

Why *resilience* is a hallmark of the Christian character and the antidote to severe turbulences in business and personal life

# RESILIENCE

by Ernest P. Liang

*“In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider — God has made the one as well as the other, so that man will not discover anything that will be after him.” - Ecclesiastes 7:14 (NASB)*

**A**dversity is a fact of life. While occasional mishaps in the course of life or business are usually well tolerated by the afflicted, severe and unpredicted perturbations could threaten the very sustainability of the productive functioning of organizations or individuals (Christians included) on otherwise smooth paths of success.

Given the random nature of severe disturbances, preparedness is often ineffective and costly to implement. Rather the ability to return expeditiously to a functioning state of equilibrium is strongly related to the notion of balance or stability. Individuals exhibiting balance, physically, psychologically, and spiritually, define stable families, organizations, and communities in the

face of shock and turbulence. They build resilient entities.<sup>1</sup>

Resilience is a concept that has received much attention from researchers in a wide variety of disciplines since the turn of the new millennium. At the individual level, the concept refers to the human capacity to deal with and overcome the adversities of life.<sup>2</sup> A broader interpretation that applies to entire institutions and organization systems is offered by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which defines resilience as “the ability of systems, infrastructures, government, business and citizenry to resist, absorb, recover from, or adapt to an adverse occurrence ... of national significance.”<sup>3</sup>

The ability to deal with and triumph over unexpected disturbances in life is obviously important in maintaining the mental and physical health of anyone who experiences life’s inevitable adversities. Similarly an organization’s or a corporate entity’s ability to adjust and thrive in the face of serious challenges

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defines its financial health or survivability in the competitive marketplace. In addition, since actions and interactions among organizational members underpin the entity's collective capacity for effective response, the resilience of an organization or a firm is characterized by that of its individual members.

The surge in interest in the concept of resilience has been a response to a cascade of events that are by nature rare, unpredictable, yet cataclysmically consequential. "Black swans," as mathematician Nassim Taleb would refer to these unpleasant, hugely disruptive surprises.<sup>4</sup> The AIDS epidemic, 9/11 attack, SARS outbreak, subprime financial crisis, Haiti earthquake, Japan tsunami, and the ongoing European sovereign debt crisis are all examples of sudden, intractable turbulences that test the resilience of individuals, families, entire communities, and indeed, the global economy because of their contagious nature in an integrated, complexly networked new world order.

The exposure to risks, particularly low probability but high consequence risks (what statisticians call "tail risks"), is necessary in determining the capacity for resilience. Risks that recur with sufficient frequency are better managed. Risks that are rare and cause certainty of significant loss could induce irrational responses.

The works of Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky suggest that, when faced with the prospect of certain loss, people will choose to gamble on the slight probability of gain and not focus on the greater probability of loss, often exacerbating the adverse outcome when disruptions strike.<sup>5</sup> Resilience therefore not only requires the capacity to

react positively to mishaps, but also the wisdom to make principled choices that transform accepted practices and behaviors. Indeed the capability to self-renew over time through innovation is a key aspect of resilience in organizational strategic management.<sup>6</sup>

Under challenging and desperate conditions, the animal spirits in us would render impotent the self-will to persist and adapt, let alone to thrive and renew. Therefore it is not surprising to learn that researchers across disciplines have iden-

## Research shows faith and spirituality to be a key contributor to resilience

tified faith and spirituality as a key contributor to resilience.<sup>7</sup> For the Christian, the transcendent purpose of life is not anchored in the transient and the destructible, but in the eternal promise of Creator God who is our refuge and strength (Psalm 46:1), and from whom we receive the strength to overcome (Philippians 4:13) all sufferings that pale in comparison with the future glory awaiting believers (Romans 8:18). Jesus himself assures his followers that "in the world you have tribulation, but take courage, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

The Apostle Paul reminds believers that the secret to triumphant living under these promises is to be transformed by the constant renewing of our mind (Romans 12:2), giving the Holy Spirit the dominion over our will and action instead of the animal spirit. Pastor and leadership expert Wallace Henley, commenting on the global turbulences that engulfed

much of the world in recent years, writes, “there is much travail and panic as people look at the devastation the turbulence has brought to individuals, homes...and businesses. But men and women who have a biblically based worldview know there is immense opportunity for transforming all these spheres by reestablishing them on the rock-solid truths and principles of the kingdom of God.”<sup>8</sup>

Christians who believe in God’s trustworthiness live a life suffused with a strong sense of moral purpose, core value, and vision. At the organizational level, especially for small and medium size businesses where individual leadership and small group dynamics strongly influence enterprise adaptiveness and flexibility, these become the critical success factors for the creation of organizational resilience.<sup>9</sup>

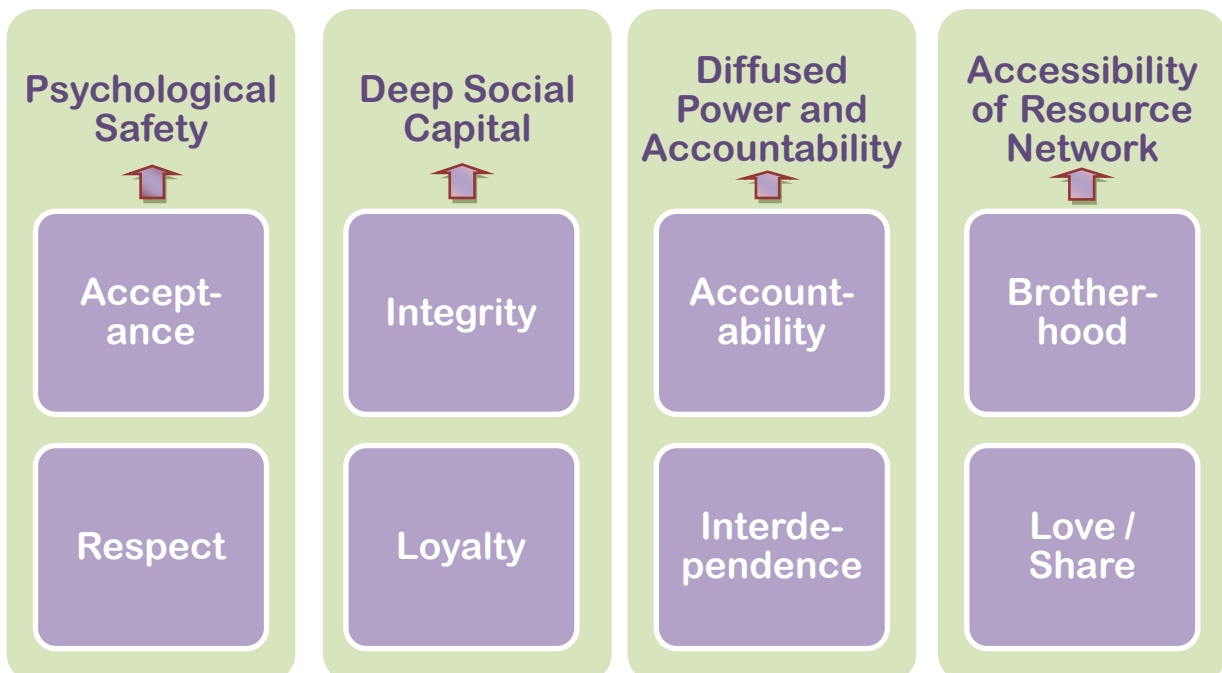
Researchers have also identified several contextual conditions that support

resilience with particular implications at the group and organization levels.<sup>10</sup>

These conditions include:

- psychological safety, where people perceive their personal or work environments as conducive to taking interpersonal risks – risks of being ignored, rejected, or ridiculed;
- deep social capital, where interactions are rooted in trust, honesty, and self-respect;
- diffused power and accountability, where a strong sense of interdependence, individual and group accountability, and shared goal governs the decision-making process; and
- accessibility of broad resource network, where relationships with external sources of resources can be readily and stra-

### How Christian Virtues Support Contextual Conditions for Organizational Resilience



tegitally deployed to support adaptive initiatives.

While secular entities work hard to design and cultivate these infrastructures and modes of behavior, it appears the community of genuine Christ followers is naturally positioned to function within these contexts. Whether in the family unit or within a community, the psychological aspects of relational Christianity are rooted in the virtues of humility, gentleness and patience (Ephesians 4:2). The dictates of Christian conduct, in harmony with God's will, are vividly illustrated by Romans 12,<sup>11</sup> where acceptance (v. 16), respect (v.10), integrity (v. 9), loyalty (v.10), accountability (v. 6), and interdependence (v. 5) are the requisites of healthful relations.

In such a genuine community of brotherly love, where the believer is to serve the community before his/her own interest, a trusted network of external resources is readily available to the despondent when disasters strike. Gene Getz, writing in *Building Up One Another*, summarizes Paul's teaching about unity this way: "Not one of us can function effectively by ourselves; we need each other. Not one of us is more important than any other Christian, even though one of us may have a more obvious or more significant position in the body. We are to be clothed with humility, remembering that even the one who has the greatest responsibility is to be the

greatest servant."<sup>12</sup> In all these there is a shared purpose, to build up the body of Christ so that all become mature and attain the fullness in the knowledge of God (Ephesians 4:12-16).

A balanced life for a Christian is a life in harmony with God's will, knowing that the one who has created us will always answer and revive us when in trouble (Psalms 86:7, 138:7), and that we can do all things through Him who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). A balanced individual or community of individuals trusting in the same divine source of strength and striving toward the same

moral purpose is the mooring of organization, institution and system resilience.

Entities under Christian leadership or amenable to the influence of Christian beliefs should nurture values, cultivate networks, and build infrastructures that harness the strength of biblical ethics in every layer of the

local community. Even in entities that are not, the Christ follower needs to be the salt and light, influencing the larger community by being a true testimony for resilience in a world that would desperately search for balance and stability when maelstrom strikes. ☩☩

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Denis Smith and Moira Fischbacher, "Changing nature of risk and risk management," *Risk Management* 11 (2009), 1-12.

<sup>2</sup> Suniya S. Luthar and Laurel Bidwell Zelazo, "Research on resilience: An integrative review," in *Resilience and Vulnerability: Adaptation in the Context of Childhood Adversities*, by Suniyar S. Luthar (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 513.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Risk Steering Committee, *Risk Lexicon* (2008), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Kahneman and Tversky's work ("Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk," *Econometrica* 47 (1979), 263-291), has wide applications in business and finance. It explains why investors have loss aversion (i.e., hanging onto loss positions in hope of a recovery which may never come, thus ending up with under-diversified portfolios) and why firms or policy makers have myopic focus when dealing with failed products, projects, or policies. The misguided response often results in prolonging the adverse outcome and seeding more pronounced future risks. A good case in point is the ongoing European credit crisis which exploded as a result of the long neglect by national leaders of destabilizing fiscal deficits and public sector indebtedness.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Reinmoeller and Nicole van Baardwijk, "The link between diversity and resilience," *MIT Sloan Management Review* 46(4) (summer 2005), 61.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, David Bosworth, "Faith and resilience: King David's reaction to the death of Bathsheba's firstborn," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73 (2011), 691-707; Helen Herrman et al., "What is resilience," *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 56(5) (2011), 258-65; Cynthia A. Lengnick-Hall, Tammy E. Beck, and Mark L. Lengnick-Hall, "Developing a capacity for organizational resilience through strategic human resource management," *Human Resources Management Review* 21 (2011), 243-55; and Kenneth I. Pargament and Jeremy P. Cummings, "Anchored by faith: Religion as a resilience factor," in J.W. Reich et al., *Handbook of Adult Resilience* (New York: Guilford Press, 2010), 193-210.

<sup>8</sup> Wallace Henley, *Globequake: Living in the Unshakeable Kingdom While the World Falls Apart* (Nashville, TN.: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 69.

<sup>9</sup> Steven F. Freeman, L. Hirschhorn, and M. Maltz, "Organizational resilience and moral purpose: Sandler O'Neill & Partners, L.P. in the aftermath of September 11, 2001," University of Pennsylvania Center for Organizational Dynamics Working Paper (2004).

<sup>10</sup> Lengnick-Hall et. al., "Organizational resilience," 247.

<sup>11</sup> See also related themes in 1 Corinthians 12:12-37 and Ephesians 4.

<sup>12</sup> Gene A. Getz, *Building Up One Another* (Wheaton, IL.: Victor Books, 1976), 11-12.