

ONE

THE MANY FACES OF SURVIVAL

“There is also this saying that I’ve often clung to. It goes something like this: those who are tried the most are loved the most. I think it’s from the Bible, and it has often been my consolation.”

– *Virpi*

“What do you think helped you survive a difficult childhood?” was the first question I asked my magazine readers in 1996. No one can ever know for certain, of course, which specific factors helped us survive certain difficulties, but a question inviting us to identify the survival factors can be useful. By pondering on this tantalising question, we can learn about the factors that enable a person to bend but not break.

In Western thinking, children have traditionally been regarded as fragile creatures who may easily be damaged early in their lives. When reading books on developmental psychology, one cannot help feeling that in order to become a mentally healthy individual, a child must have an ideal mother, an attentive father, and at least one brother or sister. But what is the origin of this impossible dream?

Thousands of children orphaned by World War II were placed into children’s homes where they lived in miserable conditions. The children were properly fed, but no one took

care of their needs for nurture and affection. Doctors observed that many of them became apathetic and started to waste away. Some of them died for no obvious medical reason. Child psychiatrist Renée Spitz investigated the phenomenon and started to call it 'anaclitic depression', arguing that the selective disturbance was due to maternal deprivation, i.e. separation of the child from its mother. Thus she laid the foundation for a doctrine that has governed Western psychology for years. According to Spitz, separation from one's mother is dangerous and destructive for a child's development.

Spitz was wrong. Anaclitic depression did not occur because a child became separated from its mother but because of the lack of care, nurture and affection which could have been provided by a substitute care giver. There were simply too many orphans after the war and the children's homes were too short-staffed to take proper care of each child's need for love and nurture. The human child is a survivor! A child can survive losses but without care, nurturing and affection a young human being will suffer in the same way as young animals who lose their mothers and receive no nursing from another animal, not even a member of another species. Rhesus monkeys fall ill if they are separated from their mothers when they are small and placed in a cage where their 'mother' is an iron contraption with two baby bottles attached to it. They start to behave in a grossly deviant manner or they die of infections and complications. Nourishment is not a sufficient prerequisite for monkeys and their human counterparts to survive. We are also dependent on interaction and touch.

Spitz's concept of anaclitic depression became a dominant doctrine of child psychiatry and from there it gradually found its way into our everyday thinking. We started to believe that

the studies had ‘shown’ that separating a small child from its mother is always detrimental to the child’s development. It did not, however, occur to us that nowadays children in similar situations are not usually placed in crowded institutions, but are fostered by someone who loves and cares about the child. No one, perhaps, can ever fully replace a natural mother, but whatever the other person may provide by way of caring and nurturing may well be adequate to ensure the normal development and growth of the child. Our lives do not turn on a single roll of the dice; orphans ,after all, turn into normal and happy people.

Other People

The fact that a child’s parents may for whatever reason be unable to provide the child with a given experience may not be as critical to its development as we have been accustomed to think because the child will often have a chance to experience something similar in relationships with other people. A woman called Maarit writes to us about her mother, who suffered from long-term depression and could not become interested in her children’s activities. But many other people who were important to Maarit and cared about her entered her life, such as her grandmother, a brother who was five years older, her godmother, her best friend’s mother and three pen pals.

In psychology, the question of what helps people survive a difficult childhood has generated the concept of ‘protective factors’. Researchers have tried to define which factors may protect a child from the negative influences of detrimental circumstances. No definitive explanation has yet been found, but researchers are in relative agreement that one protective factor is a good relationship with a person whom the child

considers important.

If, for whatever reason, one parent of a child is unable to show affection, the child may form a close relationship with the other parent. If neither parent is able to fulfil this bond, children appear to have an interesting ability to identify and connect with substitute parental figures, through whom they can acquire experiences that their biological parents were unable to provide, if they are fortunate to select appropriate adults who do not exploit this vulnerability and neediness.

Aila, for example, grew up in a family of diplomats who travelled extensively and had little time for their children. If Aila had made out a list of all those benefits she missed out on in her relationship with her parents, she could have filled an exercise book. However, she was a good-natured child whom everyone liked and, as luck would have it, she had two godmothers, with whom she had warm and close relationships, a friendly violin teacher and two governesses who continued to be very important to her as an adult.

Aila is no exception. People who have little chance of getting what they want from one relationship are usually able to find what they need from another person. Father can substitute for mother and mother can substitute for father. Grandparents and other relatives are often able to love, admire and listen to a child when, for some reason, the biological parents cannot provide such love and attention.

“I had and I still have an extremely sweet godmother,” writes Virpi, whose brother was seriously ill and took all her parents’ attention when she was young. Virpi felt nothing more than a burden to her parents. “My godmother believed in me and I believed in her. Together we shed many tears but she was the one who gave me my happiest childhood memories.”

Adele, an American therapist, shared her own traumatic

childhood memories in an Internet discussion, describing how she found a support family: “I must say that my ‘family of choice’ rather than my ‘family of origin’ has given me wings to fly beyond the limitations of my past. I learned early on to ‘do it different’ and went out and found another ‘family’. This new family provided acceptance, support and unconditional love – all the things I needed to grow as a person. I guess it’s like they helped me put ‘wings’ on my spirit, and since then it hasn’t touched the ground!”

In her letter, Tiina tells how as a little girl she took care of her brothers and sisters because her mother was seriously ill and, in addition, how she had to cope with sexual harassment by her father. “I had a wise teacher at elementary school, she recalls. “She made me recite poems from the first Christmas recital onwards – and I did, with moist eyes, at the spring recital, on Mothers’ Day, and on Independence Day ... Only a couple of years ago did I realise how this helped me gradually turn my shyness into boldness, and my introversion into aspiring optimism.”

One should not underestimate the importance of peers in coping with all this trauma. Many letters emphasised the importance of close relationships with sisters, brothers and friends. Some told about close pen friends with whom they had established confidential relationships. “All over the country I have pen pals who listen to me and support me,” writes a man who uses the pseudonym, “Discouraged as a child, happy as an adult”.

Nature

Potentially vulnerable children do not rely only on other people for emotional support, and as adults they seem to

possess an amazing skill at finding sources of strength from a variety of experiences. Pets, for example, belong to the list of important factors, although one may not always realise their significance at the time.

“We had a dog,” one survivor writes. “I turned from ugly duckling if not into a beautiful swan, at least into a goose. The dog was important for everyone in the family. We didn’t hug each other, but we did hug our dog.”

Dogs, cats and other pets provide countless children with unselfish affection and understanding. Seija writes: “Since I’m very fond of animals and nature, they’ve played an important role in my life. Dogs in particular have won my heart.”

For many people nature has provided a means of survival. The letters I received often emphasised how important the experience of observing and communing with nature had been.

Anna-Liisa, for example, who was ridiculed and cruelly punished both at home and at school, wrote that nature was not only a refuge but also a source of positive experiences for her. “When I was a bit older, I stayed in the forest as long as I could. I loved nature and its different aspects, as well as the change of seasons. All my beautiful childhood memories are connected with nature.”

Many of us recall a special childhood spot, a sunny refuge perhaps, in the garden or out in the wild. It might have been a big rock on the beach or a hill where we liked to think and daydream. Likewise, the heroes and heroines of children’s books often have a special place of refuge for when the going gets tough.

Imagination

People have an uncanny ability to create imaginative experiences that reality cannot offer them. When necessary, children can escape into the world of dreams and imagination as easily as the little girl in Lewis Carroll's *Alice In Wonderland*. In their imaginary safe haven, children can surround themselves with nice friends as well as kind and understanding adults. Authors, actors and other creative artists often explain in their biographies and interviews how they grew up in difficult circumstances. Could it be that during these solitary and perhaps frightening times, their imagination was sparked into action on their behalf in a way that benefited them in later life?

The imagination can help adults as well as troubled children to deal with their problems. People who have survived prison camps, torture or kidnapping often talk about how their imagination helped them maintain their sanity in hellish circumstances. The late Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl described in his books how, while in a concentration camp, he benefited greatly from focusing on the future. He dreamt that one day he would be released and would write a book about his experiences. Based on his own experiences and observations, he developed a popular therapeutic method that he named logotherapy. One of the basic arguments of this approach is that our well-being is to a larger degree dependent on our view of the future than it is on our memories of the past.

Other people have discovered for themselves the beneficial effects of a vivid imagination early in their lives. Satu, now a grandmother of five, had an exceptionally difficult childhood. She says that her ability to escape into an imaginary world was extremely important to her. "As a three year old, I was a great

dreamer. I was certain I was of royal descent, so it was pleasant sitting in the morning sun, touching the dewy grass with my feet and waiting for my prince. It made life seem much more cheerful.”

Terrtu, who felt that her mother hated her and whose father used to grope her, says: “Psychologists have asked me whether I’ve had suicidal thoughts and wondered how I managed without them, but as a child I had a secret imaginary family who loved me and gave me what was missing from my home”.

Lea, whose parents sent her to live with her grandmother in a different part of the country, recalls: “I’ve always had a rather vivid imagination. To my grandmother’s annoyance, I made up games, talked to my reflection in the mirror, learned to read at five, and used to lie on a big rock looking at the clouds, singing aloud and talking to imaginary creatures.”

Likewise Tiina, whose family suffered from alcoholism: “I guess my limitless imagination helped me to keep going. When I felt bad as a child my imagination took me far away. It helps me still and gives me hope when things are bad”.

Reading and Writing

Many respondents mention that keeping a diary or writing journals or poems helped them.

“Writing saved me. As I wasn’t allowed to talk much as a child, I created my own world that I escaped into. There the sun always shone, strawberries grew in the forest, and the waves of the sea gently rocked the boat in which I was hiding. Writing to me is a way out, an outlet, a mental cleaning up, my most loved hobby. When my writing is published, I always feel great joy, the feeling that I could do it.” says Taina, who

suffered serious and regular physical punishment as a child.

This comment by Virpi probably describes what many people feel: “I don’t talk about my feelings to anybody, but I ‘analyse’ them on my own and write a diary. That’s probably why I haven’t ‘lost it’ yet.”

Virpi grew up amidst violence. She saw her mother try to drown her brother, for example, and was with her in the car when her mother deliberately attempted to crash into a lorry. Virpi’s mother attempted suicide five times, her stepfather tried to kill Virpi and her grandfather shot himself.

“I’ve been writing a diary for some twenty years,” says Elisa, “and during that time I’ve felt an intense literary need for it. I also read a lot. It’s probably been the best form of therapy for me because it’s enabled me to concentrate on dealing with myself. It’s been my lifelong dream to publish my autobiography when I’m eighty something, because I’ve really had such a strange life.”

It has been known for a long time that writing has a therapeutic role but only recently has psychotherapy started to use it as a serious treatment. A simple but effective way to use writing as therapy is to ask patients to write a letter that they are not supposed to mail. If patients are bitter at someone whose behaviour has hurt them, for example, a therapist may ask them to write that person a letter. Patients may also choose to reply to their own letter. This kind of “internal correspondence” often helps people distance themselves from past events, making it easier for them to understand those events when they also see other people’s points of view.

Many people with difficult childhoods are avid readers. Some prefer fiction, while others read books on popular psychology. Many consumers of psychology books say that reading these books has greatly helped them. For example, the

author of the number one - best selling pop psychology book on childhood in my own country says that for him encountering the American 'inner child' and 'co-dependency' literature was a life-changing experience: "I devoured it. I felt as if, for the first time, someone had really understood what my life was about. I found an answer to a question that had bothered me my entire life."

Books and films and other forms of culture help people survive by raising difficult questions, touching upon sensitive subjects and showing that feelings and experiences that have seemed extremely private are in fact more common than they think. Books teach people to be tolerant by helping them understand themselves and other people better.

"Books have definitely helped me!" says a woman who calls herself 'Splinter', and who does not recall ever hearing a word of praise as a child. When she tried to tell her mother what she wanted to be when she grew up her mother just said, "I think you'll never amount to anything." This painful memory is typical of Splinter's childhood. "I used to read a lot. Books offered me consolation, taught me to understand and look at things from different viewpoints. Books were a mirror in which I reflected myself all the time. They helped me grow."

Riitta lived in a small house where she had to share a bed with her father, who often sexually abused her during the night. Books meant a lot to her, too. "I read about the upbringing of children, about psychology, and I also read the Bible. However, the Bible didn't help me as did the other books. It only oppressed me. Either I wasn't able to read it in the right way or it isn't well written. Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* made the biggest impression on me at that time. It started my growth. He had survived on pure hope, so I thought to myself I'll be damned if I can't become strong and get me a

kind and reliable man when the time comes. Almost by coincidence I always found the right book, the one I needed at that moment. I started to believe that God would always slip the right book into my hand. And I still believe that.”

Books have also provided many people with the entertainment necessary for them to forget their worries and troubles for a while: “I’ve always been an avid reader,” says Raija, whose parents’ bitter divorce was very difficult for her. “I lived and still live in an imaginary world of books and forget about tedious reality. My ability to forget has been a big factor in my survival. I want to wipe out the tedious things that I feel are too painful to be dug into.”

Other Means

When we start to investigate the protective factors that help people survive, we soon realise that the list is inexhaustible. We have already mentioned other people, pets, nature, imagination, reading and writing, but the list goes on. Many children help themselves by throwing themselves into school work or a hobby such as sport, music, handiwork, games and boy scout or girl guide groups.

“Hobbies took my thoughts away from family problems,” says Juhani, whose childhood coincided with World War II. My mind got a rest and my body felt less tense while I was playing sports. By drawing and painting I must have described my feelings with colours because I felt so relieved afterwards.”

Sari’s letter says: “At school and at college I did fairly well. It helped me internalise the feeling of ‘being a good person.’” Many other people who have suffered difficult circumstances, but still succeed in life, probably feel the same.

Many who have undergone a difficult childhood say that

they were forced to stand on their own two feet and take responsibility for their lives at an early age. Some saved themselves by fleeing the nest when still young.

Markku recalls: “My father beat me all through my childhood. The last time he gave me a thrashing with a leather strap he was taking his heart medicine and cursing about how he’d give up the ghost because of me. As soon as school was over I ran away from home.”

Certain characteristics and attitudes have proved useful in difficult circumstances. Being strong-willed, stubborn and goal-oriented, for example, can be extremely useful. Many respondents said that early on they wanted to show others that they could manage, which also helped them survive.

Ritva, for example, who lost her parents when young and whose foster mother often beat her, believes that her persistence and stubbornness helped her get where she is today. Paula believes that her survival is explained by her strong will. “I’ve always known what I wanted and tried to achieve my goals despite difficulties. My former boss once said, on giving me a new assignment, that he knew I’d stick to the job by clinging to it by my fingernails if necessary.”

Iris used to wet her bed as a child and was often teased about it. Gradually she found a way to respond to it, which gave her strength. “For example, they might put snow in a basin and make me sit on it without my panties. Then all my younger brothers and sisters were told to gather around me to watch ‘the pig in the family’, ‘piss-pants’ – I had plenty of names. Or they might spread my bed sheets in a spot where the whole village could see what kind of a pig we had in the house. When I was accepted into secretarial college my mother said to me: ‘What do you think you’re going to do there, you can’t even type with those big hands of yours.’ I was deter-

mined to show them, and later even won a prize at the national typing championships.”

Jaakko, a venerable 84-year-old, fought in three different wars. He is married with four children, ten grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren. He was abandoned as a child, and remembers: “I didn’t have a home or any relatives, so the authorities put me up for auction, and I went to the lowest bidder. At school everyone called me ‘public parasite’. I decided to work my guts out as an adult and show everyone I could manage on my own. And now it feels good to look back on the old times. There’s enough there to write a book. I’ve worked hard all my life and now I’m satisfied with my life.”

I am convinced that humour plays a larger role in human survival than we imagine. Many people say in their letters that humour is an important means of survival for them but they don’t really explain how they use it. This is understandable: writing about dark humour is difficult. We feel greatly relieved if we get a chance to laugh at the painful experiences of the past with our brothers and sisters, for example, but these are private jokes which outsiders are not expected to understand.

When people are able to laugh at their own fate and see it in a tragi-comic rather than exclusively tragic light, they are freed from the shackles of the past. Through the ages people have joked about serious subjects and used black humour to counter their misfortunes. In Steven Spielberg’s film, *Schindler’s List*, which deals with the Holocaust, there is a scene in which a group of Jews stand in a circle in the dismal yard of the concentration camp telling each other jokes about life in the camp. The use of humour in that scene may have perplexed the audience, but for the people in the camp, joking this way was clearly an important means of daily survival.

As I acquainted myself with some of the literature on crisis

therapy, catastrophe psychology and debriefing, I noticed that experts rarely present humour as a noteworthy or useful means of recovery. The man in the street, however, knows that finding the funny side is often the most effective way of overcoming a painful situation.

Taina sheds light on this approach when she recalls how she used to use humour to help herself and her children cope with her husband's alcoholism and violent behaviour. "I remember days when the kids and I were feeling low and worried about something. I sometimes went and danced in front of the big mirrors in our house. I jumped and made funny moves until it was absolutely impossible to go on. I also told the kids 'crazy' stories and together we did all kinds of funny stuff. These were our survival tactics. Although my kids are grown up now, they sometimes ask me to dance in front of the mirror and usually I do."

One shouldn't underestimate the role of religion in survival either. Countless people with difficult childhoods have reported that religious belief has given them faith and strength. Religion also provides friends with whom to talk about private matters, which some people would never discuss with professional helpers.

I have not placed much emphasis in this book on psychotherapy and psychological help in dealing with survival but this doesn't mean I do not respect the role of professional help. I just want to underline the fact that many other means of surviving exist and that survivors have discovered these on their own. Let's conclude by reading what 'Suffered but Survived' said about the important role of therapy in survival: "I had to deal with incest during my whole childhood. My mother caught my brother and me red-handed when I was 11, called me a whore and gave me a beating. My period was

always strong but when I went to work it disappeared altogether. I was overstrained and put into a mental institution to get hormonal treatment, but I didn't dare tell them about my childhood. Afterwards I got married but it was childless, and ended in infidelity on his part. I was flat broke, living on social security, and suffering from insomnia. I did sheltered work and also helped at a home in the countryside until a couple of years ago when my whole life changed. I told a psychologist about my traumatic experiences. They cut down my medication and I got my period back. My relationship to men changed for the better and I became more energetic. At fifty I'm having the time of my life. I still can't understand why my mother thought I was to blame. However, my relationship to my mother is OK now. My childhood taught me to cope with the hardships of life but it also taught me not to keep things back. There's always someone who'll understand. Now my life is filled with work and love. It's as if I was finally walking on the sunny side of the street and enjoying every moment in this beautiful country. Instead of being bitter, I'm humble and thankful."

The question of what has helped us survive "in spite of everything" or "even this well", can be helpful in itself. As one of the letters says: "Someone should have asked that question earlier in my life because when thinking about the answer I noticed how many strengths I actually had."