

Embodied Resilience: Supervising/Mentoring during a Time of COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and Climate Change

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Communities are facing significant global challenges and sociocultural shifts through the ongoing realities of COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter movement, and climate change. Supervisor-mentors are called upon to lead and mentor interns as communities struggle with the evolution of a new normal. They need to embody adaptation and resilience—which takes time and, often, sheer grit—as congregations learn to operate online and socially distanced and as agencies struggle to maintain their work and income. Psychologist Angela Duckworth describes resilient individuals she interviewed as successful and as having ferocious determination. She writes, “These exemplars were unusually resilient and hard-working. They knew in a very, very deep way what it was they wanted.

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They not only had determination, they had *direction*. It was this combination of passion and perseverance that made high-achievers special. In a word, they had grit."¹

How does one cultivate hope and grit while experiencing overwhelming uncertainty and anxiety? How does one mentor and supervise while grappling with one's own vulnerability while searching for a new normal? Here, embodied resilience is key if supervisor-mentors, interns, and communities are to find hope and serve others under these challenging crisis circumstances.

Human beings overcome the most horrendous circumstances, as psychologist and Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl's logotherapy demonstrates. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, he writes, "Everything can be taken from a [person] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."² Positive psychology and post-traumatic healing research explore how human beings who have been exposed to generational and complex trauma overcome trauma and reclaim meaning in life. Over the centuries, religious sacred texts inspired leaders to protest social injustice and care for creation when diseases threatened the well-being of communities. Networking and building support produce communal resilience and empower nonviolent solutions. When communities come together, they demonstrate, as David Chandler puts it, "the internal capacity of societies to cope with crises, with the emphasis on the development of self-organization and internal capacities and capabilities rather than the external provision of aid, resources or policy solutions."³ Both communal and individual resilience are thus built in response to core values and beliefs that are adaptable in context and crucial for the well-being of all.

In times of rapid change and uncertainty, the supervisor-mentor is called upon to embody resilience, a leadership competency crucial for facilitating the care of the souls of the individual, the organization, and the community. Resilience is the ability to embrace failure as a temporary setback, draw on internal resources to learn from a current challenge, and then find a way to move forward. This aptitude will be needed time and time again as the minister navigates the emotional vortex of the congregational or agency context. Supervisor-mentors who model embodied resilience understand that they may not be able to answer questions that are rapidly emerging. They know that sometimes they must use grit and experiment while be-

ing critiqued so answers can evolve. This often is an uncomfortable place because the outcome may not match the community's desire to restore the status quo.

Renowned sociologist Brené Brown teaches that leaders who are resilient and able to engage in transforming work have the following characteristics in common:

1. They recognize the central role that relationships and story play in culture.
2. They stay curious about how their own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are connected with the people they lead.
3. They have the ability and willingness to lean into discomfort and vulnerability.⁴

Practical theologian Tod Bolsinger observes, "The resilient leader understands that gaining perspective, seeing the bigger picture, hearing the 'music beneath the words' (the unspoken fears and anxieties, power plays, and disruptive movements that are fueling the system's current functioning) is a critical practice for leading wise change."⁵ These are the characteristics supervisor-mentors embody as they explore with interns their call and practice of ministry as active participants in God's purposes and considering God's loving presence.

Both Brown and Bolsinger note that maturing spirituality is a vital component of resiliency. Henri Nouwen suggests supervision should be a ministry of presence, of creating a sacred space where self-awareness and the awareness of the divine meet the possibilities of being in community.⁶ Maturing spirituality requires consistent spiritual practices that allow supervisor-mentors and interns to enter into sacred space. Here, the ministry of presence becomes discernment and self-examination of one's pain. As womanist scholar Renita Weems states, "Our deepest, most painful wounds not only leave us with scars that we bear forever but also, if we make our peace with them, leave us wiser, stronger, more sensitive than we otherwise would have been had we not been afflicted with them."⁷ Thus, supervisor-mentors and interns who seek and embody resilience become catalysts for transformation as they engage the challenges of COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter movement, and climate change.

COVID-19

With the COVID-19 pandemic comes a barrage of health anxieties, rising death tolls, increasing unemployment, and physical isolation. Pandemic is rooted in the Greek word : *pan* (meaning “all”), which suggests an all-encompassing reactivity as expressed in fear or anxiety. If we are to effect short-term and long-term change concerning COVID-19, supervisor-mentors and interns must address ever-increasing feelings of frustration and anger in relation to the unknown and in response to fear. Whether it is worshipping together, providing pastoral care, engaging in spiritual formation or religious education, or meeting the social justice needs of our communities, we are empowering congregations and agencies to reimagine their life and work in the community amidst pandemic conditions.

Practical theologian Israel Galindo argues that during times of crises and heightened anxiety authentic leadership is required. He posits that “authentic leadership begins with self.” Galindo assumes that the leader views the church as “a living relationship organism” and consequently understands that the “best a leader can do is to be in the kind of relationship that influences people toward maturity.” Galindo calls this “leading from the Self.”⁸ The characteristics of leading from the Self are self-knowledge, self-regulation, and spiritual maturity while being inseparable from the community as the context of ministry.⁹ Resilience is embodied when supervisor-mentors have been faithful to the task of self-work—understanding their emotions while gaining clarity about their values and guiding principles within a community guided and empowered by God’s purposes.

As they practice and share their own self-awareness, supervisor-mentors encourage interns to develop self-awareness, become clear about core values and guiding principles, and identify and deepen a definite sense of personal vocational identity. Galindo writes, “Self-awareness includes understanding our fundamental motivating force; the one that drives us toward or away from people and things, and which therefore informs and shapes our personal goals.”¹⁰ He adds that getting feedback from a “coach” or “coaching group” provides “mutual accountability, openness, and honesty in the relationship, and willingness to be challenged,”¹¹ even if this has to occur online.

Pastoral theologian Jackson Carroll’s perspective on excellent ministry as “corporate or communal in nature” complements Galindo’s argument by

stating that “there is no self apart from the community.” Drawing from the first letter to the Corinthians, Carroll grounds his understanding of excellent ministry as “deeply communal” in Paul’s understanding of the church as the body of Christ: “It involves practices that focus on building up and strengthening the whole body, which is called to be an agent of reconciliation in the world.”¹² COVID-19 has challenged and changed how we engage in the community by creating the need to connect via technology in order to practice social distancing. This is true for supervised ministry coursework as well as within ministry settings. Supervisor-mentors must adapt their mentoring approaches to online formats and find ways to build and maintain learning communities that deepen relationships and self- and communal reflection.

Psychologist Lily Brown notes that research suggests the limbic system in the brain is hyperactive during experiences of negative emotions and stress. When emotions become overblown due to stress, the parts of the brain in charge of executive function tend to not communicate with the emotional parts of the brain because the limbic system overrides the executive functioning circuit. Brown reports that this type of stress can cause trouble focusing or controlling impulses.¹³ Self-awareness and grace mutually exchanged by supervisor-mentor and intern can provide the understanding and space for resilience to take root.

One key strategy to boosting resilience is mindfulness, which involves taking a moment to be aware of one’s surroundings to reduce stress levels. In the Christian tradition, we might use the practice of centering prayer, which is a receptive method of silent Christian prayer that prepares the participant to receive the gift of God’s presence from within through silence and letting go of thoughts. Thomas Keating, a Cistercian monk and master teacher of centering prayer, says such prayer is “closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself.”¹⁴ In times of high stress, people are often thinking ahead and worrying about the future or looking back and worrying about something terrible that happened in the past. Centering prayer, like meditation, can help the supervisor-mentor and intern stay calm and present in the moment by pulling on the prefrontal cortex—the brain region in charge of executive functioning—which can reduce emotional activation in the limbic system and help the supervisor-mentor and intern stay calm and present. While the current pandemic has made it an even more significant challenge to supervise and mentor, new ministry

opportunities may arise if we are willing to employ a bit of resilience, humor, and grit.

Religious education professor Charlene Jin Lee reinforces the idea that how supervisor-mentors present themselves matters. “We form people whom we supervise/mentor as students experience us. They learn who we are, so we must be authentically present for formation to take place. As we assume the posture of one who is learning and relearning, we provide space where struggles and questions can be voiced.”¹⁵ When the supervisor-mentor assumes the posture of learning and relearning while choosing to be a nonanxious presence, this frees the intern or organizational system to take responsibility for their own learning. Here, embodied resilience, as suggested in mindfulness models, is characterized by

1. choosing faith or core values over fear, striving to reach a non- or decreased anxious state;
2. leading and modeling core values such as faith, hope, and love for the common good as resilient supervisor-mentors and interns who acknowledge difficulties and yet see them as opportunities;
3. focusing on gratitude, kindness, and compassion; and
4. building resilience through self-care, including following health guidelines.

It is essential for the supervisor-mentor to stay connected with the intern. Whether meeting in person or virtually, the supervisor-mentor needs to pay attention to the emotional content behind the intern’s words and the nonverbal cues to assess their well-being. Self-care nourishes embodied resilience. Consequently, modeling self-care for interns is part of being an effective supervisor-mentor. Self-care should include regular exercise, healthy eating, and adequate sleep as well as exercise of the mind and spirit. As Jackson Carroll states, “Developing resiliency is a fruit of engaging in regular spiritual disciplines . . . proactively putting [oneself] in position to be renewed by God’s grace.”¹⁶

BLACK LIVES MATTER

How does a supervisor-mentor address systemic racism and racial injustice in supervision? This dialogue must be shaped by contextual realities impacted by systemic racism and cultural violence. The Black Lives Matter movement emerged in response to the violent loss of Trayvon Martin’s and

others' lives. It has become a rallying cry for civil disobedience and protests White supremacy, vigilantism, and violence inflicted on Black communities.¹⁷ Standing in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement is important, particularly as Black communities fight for survival. As President Barack Obama stated, Black Lives Matter "is not meant to suggest that other lives don't matter. It is to suggest that other folks are not experiencing this particular vulnerability."¹⁸ He refers to the reality that theologian and ethicist Eboni Marshall Turman describes as follows: "Black people can eat at most lunch counters and travel across state lines without being consigned to the back of the bus, but the fundamental right to life continues to be haunted by white supremacy."¹⁹

In response, Robin DiAngelo observes, "White progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because, to the degree that we think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived. None of our energy will go into what we need to be doing for the rest of our lives," which is "ongoing self-awareness, continuing education, relationship building, and actual anti-racist practice."²⁰ Complex issues in complex communities do not excuse us from engaging in these matters. As Congressional Representative John Lewis famously said, "Get into good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America."²¹

Racial reconciliation in pursuit of the redemption of the soul of America begins in local communities. Alexis Jemal, Sarah Bussey, and Briana Young claim that "restorative justice is a crucial part of reconciliation."²² They describe a racial reconciliation process on all systemic levels that has the following six steps: "1) identifying levels and affected parties; 2) inclusion; 3) encounter; 4) amends; 5) community reintegration; and 6) transformation."²³ Such a process requires theological courage and embodied wisdom as a basis for implementation. As Sojourners founder Jim Wallis notes,

We must replace fear with facts . . . we must name racism as sins against our neighbors and against the God who made us all in God's image. Multiracial truth telling about race as America's original sin is urgently needed, and faith communities must always lift up the voices of diverse believers so that they can share their own stories. It is time for churches to emphatically renounce bigotry and become the multiethnic body of Christ that God wants us to be.²⁴

By adopting a process of racial reconciliation as part of their work together, supervisor-mentors demonstrate not only resilience but also passion

and sheer grit. Supervisor-mentors allow for relational honesty and lament as a community or congregation comes to terms with its racist or traumatized history and the complexity of its practices in response to that history. Identifying how different parties have been affected and listening to their trauma or remorse allows for deconstructing and reconstructing all of their stories. As an overarching narrative of restorative justice and reconciliation emerges, transformation is possible.

Embodied resilience means demonstrating the courage not to lose hope while repeatedly speaking out for justice and civil rights. Such supervision and mentoring courageously acknowledges past wrongdoing and then creates a space where forgiveness and a way forward can occur. Such movement fosters actions toward a multicultural community by standing in solidarity with communities of color and by examining the narrative of White privilege. This process is complicated, especially under COVID-19 conditions, and occurs over time. It evokes strong emotions that may be difficult to experience and witness. Examining these emotions in relation to holy texts or theological mandates allows for new interpretations as well as emotional catharsis.

As Brené Brown reminded us above, effectively engaging in such an endeavor requires the ability and willingness to lean into and learn from discomfort and vulnerability. Here, supervisor-mentor and intern learn from each other as they navigate resistance to change and explore ministry responses despite uncertainty and crisis. This is where new hope and a new reordering of core values may occur. Both supervisor-mentor and intern will model embodied resilience as it pertains to forgiveness and healing. The communal witness that occurs in internships that intentionally bring predominantly White and Black churches together in mutual partnership is a first step in healing and reconciliation. All will learn, with respect for one another, to share their cultural and religious heritages. These are the first steps that might overcome what Martin Luther King Jr. called the most segregated hour in America and what has been a racially segregated geographic reality in many communities. Here, embodied resilience becomes personal and communal grit that does not give up.

Supervision and mentoring based on embodied resilience exemplifies the hope and vision that humanity might find a way to live in peace so all of God's children might share respect and resources not only for survival but for the thriving of all. By embodying resilience and respectfully find-

ing ways in the community to stand with the Black Lives Matter movement, supervisor-mentors, in collaboration with interns, may initiate and participate in the process of contextual reconciliation and witness transformation. All have much work to do. In that sense, the Black Lives Matter movement is a call to embody resilience for the common good, to form and continue to work toward what Martin Luther King Jr. called the beloved community.

Supervisor-mentors model embodied resilience by being self-aware and handling strong emotions internally and externally while engaging in adaptive processes that explore what it takes to stop the violence that threatens Black lives and perpetuates generational trauma. Depending on their contextual location, supervisor-mentors may need to engage in diversity training, conduct a cultural heritage assessment, and invite those who are marginalized to be heard and treated with respect in the public square. These actions are not only religiously mandated but are a moral and ethical responsibility. Embodied, modeled resiliency includes the supervisor-mentor's willingness to engage stakeholders and influencers, receive criticism, and try again and again to fully engage in long-term justice work while not giving in to internal challenges and external trials. As such, embodied resilience modeled in collaboration becomes a conduit to the vision of those who believe in freedom and who cannot rest until it comes.²⁵

CLIMATE CHANGE

The consequences of climate change have reached epic proportions. Scientists all over the world warn that if we do not take immediate action, the life of the planet for future generations is at stake. Temperature changes, extinction of species, super-storms, and natural disasters due to climate change are indicators that our planet is indeed in peril. Greta Thunberg, a Swedish teen activist, challenged the world to address what she called "climate change justice" in an address to the United Nations. She expressed the fears and anger of her generation, proclaiming, "You are failing us, but the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you, and if you choose to fail us, I say, we will never forgive you."²⁶ Sir David Attenborough, renowned British naturalist, supports her statement and has urgently called on leaders worldwide to unite to ensure the planet's survival. Ironically, COVID-19 pandemic conditions have been the impetus for surprising reversals in climate-impacting

conditions. During the global shutdown, air quality in Beijing dramatically improved and water quality in the lagoons in Venice reverted to a healthier level.

While the debate concerning the validity of climate change continues in this country, supervisor-mentors and interns can make the planet a better place by responding positively to activists locally and globally. Many denominations and nonprofit organizations engage in green activism, from recycling to supporting new building codes, and others could follow their lead.

Public theologian and activist Jim Antal discusses the moral and ethical aspects of climate change that religious communities must address by connecting climate change with other social and environmental issues such as global social injustice, hunger, the plight of refugees, poverty, inequality, deadly viruses, and even war. His call to “repurpose” the church and reimagine its moral calling in relation to climate change emphasizes the importance of community development for the common good. Supervisor-mentors and interns may find creative ways to engage in conversation with those who doubt the reality of climate change or COVID-19. Such conversations and engagement are life-changing and life-giving but may take time.

When engaging in communal and congregational dialogue about climate change, supervisor-mentors and interns should address feelings and thoughts and redirect community members into positive behavior. The biblical mandate to steward creation, shared by the Christian and Jewish traditions, can become a lens of reinterpretation of wise stewardship of not only our local environments but the actual planet. In doing this, supervisor-mentors and interns will most likely encounter opposition and will need to address systemic issues. Congregations and organizations may challenge green initiatives if they require additional expenses during COVID-19, a time when financial resources are not as readily available as previously.

Supervisor-mentors and interns *can* and ethically *must* model being responsible stewards of resources. They can demonstrate what it means to change habits, such as replacing the use of plastic bottles, bags, and containers with reusable, decomposable, and recyclable materials. They can discern the pace it takes to adjust and how to create and meet short-term needs while lobbying for long-term systemic change. Recycling, composting, monitoring individual and organizational carbon footprints, and redefining progress are all first steps supervisor-mentors and interns can take now

to address a global crisis. While this may feel overwhelming, each step, no matter how seemingly insignificant, will contribute to the common good.

Embodied resilience addresses the need for self-awareness around one's motivations and those of the community. Supervisor-mentors and interns alike can engage in assessing educational needs concerning climate change. They can collaborate to create access to resources and provide for the needs of individuals and the community. To preserve our planet, we will need to change our behavior. By addressing our fears and acknowledging where we have privileged access to resources, we take a first step toward sharing resources globally. This is essential if we are not to lose the planet to exploitation. We must, as Jim Antal states, "revoke the social license to wreck creation, in particular in the use of fossil fuels."²⁷ Moral and ethical responsibility is expressed through education and with advocacy: taking a public stand supporting local and national legislation, as well as collaboration with international efforts.²⁸

If we are to save the planet, Greta Thunberg's generational critique may need to be the catalyst for change. COVID-19 conditions have heightened this need and have shown the positive effects we might sustain if we see community and planetary well-being as intertwined. However, since interns and communities are already coping with COVID-19 and the social injustices confronted through the Black Lives Matter movement, the climate change challenge may lead to additional distress that supervisor-mentors and interns as leaders of communities must regulate if we are not to revert to a simplified technical solution or work avoidance.²⁹

Embodied resilience resists the impulse to find a quick technical solution and instead results in adaptive change in which core values of creation care replace throwaway consumerism. Supervisor-mentors and interns alike can serve as examples and model how living through a crisis is more than crisis management. Ministry born out of crises can result in a new vision and implementation for ministry that will build ongoing resilience. As Saleemul Huq, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Environment and Development, suggests, resilience concerning climate change means responding to its impact through incremental and transformational adaptation. Huq suggests that incremental adaptation addresses the management required to mitigate the effects of climate change by creating an "early warning system that alerts communities to floods, cyclones, or hurricanes. . . [managing] damage . . . by anticipating and being prepared to respond."

He describes transformational adaptation as a “forward-looking aspect of adaptation where communities . . . through long-term planning, can improve their conditions.”³⁰ Supervisor-mentors and interns can actively participate in community projects while supporting national and international efforts. As they model embodied resilience in their settings, they become conduits of dialogue and advocacy through practicing moral imagination and community building by connecting local, national, and international communities.³¹

CONCLUSION

Nancy Koehn, Harvard Business School professor, notes, “We are living in a world that is one nonstop crisis—one calamity, one emergency, one expected, often difficult surprise—after another, like waves breaking on the shore.”³² The reality of the unrelenting waves created by COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter movement and climate change threatens to overwhelm us. Challenged emotionally, culturally, environmentally, and spiritually, we long for leaders to walk with us and guide us out of the turbulent waters. Koehn suggests the kind of leaders we need “not only endure great challenges, but get stronger in the midst of them.”³³ In this unique crucible of unprecedented crises that threatens every norm of our common life, supervisor-mentors are called to embody resilience.

The supervisor-mentor who embodies resilience that transforms is called to intentionally attend to and nurture self-awareness and self-care. Understanding one’s own emotions and the basic motivating forces that drive one away or toward people is central to this journey toward greater self-awareness. As supervisor-mentors become more self-aware, they become able to identify their strengths and use those strengths to guide decision-making and take more accurate, effective action. The emerging understanding and maturing of self are foundational to embodied resilience.

We are still learning from our new COVID-19 world, but some lessons are becoming clear. We are discovering that our economic and civil systems are fragile and that this fragility extends to our models of church and vocational ministry. COVID-19 has forced us to pause, reflect, and reimagine what kind of church and leadership is needed for this new era, but before we can ask “What?” we must ask “Why?” It is the “why” that helps us re-engage and put embodied resilience into action. It is reclaiming our mission

as the people of God and joining God in reconciling all things to Godself that grounds us. It is when we can truly grab hold of the “why” that we find our call clarified and renewed. It is this call that propels us to do the hard work of understanding ourselves and others. It is God’s call that convinces us that self-care is necessary and that provides the solid ground from which we can bounce back. This is embodied resilience fueled by passion and carried out with grit.

Donald Schön reminds us that supervision in ministry provides the intern space to evolve through “vocational identity formation, skill development, and reflective practice.”³⁴ To this list, supervisor-mentors must add the cultivation of resilience. Supervision-mentoring based on embodied resilience courageously acknowledges wrongdoings in the past and then creates the space where forward movement can occur. Embodied resilience is modeled when the supervisor-mentor, guided by core values, personal ethics, and guiding principles, stands in solidarity with those who are marginalized and oppressed.

The COVID-19 pandemic frames ministry by forcing a focus on common health. The Black Lives Matter movement is a call to embody resilience for the common good while striving toward Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision of the beloved community. The supervisor-mentor models embodied resilience by being self-aware, managing strong emotions internally and externally, and engaging in adaptive processes that explore what it takes to stop the violence that threatens Black lives and perpetuates generational trauma. Climate change justice and its corresponding necessary, immediate action locally and globally allow the supervisor-mentor to initiate community change that will create an improved quality of life to be shared by all. Embodied resilience in the end allows both supervisor-mentors and interns to lament losses and trauma, embrace a new reality that includes technology, and explore a new vision. Thus, ministry in crisis becomes a ministry of hope and a ministry of healing and restoration. Embodied resilience becomes more than survival. It becomes transformational if we are willing to embrace honestly, and with humility, our current conditions and strive for the good of all.

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