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Preparing for a New Kind of Transition: Time to Cultivate Both Resiliency and Care

As I and the rest of the class of 2021 prepare for a new adulthood, our plans for the future are defined by the fact that our foundations have been shaken. For the better part of 2020, we have all been scrambling to manage our schooling, jobs, and on campus roles, as well as keeping our basic needs like housing met in the midst of political instability within the United States, a global pandemic, and continual environmental disasters.

In my personal experience with my university, I feel the structure of support has changed for the worse over the course of 2020. As we entered “uncertain times” last spring, there was a level of understanding pervasive to the culture of the virtual classroom setting. As students, teachers, and administrators collectively scrambled to figure out how to manage universities and colleges in the face of crisis, our needs as not only students but as young adults in enormous transition were more readily accommodated by administration and professors that sympathized with our struggles. In spite of continued rapid change this fall, this culture of support and care has evaporated. Instead, there is now a sense that we should have adjusted to living in a state of chaos and change, and that we should be able to push forward regardless of new adversities. Somehow, we are supposed to make successful contingency plans, in spite of the fact that colleges across the country are still debating whether or not to reopen in the spring; many internship and research opportunities have been cancelled; graduate and doctorate programs have cut both funding and acceptance rates; and jobs related to our fields have become harder to find in the wake of the current recession. It is incredibly difficult to push through natural feelings of overwhelming anxiety, depression, even apathy, as we finish the undergraduate portion of our young adulthood and begin the transition into life after college.

In my case, the start of the pandemic this spring saw me evacuate from my study abroad with only a day’s notice before Spain’s borders closed, only to resume courses online just days later from my parents’ house in Virginia. Each week brought new challenges, as none of the professors in the program had used online teaching modalities for my coursework and internship. What was supposed to be hands on field research and experiential and cultural learning became research papers and unvoiced PowerPoints overnight. The research work that I had been looking forward to since being selected for the program in January 2020 largely dissolved. Site visits and archival research in private collections were cancelled due to pandemic related risks and much of

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the team left the project indefinitely, leaving me to conduct independent research remotely. I tried to make the most of what remained from these learning experiences and stay positive; After all, I had my family to support me, and my basic needs were met, neither of which are guarantees in a pandemic and economic crisis. Even so, I couldn't shake the deep fear that not only my last year of college, but also my plans for the foreseeable future would go up in smoke. All the while I only plunged further into student debt.

Moving into the fall semester of my senior year, I quickly burned myself-out trying to keep myself busy and active as I struggled with the challenges of remote learning, lost my health insurance for several months, and began a new job. I quickly surpassed depression and anxiety, succumbing to a state of apathy towards my surroundings and even my own wellbeing. This combination of depression and anxiety paired with a lockdown sent me in a downward spiral. To make matters more difficult, I was cut off almost entirely from my old support system, including my on-campus community. This made it difficult to see any positivity over the horizon. I just kept trying to push forward, only exerting whatever energy was necessary to get by. I don't write this out of self-pity, but to share the pattern of thought that I fell into over the course of this year. While everyone's experience has been unique during this last year, I know that I am not alone in my sentiments or experience. It begs the question of how can we pull ourselves out of this mentality and alleviate the pain and isolation associated with this experience? The answer is resilience and community.

Upon reading William Ury's *Getting to Yes with Yourself* (2015), I came across some new notions of self-care and self-acceptance that would relieve some of these mental blocks and challenges that cropped up within this year. Of his ideas, the concepts of "reframing your picture" and the "inner BATNA" were particularly insightful. In his chapter "Reframe Your Picture," Ury posits that if we see the world as an outwardly hostile place, it creates a scarcity mentality that drives our interactions. Under this assumption, we are more likely to see others as enemies before seeing them as possible friends or allies. If, however, we frame the universe as being friendly, then we are more inclined to see others as potential partners in bettering our shared situation (Ury, 2015). In the year 2020, it is more than easy to fall into the trap of viewing the world as a hostile place, given the array of environmental, economic and political crises that have arisen. However, in defining this year only by the ongoing crises, we run the risk of seeing the world only through the lens of hostility and losing camaraderie and hope. We cannot overlook the moments of reprieve this year. If we relish the time, we are able to share with our families and friends, even if it's over zoom, savor a routine moment such as drinking a good cup of coffee in the morning, and carve out time to do something enjoyable, the world and the life we live in it may seem a little less hostile. It seems like an over-simplification, and perhaps it is, but savoring a moment for potential happiness helps to keep our inner senses of hope alive.

Ury's concept of the inner BATNA, or Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement, asks us to look at how we negotiate with ourselves on our own needs, and reflects on our own self-care. Our inner BATNA, should be an agreement that we make with ourselves to always prioritize our needs. He says of the inner BATNA that "it makes you less dependent on the other side to satisfy your needs. It gives you a sense of freedom as well as power and confidence" (Ury, 2015). Central to this concept is the idea that if something or someone does not fulfill your needs, you have to empower yourself to meet them through communication and action. In the year of crises that we all are facing, the ideas of self-empowerment, finding creative ways to fulfill your needs, and building the confidence needed to change your situation are incredibly relevant. For instance, to fulfill the need of connection right now, you have to empower yourself to go out and seek connections. You cannot expect those connections to happen on their own, especially in a time of relative isolation. We must empower ourselves to create new ways of maintaining social interaction, be it through parking lot picnics, through joining new online groups and chats on services like Discord, or virtual communication on platforms like zoom.

One critique of this claim by Ury is that it ignores the innate human necessity for connection with other people, and the need to care and be cared for. He claims that the inner BATNA "is your commitment to remove the responsibility for meeting your true needs from the other person's shoulders-- and to assume it yourself *no matter what*" (Ury, 2015). This certainly can ring true in situations where the demands of the outside world may supersede your personal needs. The truth though, is that no man is an island, and if extended too far, this philosophy can create new isolation under the guise of independence and self-sufficiency. There has to be a balance between taking care of your needs and your responsibility to the people around you. There is an innate human need for community which can only be met when we are active and caring participants in said community. To state that self-care could take the place of both giving and receiving other forms of care neglects the nature of humanity, and in actuality is incredibly isolating. We are interdependent on each other, and we require care from our communities. While maintaining oneself both physically and emotionally is an important skill, especially given the physical isolation many of us are experiencing through periods of full quarantines and social distancing, we ultimately need other people and the different forms of care that they provide us in order to live fulfilled lives. I felt this personally in my experiences in the spring and fall of 2020, in the difference between building camaraderie and systems of support as opposed to expected self-sufficiency. By adapting Ury's concepts of reframing your picture and the inner BATNA to include community as well as self-care and positive outlook, resiliency is much more possible.

Resiliency is the ability to acknowledge a set-back or crisis and bounce back. As difficult as our

present circumstances are, they also offer us the opportunity to build up practices of resiliency, making us stronger and more capable of weathering that challenges brought about by adversity. We will not only be ready with methods to cope and rise to meet adversity, but be better prepared to help those in our community, especially young people who come after us. In our present moment, the strategies outlined in a TedTalk by Dr. Lucy Hone, a resiliency expert from Christchurch, New Zealand, are essential in bringing us through the present challenges facing us as young adults and citizens of this world. Dr. Hone has worked to cultivate resilience on both a professional and personal level. She helped her community to develop essential strategies for resilience after the Christchurch earthquakes, and had to learn resilience on a more personal level after the loss of her child. From these past experiences, she has identified three major tools for cultivating resiliency: acknowledging that adversity happens, selective attention, and asking the simple question of “Is what I’m doing helping or harming me?” (TedX Talks, 2019).

When people acknowledge that the adversity that they are experiencing is not unique to them and that adversity is a part of being human, it is easier to not get caught up in asking “why me?” or falling into the seduction of self-pity. While grieving and a period of mourning are essential for growing and surpassing the challenges of adversity, self-pity prevents the advancement past grief. Many young people have already begun to work on this skill, and our language reflects it. We often acknowledge the challenges that face us with common phrases like “it be how it be” or “it be like that sometimes,” accepting that while the situations we may find ourselves in can be difficult, sometimes it is simply unavoidable. The use of these phrases is also limited to shared experiences between peers and community members, creating a sense of solidarity in the face of adversity while also strengthening community bonds.

Selective attention is a more difficult skill, and requires much more practice. According to Dr. Hone, resilient people cultivate the skill of focusing their attention on what they can change in the challenging situation, and letting go of what they cannot. Of course, when people are bombarded in everyday life with the negative, including natural disasters, a pandemic, and an unstable political climate contributing to an overarching threat of violence, it can feel like an impossible, if not irresponsible, task to “let it go.”

However, in the wake of all of these ongoing issues, there are manageable actions that we can take both as young individuals and as community members to fight back against the adversities facing us all. In terms of natural disasters, on the ground volunteer work on a local level and donations of money or essential resources from any part of the country are manageable actions to help, and are healthier than getting caught up in emotions of helplessness or fear. In terms of the pandemic, minimizing trips out, wearing masks, and taking care of community and family members who are immuno-compromised by delivering essential items and groceries are all

actionable plans that protect both you and your community from accelerating the spread of Covid-19. Lastly, in terms of political unrest and instability, combating misinformation online and local organizing are incredibly important actions that we all are capable of doing.

Lastly, asking yourself the question of “Is what I’m doing helping or hurting me?” allows you “to get on the balcony” and gain perspective on your actions and put you in a better position to exert control over your situation. This not only is beneficial on a personal level, but on a community level as well. When you expand the question to be “Is what we are doing helping or hurting us?” it also permits the community to see itself and its actions with more clarity. The community as a whole can then make necessary changes to heal and better itself after a crisis.

We may have all been hoping that it would have changed by now. We all hoped that the pandemic would be adequately handled; that we wouldn’t have to worry about another recession; that unity and justice would prevail in our politics. We have been hoping that a quasi-normal life could resume and we could finish our last year of college, celebrate our growth and accomplishments and enter an exciting new phase of life with manageable and expected challenges. Regardless, we are now the emerging leaders of our fields, and our present times and challenges do not define our futures or the possibilities of tomorrow. Ultimately, we are not the first generation to come into adulthood during times of crisis in this country and we will not be the last. What we can do now, is cultivate a strong sense of resiliency and a caring community so that when adversities arise again, we are ready to meet them and we can show those who come behind us how to meet them as well.

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