**How We Come Back: Stories of Resilience**By Rev Ellen Quaadgras
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Pema Chodron is a Buddhist nun, bestselling author and one of my most influential spiritual teachers. I have read almost every one of her books and listened to her published talks probably dozens of times.

In a sermon on resilience Rev Rob Hardies relays a turning point story from Pema Chodron’s life.[[1]](#footnote-1) About the day things fell apart. Back then she hadn’t yet discovered Buddhism or taken the name Pema Chodron, back then she was Deirdre Bromfield Brown – wife, mother and school teacher, living in New Mexico. Then one morning, while she stood outside her adobe home, sipping a cup of tea, she heard the car drive up and the door bang shut. Her husband walked around the corner and without warning said he was having an affair and wanted a divorce.

You know how sometimes when you receive shocking news you dissociate, you go numb for a little while – that’s what happened to Pema Chodron at first when her husband told her he wanted to leave. She writes, first I just noticed the sky and how blue it was. I saw the river, I saw the steam rising from my cup of tea, there was no time or thought there was just light and a profound stillness. Before long though Pema came to her sense – bent over, picked up a rock and threw it at her husband’s head.

As Hardies comments, isn’t it great that Pema Chodron threw a rock at her husband’s head – this paragon of mindfulness, I think there’s some hope for all the rest of us if Pema Chodron also throws rocks at her husband.

And that’s good, because these kinds of things happen to us too.

That story from Pema Chodron is in a book called “When things fall apart.” Not, if, you will note, but when.

Job loss, divorce, illness, financial setback. Loss of a loved one. Some revelation about your family, some dream that now it is clear to you will, really will, never come true. At least, not the way you had so fervently hoped.

Things fall apart all the time.

And getting from breakdown to breakthrough is not always as easy as reading a book or throwing a rock.

There is a TED talk in the packet this month, by a woman named Amy Purdy. At 19 she was full of hope, ready to take on the world, or at least travel it. She flew off to a place with snow, brought her snowboard, found a job as massage therapist, and for the first time in her life, she said, she felt free, independent and fully in control of her life. Until, 2 days in, she went home with a fever, and then promptly landed in the hospital with a case of bacterial meningitis that almost killed her. She lost a spleen, a kidney & both legs below the knee.

She felt like a patchwork doll she said, but was managing to hold it all together. Until surgeons came forward with her brand new, artificial, legs.

The calves were bulky blocks of metal with pipes bolted together for the ankles and a yellow rubber foot with a raised line from the toe to the ankle made to look like a vein. When she saw that she lost it.

She crawled under the covers in a state of hopelessness, she said, that lasted for months.

Amy is not unusual.

And while not all challenges are so physically profound, they can have equally strong repercussions in us. When the divorce is finally final, and you have the papers in your hand, something hits home. When the funeral of your loved one is over, and you come home to an emptier house, or an emptier world. When you finally recognize that you will not regain all the energy or capacity you had before that last illness, when you fail that milestone test, or realize something will not ever be what you had so fervently hoped, some weight sits on your chest and you’re not sure it will ever go away.

When hard things happens we humans are vulnerable - to losing hope. To, like Amy, pulling the covers over our heads.

Giving up.

It’s an experience that can happen to us.

It’s an experience that can happen to those we love.

And there is this place we sometimes land. This hopeless place. The place before resilience. We don’t talk about it all that much because, what do you say. Maybe it scares us, a little bit. But I imagine we’ve all been there. We’ve all seen others go there.

Where it’s like you’ve been caught in an avalanche of negative thinking that sweeps all your supports down with it. Or like being inside some bubble of disillusionment where everything, from there, looks pointless. All the things that seemed promising before look different or unhelpful or maybe even are different to you, because something about you, is different.

And it’s a sticky place, a tricky place – when that negativity gets in your eyes, gets in your perceptions. When no matter what someone says to you, no matter how helpful they’re trying to be, everything goes through some twisted google translate that makes it all sound bad. Well-meaning suggestions come through as lack of confidence in you, reminders of the bright side leave you feeling just unheard or more alone.

And when you’re on the other side, if you’ve ever tried to cheer up someone in this state, you know how well that goes.

So, there’s this place, this dark place. This place before resilience, where we can get stuck. Where well-meaning efforts don’t always help.

There’s this sweet Youtube video by Brene Brown on empathy that reminded me of one thing that \*might\* help. In it, a young fox has a cloud over her head and it’s raining – just on her. Her friend, bear, stands next to her, no rain cloud over him. Suddenly, the ground beneath fox’s feet cracks, breaks open and she falls into a deep, dark hole. She calls up – I’m stuck, it’s dark, I’m overwhelmed. Bear throws down a rope ladder, climbs down and says, on the way down “I know what’s it’s like down here. And you’re not alone.” Antelope, on the other hand, looks down the hole from the top, chewing on a sandwich and says “Oooh it looks bad” and “Hey, want a sandwich”? [in a tone that does not sound empathic]. Then antelope goes on to try to point out a silver lining. What you had a miscarriage? At least you know you can get pregnant What, John’s getting kicked out of school? At least Sarah is an A student. What, you’re worried your marriage is falling apart? At least you have a marriage.

Not necessarily helpful. Empathy, is a choice, Brene suggests, and it’s a vulnerable choice. Because in order to connect with you, I have to connect with something in myself that knows that feeling. In the video Bear pulls, from under his baseball cap, a raincloud that looks a lot like the one raining on fox, and places it over his head. Now both of them are standing at the bottom of the hole, getting wet. Together. I don’t even know what to say right now, bear says. I’m just so glad you told me. [[2]](#footnote-2)

I sometimes think that as much as we want to help pull people out of the negative spaces they are in, much as we want to point them to the light, sometimes what they really need is for us to keep them company in the dark. At least for a while.

Offering presence. Warmth, kindness, simple presence. A reminder that they’re not alone. That the feelings they have aren’t wrong. That \*they\* are okay, no matter what just happened. Your simple presence can be a sign that you trust their ability to put the pieces together in a way that works for them. Because ultimately, they’re the only ones who can.

And when we are in that space, when it’s we who feel lost and alone, when it is we who are rushing to put the vase of our lives back just the way it used to be, trying to convince ourselves we’re fine, I wonder if the answer is not the same.

A gentle trust in ourselves. In \*our\* ability to sort through the pieces and create something new, in time. A trust that we are fundamentally okay, no matter what just happened. Even as it feels how it feels. Even as we reach for connection with others who can listen. With others who can help. Even as we reach for connection with the simple goodness that is always part of life.

I read a story of a Tibetan Buddhist nun who, years ago, was interviewed after a long imprisonment by the Chinese government. A reporter asked her how she had survived [all those] years in solitary confinement. She replied, “I knew that, at every moment, somewhere in the world, someone was saying metta for me.” In every moment, she imagined, someone was holding her in their hearts. [[3]](#footnote-3) Reminding her, she is not alone. Not beyond love, as the poet wrote.

One of the most powerful tools I learned from Pema Chodron, our iconic rock thrower from the beginning of this sermon, is a way of using our imaginations to stay balanced, work with heavy feelings, remind ourselves we are not alone. Breathe in the dark, she said, and breathe out the light. Breathe in as you allow yourself to experience your disappointment, your disillusionment, your loneliness, your fear, then breathe out light not just for yourself, but for all the other beings who are feeling that same thing too. Breathe in the pain of your mistakes or those of others, and breathe out sunshine and bird song and fireplaces and fresh bread, for yourself and all beings who are in that same pain. Soon, you will know, you are not alone.

One of Pema’s teachers said to her once – please keep working with negative feelings, hard emotions, you will be such an inspiration for others.

We, too, can move from a story of defeat and isolation to one of courage and connection, maybe \*even\* inspiration, one breath at a time.

Letting go, again and again of our thoughts. Letting go of what we thought was immutable, and learning that reality is bigger, always bigger than our limited minds can grasp.

When our stories break, when the pieces no longer fit the way they did, when our feelings are an avalanche of negativity, we don’t have to give in, and we also don’t have to pretend we are just fine.

We **can** breathe consciously, take care of ourselves, we can remember goodness, kindness, fresh bread. Remember we can connect with others, even if only in our heads. We can give ourselves time to grieve even as we keep putting one foot in front of the other, reassembling the pieces, walking a path toward something new.

And the more we practice these habits, the more resilient we become. And the more even old, sometimes long-forgotten traumas, start to work their way out of our system.

Until we start seeing our tomorrows, in a fresh light, day by mindful day.

Amy Purdy, in the TED talk I described earlier, doesn’t go into any detail about what happened in or around her during those hopeless months in bed. She doesn’t share if she had visitors, doesn’t share if she felt alone, doesn’t say what the journey through discouragement looked like for her. We just know she came out the other side.

One day she woke up and had, she said, a flash of insight. About those horrible, metal, bolted legs, which sent her under the covers in the first place. She realized that while they were very much \*not\* hers, that also meant they also could be changed. Swapped out. So while she’d been 5’5, she could now be as tall as she wanted. Or as short, depending on who she was dating.

It meant that she could snowboard without her feet getting cold. And it meant she could make her feet whatever size she wanted to fit any of the shoes on the sales rack.

Clearly, she’d gotten her sense of humor back.

What now? In her turning point moment, she came face to face with this question. If my life were a book, and I were the author, how would I want things to go next?

What new chapter is opening up for me, now? With this new reality in place?

She researched artificial limbs and feet for a year and, not finding any that would work for snowboarding, built her own pair. Through her efforts, ingenuity and persistence, she ultimately won 2 back to back world cup snowboarding medals – becoming the highest ranked adaptive snowboarder in the world. She ultimately founded a non-profit so other young adults with physical disabilities could get involved in active sports, turning her own adversity, into a gift for others.

If you ask me today, if I would ever want to change my situation, I would have to say no, Amy Purdy says, at the end of her talk. Because my legs haven't disabled me, if anything they've enabled me. They've forced me to rely on my imagination and to believe in the possibilities, [...] because in our minds, we can do anything and we can be anything.

As we walk through our dark, we may just find ourselves cleared us out for a life that is, inexplicably, wider, deeper, richer than it was before. We may just find ourselves brought more alive.

And this is also true: as Ram Dass once said “we are all just walking each other home.”

May we accompany each other on the journey as, day by day, we build ourselves anew.

1. <https://all-souls.org/events/sermon-20190203/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.ascboston.org/downloads/publications/Sermons/Sermon_020109.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)