and all, were met with explosive applause. People loved him and I think they loved him more for his mistakes.

I recently had a young piano student admit to me that she doesn't like it when she makes mistakes and wishes she could play without any mistakes. I asked her, "What do you think I do, if a student comes to their lesson and plays a piece flawlessly without any mistakes?" She said she didn't know. I tell her, "I give them a harder piece and then keep giving harder pieces until they do make mistakes." Clearly baffled, she asked why. I tell her, "Because making mistakes is how you know you're learning." Of course, she didn't believe me. To be honest, I probably wouldn't have believed me either, at 8 years old.

In both Taekwondo and music, and arguably any pursuit, academic, artistic, athletic, etc. the goal is not to not make mistakes. Just as I mentioned earlier—an individual who is too protected has no opportunity to develop resilience. Likewise, a student who is not challenged and constantly making mistakes will never have the opportunity to learn. On the flipside, if I were to push a student too hard to the point where they are only experiencing discouragement and not success, the chances of them quitting piano lessons are high. In teaching, we have a name to meeting a student where they're at while pushing them to grow just a little bit more: it's called scaffolding. In music therapy, goals and objectives are also scaffolded to the best fit for an individual. A music therapy session is about push and pull—pushing clients toward their objective but pulling back, adapting and balancing if distress is to the point where the therapy is contradicted. Developing resilience is a lot like

that process—gradual and balanced. Pushing and pulling. Protective factors and risk factors.

Now, often we look at resilience and indomitable spirit from an individual perspective. In talking to my dad about today's presentation, he mentioned, "It's always good to believe in yourself but a little help from others goes a long way." If you haven't noticed by now, I reached out to quite a few family members in preparing this service, to get their perspectives. That's because my dad's right. While some people can do just fine isolated in their own bubble, at some point or another we will need the collective resilience of many to reach our true potential. One of my good friends, Deborah Michael, lives here in Casper and she told me about her experience running her first marathon. She wrote down the names of 26 people on her arm—one for every mile. As she ran that mile, she thought about that person and their role in her life. By the time she crossed the finish line she was in tears, not so much from physical pain or drain, but the marathon had been an emotional challenge as well. All those 26 people helped her cross that line, whether they realized or not. Sometimes it is only with the help of others that we can effectively tap into our own potential for resilience.

When I was a child, my family had a book called *The Street of the Flower Boxes* by Peggy Mann. It tells the story of an elderly woman who moves into a home in a run-down, low SES neighborhood. She decides to brighten up the place by planting some flower boxes, only to have delinquent gang youth tear them up. Again and again, she replaces the flowers until she finally catches one of the young boys in the act. Instead of punishing him, she shows him kindness and teaches him how to re-plant the flowers and care for them. She starts referring to him as her gardener and gives him responsibility to protect the flower boxes. The young boy develops respect for her and gradually introduces her to his friends—the other youth who had vandalized her flowers. Soon, flower boxes are popping up all around the neighborhood. People begin spending more time outside socializing, friendships form, and the gang violence in the neighborhood decreases.

Despite being a fictional children's tale, Mann's story still touches people and has even been adapted and produced for N.B.C. Children's Theater. It has been criticized for its questionable merit and the reality that gang violence can't necessarily be solved with a few flowers. However, I would argue that the flowers themselves are not the point of the story—rather it is the quality of the social relationships that arise from the interaction of the young boy with the woman and how a minor shift in environment spurs change throughout the neighborhood. The question of applicability would therefore be: can a single individual really make a difference in the dynamics of a neighborhood? How can quality social connections strengthen both individual and collective resilience?

Resilience implies that, following a catastrophe, a person (or community) will not only be able to cope and recover, but also reflect growth as a result of changing priorities and perspectives. A resilient community is able to respond proactively in ways that strengthen interpersonal bonds within the community and enhance the overall capacity to manage stressful events. In this way, community resilience reflects and might even affect the collective resilience of community members.

Sociologist Eric Klinenberg stated in an interview for National Public Radio that we often underestimate the significance of social infrastructure within neighborhood relationships, interpersonal communication, and how neighborhood dynamics can be protective or perilous. He discusses that this is especially true in the case of a natural disaster or other emergency and that engineering efforts to build safer physical infrastructure can only do so much in a crisis situation. "When a real disaster strikes, it's the social stuff that might make the difference between life and death." Klinenberg makes a valid point. Movements on the political level often prove to be all about debating issues but never reaching a viable conclusion. When it comes to effecting social change, it must happen at a grassroots social level—at the level of individuals, neighborhoods, and communities.

One of my personal favorite models of human development is Bronfenbrenner's Socioecological Systems model. You've probably seen it at some point or another. It's the image of the inlaid circles with the individual at the center. The circle just outside the

individual is the microsystem which includes their immediate environment which could be family, friends, and home. The next layer is the mesosystem, which includes their neighborhood, their work or school, and maybe church or other peer groups. Outside of that is the exosystem which includes local governments, mass media, and extended community. The macrosystem is the outermost layer which includes culture, national level political systems, laws, the economy, and society as a whole. There is another dimension often added to this model called the chronosystem which implies that these layers often change over time as an individual moves through different stages of life. The layers are always in interaction with each other, eventually trickling down to affect the individual in the center.

This model can seem very much egocentric at first glance. However, if we were to take all the individuals within a single individual's microsystem—remember that includes their family, friends, and most immediate environment, each of those individuals would have their own layers upon layers and the people within those and so on. Rather than a single ripple, there is an infinite number of interactions and possibilities.

The reason I like Bronfenbrenner's model is because it provides a basis for how we might look at resilience within communities. The COVID pandemic is an interesting example. It's something that originated far away from our own microsystems but eventually infiltrated every single system for every individual who lives through it.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic resulted in widespread exacerbation of stress and anxiety. Of course, social psychologists are interested in studying the effects of such an event and I did find a study published in 2021 in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* by Sarah Jane Svensson and Stamatis Elntib. This study found that higher levels of stress in isolation during the pandemic has been linked to higher psychopathology, disruption in socio-cognitive ability, and further consequences that, at the time of publication, had not yet been realized. Their research recognizes the critical role of social cohesion in communities as being essential to well-being, not only of the individual, but in communities as a whole as they begin to recover and adapt to a pandemic environment. This means that,

while a pandemic event can lead to a rise in unwanted outcomes, the potential for positive outcomes through resilience is certainly there. Neighbors begin to rely on one another for errands, favors, and even something as simple as a listening ear. Viral videos popped up of communities in lockdown, creating music from balconies. Social media posts told stories of people having lived in the same apartment building for years and never having spoken to their neighbors before the pandemic. As nonessential human interaction was stripped away to promote safety, people learned the value of true human relationships.

In my own experience, living alone in a duplex apartment in Fort Collins, where I literally took to hugging trees because I was so lonely and starved for some sort of interaction with something alive...I met someone who would eventually become a good friend. Carla was my neighbor across the courtyard. She's a 60-something year old woman who is a self-proclaimed radical feminist and one of the most interesting people I've ever had the opportunity to get to know. Those of you who know me know that I don't really ever go out of my way to talk to people so I really do rely on others initiating a conversation. Carla did just that. It started with little conversations in passing and after a few months, we would frequently sit out in the courtyard and chat for hours. Occasionally another neighbor would come and join us. Carla had lived there for 25 years—longer than anyone in those duplexes. She liked to get to know everyone that came and went but admitted that her strong opinions had the tendency to offend and distance some people. Indeed, there was at least one occasion where I had to tearfully tell her to please change the subject because some of her vehemently expressed opinions could border on being hurtful. Despite some of the differences in opinion, we always respected each other and never let disagreement tarnish our friendship. As a result, we are lifelong friends and chat over the phone or email at least once every other week.

I often imagine that, if it weren't for Carla, I probably wouldn't have made it in Fort Collins. In fact, right around the time I met her I had been seriously considering throwing in the towel on my degree—it wasn't because classes were too difficult (although that infamous anatomy and physiology class nearly did me in!), nor was I not enjoying school. I loved all

the academic opportunities but a person cannot live on nerdiness alone. People need connection, even introverts like me. Many stones can form an arch. Singly, none.

One of the interesting things about lyric analysis, or really any kind of literature or art interpretation is that it changes. I'm sure many of us have had the experience of reading a book for the second or third time and discovered that it often changes meaning as our own life experiences change. I used to think that Dr. Seuss's *One Fish Two Fish* was about teaching kids their counting and colors, but now I wonder if it might represent the beauty of diversity. Art, literature and music are fascinating because they not only reflect the human condition, but they have the ability to meet each individual human where they're at in their own condition.

I was first introduced to the song "Step by Step" by my grandmother Annette—she had it in her collection of songs that she used for music therapy, and it was one of the many songs, along with session ideas, that she bestowed upon me when I decided to become a music therapist. "Step By Step" was written out in her hand on a piece of manuscript paper, labeled with the chords. I remember sitting down at the piano to play it, having never heard it before, and was drawn to it for its simplicity and the way the music marches along with the lyrics, slowly but steadily going about its purpose. At that time in my life, I was working on trying to take things in stride, on trying to focus on the next step while avoiding ruminating too much about the future. In my mind, I pictured a single individual, trudging along, perhaps dragging the stones to build that arch. Somehow, it didn't occur to me that part about many people working together. Each of us is a stone. Each of us is a drop of water—it's not up to a single individual to provide all the stones and water.

If I'd had dived in a little deeper with the lyric analysis and went so far as to research the history of "Step By Step," I would have discovered that the song was originally found by Pete Seeger and Waldemar Hille in the "Constitution and Laws for the Government and Guidance of the American Miners' Association" (1864). The song and original poem have been associated with unions—people working together to improve conditions in a workplace. Recently, Kelly Walsh High School performed the Disney musical, "Newsies," for which I had

the opportunity to play piano in the pit orchestra. The storyline is of a group of boys—mostly orphans who live on the streets of New York—unionizing against greedy newspaper companies for fair wages for selling papers. While there are a few characters who “lead the charge” so to speak, it takes the collective strength of the group to attain their goal.

Such is the same for any goal to better a workplace, a neighborhood, or any kind of community. That individual in the center of Bronfenbrenner’s socioecological model is not alone. Nor are they merely subjects to be acted upon by the outer layers. Rather, they are active participants affecting each of those systems, often with further reaching consequences than they realize could ever be possible. Although *Newsies* is a fictional depiction, it is based on real-life events of the 1899 Newsboys’ strike. It’s interesting to see how it can all start with one person, Jack Kelly (or in real life it was Kid Blink), and their actions can extend out to first their neighborhood, then beyond to other New York neighborhoods with newsboys all over the city going on strike. Finally, it is recognized by the then governor, Theodore Roosevelt, who mediates a resolution. From the individual to the micro and meso and even macrosystem!

Now, this is admittedly where the musical takes some liberties in telling the story. In real life, Roosevelt had nothing to do with the 1899 strike, and Kid Blink actually abandoned his union, taking a bribe to sell the boycotted papers. However, further efforts eventually did lead to a resolution. The true story is actually a decent example of how imperfect resilience is. Some people, even those who we might see as leading the charge, might abandon ship. The metaphorical arch itself might even crumble with the loss of a key figure, or the metaphorical mill might cease to turn. However, this doesn’t mean the arch can’t still be rebuilt or the mill can’t begin to turn again through the combined work and resilience of many. Indeed, resilience often requires tearing down and building up. Progress is often synonymous with loss.

Last week, we discussed how we might be more proactive in caring for an Earth so it may not only yield what is needed to sustain humanity here and now, but that we nourish

Earth's overall health, creating a sustainable future. We addressed how we are not the owners of this planet, but part of the environment who have the ability to be either nurturers or destroyers. Even those things we do at an individual level can have outward reaching effects. For instance, the simple act of Janet and LeeAnn going about their neighborhood, picking up any litter they see, doesn't go unnoticed by others in the neighborhood. Children, particularly, being social learners, observe and take their cues from adults in their environment.

Resilience and indomitable spirit isn't about doing everything with superhuman strength, always going above and beyond. It's about step by step, doing the little things that matter. Planting that flower box. Picking up the candy wrapper. Visiting with a lonely neighbor in a courtyard. Little acts within our own communities, within our own environments, are not necessarily isolated. It is through our collective acts, our collective resilience that we effect change for a better tomorrow.

