



## **Upping The Downside:** Creating Professional Resilience by Design by Mike Jay with co-author Lesley Parrott

Chapter contributed by Lesley Parrott

### **Reflections On A Personal Journey**

Resilience. I feel I earned a PhD in it!

In 1986, our eleven-year-old daughter, Alison, was lured from our home in an idyllic neighborhood in Toronto. Two days later, her naked body was found in a secluded ravine. She had been brutally raped and murdered. Needless to say, my life started all over again from that point in time. I've been on an incredible journey taking me to the depths of the human experience. I've learned a lot and grown a lot. Now, more than twenty years later, I'm proud to often hear myself say, "I have not only survived, but thrived."

If anyone had told me this was possible, I would have taken them for the village idiot or the most insensitive and unknowing human being ever to set foot on this planet. Yet today, my marriage has survived, our beloved son is in no doubt about his own personal values and integrity, and my career has flourished.

Reflecting on my own resilience, I believe I was blessed by my childhood upbringing and my inherent personality. I was brought up in Scotland, a daughter of the manse. My father was a minister, and when I was a young child, we lived in a small seaside town. Later when I was a teenager, my family moved to inner-city Glasgow. The small town gave me my innocence and naïveté and the slums of Glasgow, in the sixties, my street smarts. Quite a useful combination.

My parents were always involved in the community and called upon to make a difference in the lives of others. They were extremely busy and, frankly, had neither the time nor interest to be overly involved or fussy parents. There was a lot of unconditional love, but not a lot of worry over our every move. Early on in life, therefore, I learned to fend for myself.

Given my own extraverted personality, with a keen interest in people from an early age, I, too, became involved in reaching out to help others. As a youngster, I learned how to speak to people arriving at the manse door after a death in their family. I volunteered to teach cooking (another lifelong passion) to

a bunch of brash and what could be described as underprivileged Glaswegian teenagers only a couple of years younger than me. And then, through their wild curiosity, I ended up giving them sex education lessons—I hasten to add, despite my own lack of experience on this topic!

I was fortunate that, in my formative years, I was well aware of the adversities faced by people in their lives, and also discovered in myself coping and social skills that became invaluable as I matured and had to deal with my own challenges. I often feel that parents today are so eager to be fully present and involved in their children's lives that they rob them of the ability to develop and build their own inner resources.

As I discovered, our individual and inherent personality, which is developed from a very early age, is a clue to how we deal with life's adversities. This became abundantly clear to me when tragedy struck. I needed to *talk*, and talk I did. My husband said to me very early on in this journey of grief, "it's not real to you unless you talk about it." He, being as strongly introverted as I am extroverted, couldn't imagine why every thought had to be processed out loud. Fortunately, it did not take losing Alison to discover that we dealt with life quite differently.

I had many patient and loving friends who became saints in the art of listening. They selflessly listened endlessly with empathy and without judgment. One of my big lessons was to accept that rather than helping others, for once I had to ask for, and accept, help and support.

As Alison's murder had a high profile in the Canadian media, there was a need and an opportunity to speak in a larger arena. The case remained unsolved for ten years, and then there was an arrest and, three years later, a conviction of first-degree murder.

During the ten-year period, I used my communication skills to keep the case in the public eye in order to help solve the crime. I also reached out to others through the media and talked about the process of grief and healing. I became deeply involved in the charitable organization, Bereaved Families of Ontario, which offers self-help and mutual support to families who have lost a loved one. I also cofounded the street-proofing program Stay Alert . . . Stay Safe to help educate children and their families, in a positive way, on how to stay safe. Like many families that face tragedies, these actions helped relieve the feeling of powerlessness. Many people have a real need to help others and to do something to prevent similar tragedies. This is all part of the process to help make sense of the senseless—another building block on the road to resilience.

I have learned a few other things about resilience: how to develop it and what it can do for you. When you face adversity, you must allow yourself to fully acknowledge it and feel the impact of what has happened. Inevitably, there are feelings of pain so acute you often feel sick to the stomach, you shake, your heart aches, and you certainly weep. When this happens, be fully present and allow

yourself to be with that pain. Rather than denying or distracting yourself from it, the more you can actually absorb it, the quicker it dissolves.

Deep and painful feelings have returned to me over the years and, frequently, intensely. Whenever I allow myself to acknowledge and take the time and create the space to feel the impact of this pain, the quicker the feelings dissipate and I am, once again, able to fully participate in life. This completely flies in the face of what I believed prior to my own journey through the minefield of deep and seemingly insurmountable grief. I, like many other well-intentioned people, believed that constructive distraction and always being positive were the best course of action. I have also learned not to indulge in “what ifs.” I think most of us come sooner or later to the realization that today is all we have—not yesterday, not even tomorrow.

One of the hardest lessons to learn is to forgive others and to forgive ourselves. This is vital to letting go and moving forward. Ironically, by not forgiving those who have wronged us, we allow them to have a hold on us. This can be incapacitating and overwhelming. And the person who has the hold on you isn't even aware of your internal struggle! By setting them free you set yourself free. This does not mean condoning unacceptable behavior or diminishing its impact, significance, or as in my case, downright evilness. It is, however, an acknowledgement that you cannot change what has happened, and to wish healing for the perpetrator is also to wish for healing for yourself. In other words, it is a desire to clear the way forward and involves the necessary step of letting go and wishing for healing for us all.

To forgive yourself can be the hardest part. Guilt and self-blaming come all too easily, often concealed in anger and a feeling of diminished self-esteem. Yet ultimately, to forgive yourself opens up your universe into a place of deep compassion, with the possibility of a life filled with true understanding and meaning of the very complexities and purpose of life itself. If you can arrive at this place, you have an incredible gift to offer others you meet along the way. By confronting and overcoming your greatest vulnerabilities, you are truly free to live life to the fullest, and to share that life with love, understanding, and compassion for others.

An optimistic nature has also been a key ingredient of my own resilience. I can attest that in the midst of incredible darkness, the very goodness of life kept peeking through: a touching gesture from a thoughtful friend, a spring flower, discovering a lovely painting, seeing a newborn baby, and even a smile from a stranger. I have learned to search for, and celebrate, the many, small, everyday joys in life.

This brings me to the ultimate learning—*live fully in the present moment*. Seek out all the little moments of joy, beauty, and happiness in your life. I have. People often say to me, “Lesley, you are one of the happiest people I know.” Little do they know my story, but I accept with grace and understanding that they

are seeing me fully engaged, and I take that as a compliment of just how far I have come from the depths of despair.

Yet sometimes, the way forward, regardless of our personality, our positive disposition, and our best intentions, does not seem clear and certainly is not easy. That's when you need faith in yourself and in life itself. You must trust that the uncertainty won't last, and the present situation will change and evolve, and by living in the present, you will always have a new perspective and new opportunities. By regularly checking in on and focusing on our resilience, we are also actually building that very capacity within ourselves.

I think the major hurdles in life return us to our core, whereas we can sometimes be totally derailed by an apparently lesser setback. The process is much the same whether it is a life-changing event or the minor irritations we face on a daily basis. Managing our working life with balance between who we are and who we are expected to be is a constant challenge. So here is my hard-earned "to do" list for engaging the resilience within us all, whether it be in a personal or professional context:

- Know who you are, and if necessary, do some work to overcome your childhood obstacles.
- Understand your own personality and coping mechanisms and be ready to engage them.
- Reach out to others for help when adversity calls, and be ready to reach out to them when they need you.
- Acknowledge and allow yourself to absorb the impact of the occurrence, big or small.
- Forgive others, and more importantly, forgive yourself. This opens up a world of possibilities.
- Be optimistic, live in the present, and seek out the small joys presented to you every day.
- Hang in there when all seems bleak and remember the sun *will* rise tomorrow and with it another perspective.

The opportunity to live this life, with all its ups and downs, highs and lows, challenges and opportunities, is a great gift. To live only the upside is to experience half the journey. A profound understanding of the downside allows you to know what it is to be truly human.

## **THE AUTHOR**

Lesley Parrott is a facilitator, leader, humanitarian, and a friend to many. She is a renowned veteran of the Canadian advertising and communications industry, where she worked in senior leadership positions. Her beloved daughter, Alison, was murdered in 1986, and through learning to live with this loss, she has reached out to help others dealing with tragedy and loss. In her consultancy she brings together her corporate and personal experiences to help those in the corporate world communicate effectively. She's the recipient of many awards, including the prestigious Spiess lifetime achievement award and the YWCA Toronto Women of Distinction award for Communications and Community Service.

## **Backstory**

I would like share with you how I came to write this essay. During these past twenty years, I've spoken publicly on many of the personal issues I've faced. I have also been featured in many articles and programs focusing on people dealing with loss and tragedy. The latest is a wonderful documentary film titled *Forgiveness-Stories for our Times*, which features four people, all of whom have dealt with violent personal loss, confronting and exploring forgiveness from their own perspective.

Through both my personal and professional experiences, I arrived at a point when I felt not only ready, but compelled to take my message of "surviving and thriving" into the realm of keynote speaking. I have a specific interest in reaching those in the corporate world, as I have had a successful career working in the private sector. I also have a real passion to help people cope with the many difficulties presented by their professional lives and the often unacknowledged or misunderstood challenges they face. My dilemma, and one I struggled with, was how to position and make relevant to business people the learning from my own overwhelmingly sad, personal story.

This is where Mari Smith and resilience came in. I had been chatting about the wonders of Facebook with Sandy McMullen, one of the other authors, and discovered she, too, had recently joined the popular social-networking site. We immediately became Facebook friends, and on looking at her profile, I found she was a member of the Upping the Downside Group hosted by Mari Smith. Reflecting on the question posed by Mari on the site--"what does resilience mean to me?"--I realized this was the very topic on which I could communicate with relevance to those in the corporate environment. Once again, an example of how the universe unfolds. Thank you, Sandy and Mari, for bringing me to this place ([www.lesleyparrott.ca](http://www.lesleyparrott.ca)).