Excerpt from How High Can You Bounce? by Roger Crawford

If you put a golf ball in the freezer until the core gets very cold, it loses its resilience. No matter how hard you hit it, it's not going to go far. Even after the outside has warmed up and the ball seems completely normal, it won't perform like a regular ball. And if the ball gets cold enough, it will splinter on impact.

People are like that. They can look pretty much alike, come from similar backgrounds, and go through similar experiences. Yet, in the same situation, one person soars and another comes up short, one person flourishes and another is devastated.

Those who soar through life have resilience. Their resilient core transforms the momentum of life's many blows into speed and distance. The same forces that shatter others are what keep them going.

Resilient people regain their stability more quickly in difficult situations, and stay physically and emotionally healthy during periods of stress and uncertainty. They stay hopeful and optimistic when others give up. They rebound from adversity even stronger than before.

A high level of resilience is a great thing to have. It makes our lives richer, more productive, happier, and more successful. But how do we get it? We're all born with some resilience or we wouldn't be here. A few charmed individuals seem to have gotten more than the rest of us, surviving with a smile everything that life throws at them.

The rest of us have a conscious choice. We can allow ourselves to freeze up, calcify, to slowly become brittle and inflexible like frail old trees waiting to blow down in the next strong wind. Or we can take steps to develop and maintain our resilience. Fortunately, resilience is a skill you can learn.

If you're alive, you're going to face challenges and hardships. Many of mine are obvious. At birth, I faced a physical challenge that affected all four limbs. The medical explanation was "ectrodactylism." My preferred term is "inconvenienced." Basically, my hands aren't fully developed. A thumb extends from my right wrist, and a thumb and pinky from my left wrist. One foot has three toes. My other leg was underdeveloped and was amputated below the knee when I was five so I could wear an artificial leg. Suddenly I had the agility to walk and run. What an incredible turning point in my life!

Has this physical challenge limited me? Of course. I can't eat with chopsticks or play "Chopsticks." That's one of the realities of my life and yours: We must accept what we cannot change.

As soon as I developed the necessary mobility, athletics (especially tennis) became a positive influence in my life. I captained my high school tennis team and had a single record of forty-seven wins, six losses. In college, I became the first person with a physical challenge affecting two or more limbs to participate in Division 1 NCAA athletics. I'm proud of this accomplishment, but I didn't do it alone. Loving, supportive parents, excellent coaching, and
some God-given ability made it possible.

Was I any more "handicapped" than someone able-bodied who is disadvantaged by poverty, a dysfunctional family, or a negative self-image? I don't believe so. It's the invisible handicaps--attitudinal, spiritual, or emotional--that are the most painful and difficult to overcome.

But this book is not about my life, it's about yours. It's about nine ways to make yourself stronger, more powerful, and more resilient. In sports, in business, and in life, I've always been fascinated by the enormous difference that resilience makes. Is there a way to tell who will thrive and who will fail? Is there a formula for building resilient organizations or raising resilient children? And can we learn to be more resilient? After studying hundreds of organizations and talking with thousands of exceptional people, I'm convinced that the answer to all these questions is yes!

In this book, you will be reading stories about highly resilient people--people who have been challenged and who have emerged even wiser and better equipped to manage the future. At first you may think, "Oh, I could never do that!" But how do you know? These are all ordinary people who have been able to tap the extraordinary resources within themselves. This can be your life as well!

We can't control which difficulties we'll encounter, but we can control how we'll respond to them. We can choose to be victims or victors, winners or whiners, optimistic or pessimistic.

We all need resilience on a daily basis, not just in times of catastrophe. The cumulative effect of everyday stress of family, job, and even traffic jams can be nearly as hard to deal with as great tragedy. When something goes wrong, do we see it as further evidence of life's unfairness and futility? Or can we find the opportunities for growth? Once we make this crucial attitude shift, a resilient life is within our grasp. We have seized the power. We can now convert mountains into molehills and discover abilities and internal boldness that we never knew existed.

Profile: Phil Butler

When I need an extra reminder about the connection between optimism and resilience, I think of Phil Butler. Phil graduated from Annapolis and became a Navy light attack carrier pilot who seemed to have the world by the tail. Then he was shot down on a bombing mission over North Vietnam. He spent four days trying to escape through the jungle before he was captured and imprisoned. Each day in his cell he hoped that tomorrow might bring freedom. He maintained this hope for eight years! Phil managed not only to survive but also to accomplish the POW mission--"to return with honor."

Phil told me how the prisoners were kept separate to break their spirits so they could be used for political propaganda. Despite this isolation, they managed to develop and use a secret method of communicating. They created a tap code based on assigning letters to a five-by-five box grid, rather than using traditional Morse code, which might have been deciphered by the
guards. Messages could be sent by tapping lightly on the wall or even by the swishes of a broom while sweeping the courtyard. Phil and the others would sweep out jokes and stories to entertain all the other prisoners.

New prisoners were taught the code, and soon elaborate games and formal "lectures" were organized to keep their minds occupied. Phil says the most damaging part of being a POW was the isolation. If it hadn't been for the mutual support through the communication system they devised, few would have survived the torture and horrible conditions. The strong personal relationships that he developed supported him through eight years of imprisonment.

Phil feels the men owed their courage and tremendous endurance to their refusal to lose their optimism, and that humor was an essential factor. He told me a story about Skip, a pilot from his squadron who was shot down eight months after he was. After being blindfolded, bound with ropes, and tortured for weeks in an unsuccessful effort to get a tape-recorded "confession," Skip was finally moved to the cell next to Phil's. The first message Skip tapped through the wall was, "Sorry I didn't get over to you sooner, Phil, but I've been all tied up with other things." The POWs were strengthened and unified by such humor.

Phil still maintains this ability to put things in perspective. When he was shot down, he was declared "Killed in Action," and there were three memorial services held for him: one in his home town, one at his base in California, and one on the ship. He says with a slight grin, "I have some terrific news clippings in my scrapbook."

Optimism was actually enforced among the POW's because pessimism is so demoralizing. The men realized they couldn't afford the luxury of constant pessimistic grumblings, because both pessimism and optimism become self-fulfilling prophecies. "We had to remain optimistic to survive," Phil says. He calls optimism and humor the "glue and grease of life. Optimism is like glue because it unites us with people as we work together to accomplish our goals and objectives. Humor greases up the tough times so we can slide through being tired, sick, disappointed, depressed, bored, or even growing old. People who share a strong sense of optimistic purpose are absolutely unstoppable."

Optimism + humor = resilience--that's Phil Butler's formula.

After his repatriation, Phil was awarded two Silver Stars, the Legion of Merit, Bronze Stars, and Purple Hearts for heroism, but he didn't stop there. He went on to earn a Ph.D. in sociology and completed a successful Navy career. Now he's one of the top speakers and consultants in the country. He's living proof that our true prison is negative thoughts. Resilient thinking is the key to unlocking the door.

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