
NARRATIVES, RELIGION, AND TRAUMATIC LIFE EVENTS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the growing sociological interest in resilience by using a virtue ethics framework to examine distinct ways young adults respond to stressful life events. Based on interviews with 26 young adults in nine U.S. states, I argue that resilience differs from coping. Coping implies people have mitigated the negative effects of a traumatic event. I define resilience as a dynamic process oriented toward a telos that encompasses both personal wellbeing and contribution to the common good. Although we know that strong interpersonal, community and spiritual ties support resilience, many of the young adults I interviewed had few strong social connections of any kind. Few of the 26 young adults I interviewed were religious in traditional ways. Those few young adults who attended services weekly and received social support from their religious congregations experienced high levels of wellbeing despite experiencing many hardships. Even among those who are not religious in traditional ways, nearly all of them ask moral questions about meaning and purpose. Studies of resilience should thus consider both

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individual and social factors that lead to or inhibit experiencing growth after a traumatic event.

Introduction

Why are some people resilient in the face of hardships, but others fall into chronic dysfunction? Is coping with hardship the same as resilience? How do religious beliefs, practices, and narratives influence resilience among young adults who have had traumatic life experiences? To understand these questions, I interviewed 26 young adults in nine different states. All of them had undergone traumatic life events, but the following three narratives demonstrate the diverse paths people follow in the wake of hardships. Laura's narrative is one of ongoing suffering and chronic dysfunction. Alex has overcome many hardships, but still lacks a clear path toward socioeconomic and personal stability. James is not only personally successful, but also gives back to his community in various ways. Although much research focuses on how people mitigate the negative effects of traumatic events, these three narratives illustrate how experiencing traumatic events leads people to reflect on larger goals, purpose, and meaning. These narratives also illustrate how social contexts and relationships that can alleviate or magnify the effects of stressful events. I argue that we must first distinguish between mitigating the negative effects of stress, understood as coping with hardship, and resilience, understood as a process that entails purposeful motion toward a goal. Understanding resilience as a process then leads us beyond isolating how particular religious beliefs or behaviors affect responses to stress. I focus on narratives through which people understand their trauma and define a sense of meaning and purpose.

Narrative Summaries

Laura: White, 26, from the South. She hopes there is a finish line to her pain.

Laura's life story is a long narrative of pain. She was bullied for being obese as a child, became pregnant at age 15, and dropped out of high school. Laura's baby brought her happiness she had never known. One day at work, she received a phone call telling

her to rush home. Her baby had walked into the backyard of her house and fallen into a small pond. When Laura reached home, police and paramedics had surrounded her house and her baby was clinging to life. Laura prayed incessantly to God to save her baby's life, even if her baby would end up brain-damaged. When her baby died a few hours later, even the doctors cried and asked, "Why?" Laura said, "I felt like I was left in the dark, like there's no light at the end of the tunnel."¹ As she told me this story, I shivered. Laura experienced darkness so profound that most people would hope and pray to never end up in her situation.

Laura never had close relationships growing up, and her baby's death tore even deeper into her weak relationships with her mom, dad, brother, and the baby's father. When I met her five years after her baby's death, Laura had two more children, one with the father of her first child and one with another man. Although her deceased baby's father started abusing drugs and alcohol, and abuses Laura emotionally, physically, and sexually, she still lives with him. She fears him most of the time, so she practices Wicca to try to expel the demons in his soul demons that speak to her while he sleeps. Laura definitely believes in some kind of higher power, but the problem is that he is not "100 percent there." In some situations, such as when Laura's boyfriend took her with him to get drugs, Laura asked God to keep her safe, and he protected her. But when her baby was dying, God did not show up to help her. Laura's memory of God abandoning her at her darkest moment continues to haunt her.

To ease her emotional pain, to calm her nerves, and to not cry all day, Laura used to smoke marijuana two or three times daily. Since being arrested for drug possession, however, she has stopped smoking marijuana. Instead, Laura began taking four mental health medications to calm her nerves, balance out her moods, and simply enable her to function. When I met her at a coffee shop in the South, her voice was quiet, her diction slurred, and her eyes glassed over. "She's not all there," I scribbled in my notes. I could feel in my body that Laura's pain was so deep and her medication so heavy that her full self was buried somewhere.

¹ Quotation marks indicate direct quotations from interview transcripts.

Laura works full-time at a low-wage job. Her hopes focus on taking care of her two children. “I’m stuck,” Laura said. But she believes that she can help her children avoid the same pain she experiences. Sometimes when her children see her crying, they ask, “Mommy, you okay?” Her voice shook when she looked at me and told me that she replies, “Mommy loves you forever no matter what.” For the sake of her kids, Laura wants to “get on track and do good.” She prays there will be a finish line to her pain. After the interview was over, I leaned over, hugged tightly Laura’s small frame, and blabbered five times, “I’m so sorry for your pain. I really hope there is a finish line soon.”

Alex: 25, African-American, from the South. His mother wishes he were dead.

Alex, who I met at a Starbucks in another small town in the South, started off our interview eagerly telling me about his great love for his girlfriend and his faith in God. But his optimism for his future was punctuated by stories of past drug use that led him to overdose twice. Alex also has an extensive criminal record. Starting at age 10, he was diagnosed with a long list of mental illnesses, including ADD, ADHD, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. He lamented his lack of a “sturdy foundation” at home as the reason he became a “hell-raiser.” Alex never knew the identity of his father. He adores his grandmother, but stole from her to support his drug habit. He has always lived with his brother, but since Alex chased him around the yard and tried to stab him with a butcher’s knife, his brother will not speak to him.

The love Alex feels from God, his girlfriend, and his grandmother contrasted with everyone else he spoke about, especially his mother. His mother told him so frequently that she wished he were dead that one day Alex went to his friend’s house, got “one of his 38 specials,” took out the ammunition and returned home. Standing in the kitchen in front of his mother, Alex put the gun to his head and threatened to commit suicide. His mother said she would be so happy if he killed himself that she would throw a party and serve cake to all who came. Alex put the gun down, but he knows his mother really does wish that he were dead. I sank in my seat as Alex’s speech slowed and his eyes wandered up to the

ceiling as he pondered his painful relationship with his mother, exemplified by her urging him to commit suicide.

After about 10 years of heavy substance abuse and constant trouble with the police, Alex reached a turning point when his friend overdosed from heroin and died in his arms. Alex is now substance-free; he even stopped taking mental health medications and pain pills. He has not experienced his previous symptoms of bipolar disorder or schizophrenia despite stopping medications. Alex's goals are to go to community college, earn a degree, get a stable job, marry his girlfriend, and raise a family that could be proud of him. Alex actively seeks good people to guide him, such as his girlfriend and his pastor, and has turned away from a troubled lifestyle to a more normal one. But what will his life look like in the future? Will his desires become a reality?

Alex feels lucky because he is not "in the ground or locked away somewhere for the rest of my life." Alex also had recently returned to the Baptist faith of his childhood. He firmly believes that God will turn his life around, but things are moving slowly. Real change will only come in God's time, he said. Alex sees small signs that God is working in his life, like when his friend's little sister one day simply looked at him and told him everything will be okay. Alex knows he just needs to be patient, build strong relationships, and stay out of drugs and out of trouble. He can see the path to follow.

But Alex's narrative illustrates how even the path to resilience is not always a straight line. Alex said he quit all substances, but then he admitted that he and a friend drank a case of beer the night before I met him. When he arrived to meet me, he was eager to describe his high hopes for his future, but his bloodshot eyes were a haunting reminder of his past. Alex knows that getting a good job and getting married will provide him the stability he lacked in his own childhood, but his past criminal record may be an obstacle to getting a good job and his relationship has yet to stand the test of time.

James: 27, White, from the West. He wears his disabilities like a badge of honor.

How does someone who could not read until age 14 become a "book nerd"? How does someone with Asperger's syndrome

become a millionaire philanthropist by age 27? When I met James in a large independent bookstore in a booming metropolitan city out West, I recalled the saying that there is more to a book than its cover. James looks like a typical book browser. He is about six-foot-one, wears glasses, and met me wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. James was so clearly bright, successful, and confident that I wondered how he ended up in my sample of people with traumatic life events. I interrupted his cheerful narrative to ask about his childhood. He then revealed a long struggle with dyslexia, depression, bullying, social isolation, and even coming close to death at age 14.

There are three key relationships in James's life that helped him move forward. First is his mother, whom he described as a "helicopter parent mom" who never gave up on him. When others thought he was stupid and could not learn, she kept looking for better tutors. When he nearly died from a disease that inflamed all his organs, his brother and father avoided him like the plague, but his mother nursed him back from near death. Second is his high school science teacher. James attended a \$40,000-a-year prep school that sends most of its graduates to elite colleges. Although many of his peers bullied and made fun of him, his high school science teacher invited him to her house and taught him chemistry by teaching hands-on learning through cooking and baking. Tears welled up in his eyes as he said, "She changed my life!" Third is a Tibetan Buddhist teacher James met during college who taught him how to deal with his anger. At college, James was finally doing well academically, but still struggled socially. With the help of his Buddhist teacher, James forgave his emotionally distant father. He found peace with his dyslexic brain and unique way of socializing. James's personality and intelligence may not make sense to others, but now he wears his disabilities "like a badge of honor." He still struggles to make close friends, but he no longer feels hostility toward those who reject him. He also now has a group of friends—most of whom also have autism or Asperger's syndrome—who understand and appreciate him.

James was raised nominally Christian, but when he nearly died at age 14, he questioned how a good God could let him suffer so much. James rejected simplistic explanations people gave him, such as "God works in mysterious ways." James was angry with

God, but didn't give up his belief in a higher power. A friend's father, a Jewish Rabbi, encouraged James to explore his anger with God. James's mother encouraged him to read books on every world religion. But it was the personal relationship with his Buddhist teacher, their long talks about his painful experiences, and being trained to meditate with others or alone in the mountains that transformed James. He continues to read about different spiritual masters, but he is clear that he's looking for "wisdom" on how to lead a good life rather than worshiping anyone. Because of his various mix of beliefs, James considers himself a "secular humanist Buddhist." He takes his Buddhist practice very seriously—meditating every day for an hour. His strong mentoring and close relationship with his Buddhist teacher allowed James him to stop taking depression medication and slowly but surely develop better friendships. His daily meditation keeps him on the right path.

James learned to use his dyslexia to analyze data for companies and advise them on how to invest. He has been so successful in investments that his net worth at the time was \$2.5 million dollars. Even though he could have made even more money, he turned down several projects from companies that were not environmentally or community friendly. James lives in a simple apartment with a roommate and hardly spends money on himself. The previous year he earned \$100,000 and gave \$22,000 to community organizations that help youth facing the same types of hardships that he did. Looking to the future, James would like to get married, but finds it difficult to develop close relationships with women. He dated one woman seriously, but after she moved her interest in him waned. Despite his lack of romantic relationships, James is extremely proud of the long journey he has made. "I've gone from the outsider to the one in the middle of things that everyone thinks is something else," he said. James feels a strong sense of duty to help others through his ideas and through financial investments. "With great powers comes great responsibility," he explained. His life goal is to pay back three or four times the blessings he has received.

Narratives and Resilience

Laura, Alex, and James were three of 26 young adults that I interviewed for this study. Before presenting more interview

narratives, I will argue that seeing humans as purpose-oriented moves beyond asking questions about coping or recovery and leads us to ask about resilience, understood as purposeful action toward a *telos*. In part due to the influence of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, the concept of *telos* is slowly making its way back into American sociology. For Aristotle, personal virtue was closely linked to a virtuous society. But understanding how such virtuous communities emerge and flourish has not been a central concern of sociologists, who more often examine society through a functionalist or a utilitarian lens (Gorski 2012; Smith 2003, 2010).

Incorporating insights from virtue ethics provides powerful analytical tools to examine the relationship between personal good and the common good (Mooney 2014). In *After Virtue*, moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre critiques much social theory for its lack of attention to human purpose or excellence. He argues that institutions or communities are more than a means through which individuals pursue “their own self-chosen conception of the good life” (MacIntyre 2007 [1981]:195). For MacIntyre, relationships and communities are not a utilitarian means to achieve individual goods, nor do relationships and communities simply establish rules for people to follow. Rather, relationships and communities both define the goods of excellence people seek and also provide the contexts and practices to sustain virtues.

MacIntyre further argues that social science cannot describe social facts or individual behaviors apart from some concept of the motivations behind those behaviors and the specific settings—both institutions and practices—where human behavior occurs. Understanding human motivations requires identifying a *telos* of a human life as told through narratives. It is only with regard to a *telos* that we can understand narratives and evaluate the purpose of a life, as well as the progress, or lack thereof, toward that purpose (MacIntyre 2007 [1981]:215-216).

Narratives are a powerful way to understand how stressful events are experienced. Narratives allow us to see not only momentary actions, but also to explore how actions are linked across time. In addition, narratives reveal which aspects of the cultural or social context become meaningful in a particular person’s story. The narratives I present illustrate that relationships are key to resilience—no one gets unstuck alone. But relationships

that are embedded in religious practices and communities that link personal narratives to larger narratives are particularly powerful at promoting resilience, understood as purposeful action toward a *telos*.

Resilience and Personal Growth

The growing interest in adult resilience is part of a broader shift in psychology from the disease model of health, which focuses on preventing bad outcomes, to the growth model of health, which focuses on promoting good health outcomes, even after stressful or traumatic events. Psychologists Zautra, Hall, and Murray define resilience as “successful adaptation to adversity” (2010:4). They further distinguish between recovery, or bouncing back from hardship, and sustainability, which requires “continuing forward in the face of hardship” (Zautra, Hall, and Murray 2010:4). Recently, psychologists have begun to examine cases where personal growth occurs after trauma (Bonanno 2009; Calhoun and Tedeschi 2013; Seilgman 2011).

George Bonanno (2009) argues that chronic dysfunction, understood as prolonged suffering and an inability to function that endures for several years, is less common than assumed. The reason chronic dysfunction is not as common as often assumed is that adversity can cause people to develop new capacities that they would not have otherwise. Similarly, Zautra, Hall, and Murray write, “when people reach and go beyond their capacities to cope with events, we observe not simply a change in levels of cognition, affect, and behavior, but also a change in the nature of relationships among these core elements of the human response” (2010:6). We need to look not only at how responses to adversity affect one element of the person—such as his or her emotions—but also at how adversity influences the relationship between various parts of the person, such as the relationship between emotions and behavior. Events that cause stress or challenge a person or community’s capacity to respond can influence their goals. In response to risk exposure and adversity, people can set new goals and develop new capacities. Understanding resilience requires not just focusing on coping strategies that mitigate risk or solve problems, but also enabling people to reach their highest capacities, even if they have been exposed to risk or harm.

Is resilience just another psychological character trait that some people have and others do not? It would be tempting to define resilient people as psychological super-heroes with strong wills or amazing emotional control who can seemingly deal with any problem. But research in cognitive neuroscience (Fredrickson 2013) has shown that even very small acts, such as smiling at someone or saying a kind word, can produce cognitive and emotional benefits. Hence, I agree with Zautra, Hall and Murray that “it is important not to overstate the amount of psychological muscle it might take to be resilient. Resilient actions often start just with a smile or a moment for reflection that welcomes a broader perspective and encourages a thoughtful optimism about events” (2010:10).

Many studies of stressful life events focus on a particular outcome, such as socioeconomic achievement or psychological wellbeing. Rather than focusing on particular outcomes, Zautra, Hall, and Murray argue that we need to understand resilience as a process. Sustainability requires making plans and choices. First, it is important to distinguish recovery from a stressful event from sustainability, as sustainability entails purpose-oriented, forward motion toward a goal. Hence, I define resilience as purpose-oriented, sustained movement toward a goal following stressful life events. Understanding resilience asks how people define meaning and purpose in life while examining their behaviors in relation to those goals.

Resilience and the Social Context

Looking at resilience as a process also requires examining how it is influenced by social context, including the religious context. A few sociologists have contributed to understanding contextual factors that influence resilience. In both *Children of the Great Depression* (1974) and *Children of the Land* (2000), Glen Elder combines history, psychology, and sociology to examine individual variation within communities affected by similar changes, namely the Great Depression of the 1930s and the decline of the rural farming economy in the 1980s. Although both studies focus on socioeconomic change as the primary risk factor to wellbeing, Elder’s understanding of successful adaptation to risk includes outcomes such as positive values, strong families, and investment

in community institutions. Elder further challenges the common idea that socioeconomic risk early in life always leads to bad outcomes and that socioeconomic advantage early in life always leads to good outcomes: “*Life trajectories are by no means solely determined by socioeconomic disadvantage and subsequent misfortune*” (Elder and Conger 2000:230). In Elder and Conger’s study, a large number of young people from disadvantaged circumstances ended up doing better than one would have predicted based on their backgrounds (2000:230). Elder and Conger also find that either due to lack of motivation or because of risky behaviors, people can lose the advantages they are born into. Family relationships, community resources, and religious communities are all key factors in overcoming disadvantage. Elder’s work hence defines risk as residing in macro-level circumstances, and he calls our attention to the closest relationships people have in family, community, and religious institutions as the primary sources of resilience. In particular, he finds that lives characterized by “strong bonds across the generations, a community investment in church, school, and civic groups, and a culture of industry, civic responsibility, and care for secondary schools” contribute to overcoming socioeconomic disadvantage (Elder and Conger 2000:249).

Robert Wuthnow’s (2014) work on social resilience in rural America echoes many of Elder’s findings. Over time, macro-structural changes such as the decline of the rural economy, which is related to population declines in many rural areas, have changed the landscape of rural America. However, Wuthnow argues that the story of rural America is neither linear nor uniform. Some communities experienced decline, but then bounced back. Wuthnow defines resilience as comprising economic resources such as schools, but also intangible goods such as social networks and civic engagement. Importantly, Wuthnow points out that leaders who have foresight about what their communities need and who build strong personal relationships with their community members are key to igniting economic revival. Compared to urban areas, in rural areas, such close relationships are buffered by proximity, time spent together, and participation in religious and community organizations, thereby often enabling resilience.

Hall and Lamont use the term social resilience “to denote an outcome in which the members of a group sustain their well-being in the face of challenges to it” (Hall and Lamont 2013:13). Echoing the move in psychology away from the disease model and toward a holistic view of wellbeing, Hall and Lamont define wellbeing as having various dimensions, including physical and psychological health, economic stability, and recognition of one’s identity in a particular community.

Elder, Wuthnow, Hall, and Lamont all concur on the importance of community institutions to resilience. In particular, Elder and Wuthnow point to strong impacts of religious communities on resilience, especially in low-income and rural areas. Although young adults today may maintain some type of personal belief system, few are active in religious congregations. According to the General Social Survey (GSS), only 5.1 percent of the U.S. population claimed no religious preference in 1972, and only 16.5 percent did by 2010. In his review of data from the GSS and the National Congregations Study, Mark Chaves concludes that even if church attendance has remained steadily at about one-third of the U.S. population since the 1970s, nearly every other indicator of traditional religious beliefs has declined (2012). Previous work using the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) found similarly low levels of formal religious involvement and weak denominational affiliation alongside diverse types of private practice (Smith 2011; Smith and Denton 2005; Smith and Snell 2009).

Resilience, Coping, and Chronic Dysfunction

Table 1 provides a heuristic tool to understand the process of resilience. First, understanding resilience requires examining how the intentions and actions of a particular moment do or do not contribute to a unity of life oriented toward a particular purpose or intention. Only with regard to a *telos* can we understand narratives and evaluate the purpose of a life, as well as the progress or lack thereof toward that purpose. The concept of *telos* allows us to distinguish two processes that are often conflated: resilience and coping. Coping implies stasis, a state of standing still, rather than forward motion. In addition, the very language of coping implies a vision of the person solving practical problems as they arise in the

moment. However, this pragmatist approach to responses to stress excludes how people reflect on higher purposes and define ultimate concerns. By defining resilience as a *telos*, we can also see how chronic dysfunction occurs in cases where ongoing suffering prevents forward motion.

Table 1. Resilience, Coping, and Chronic Dysfunction

	Resilience	Coping	Chronic Dysfunction
<i>Telos</i>	Forward motion	Statis	Ongoing negative effects of suffering
PERMA	High on all	High on some	Low on all
Virtue Ethics	Coherent values and actions	Articulate values but inconsistent actions	Incoherent values and actions
Common Good	Socially engaged and generous	Uninvolved socially and distant from others	Isolated and/or addicted to legal or illegal substances

Second, positive psychologist Martin Seligman argues that authentic wellbeing is a multidimensional construct with given constitutive elements that cannot be reduced to one another: positive emotions, engagement, strong relationships, meaning, and achievement, or PERMA (Seligman 2011:16–20). Although Seligman revised his earlier theory of wellbeing to include relationships, most empirical work from positive psychology still focuses on individuals or small groups, not communities or larger groups. Hence, rather than assigning personal wellbeing to one single construct—such as positive emotions or life satisfaction—Seligman’s PERMA construct calls our attention to five separate dimensions of wellbeing that should each be analyzed separately. Persons can be high on all, high on some, or low on all aspects of PERMA.

Third, a virtue ethics framework urges us to examine both behaviors and motivations. Resilience requires coherence between values and actions. Some people may have articulate values but inconsistent actions, and others may struggle to articulate purposeful goals. Fourth, many accounts of wellbeing focus on individual goods, overlooking that the Aristotelian concept of *telos* points our attention to the interdependence of the personal good

and the common good. Resilient people view their personal good as interdependent with the good of others, including not just relatives but also their wider communities. Some people may have a few close relationships but little engagement outside of their immediate family or friendships. Finally, others may be socially isolated or addicted to legal or illegal substances, thereby making no contributions to the common good, and possibly harming the common good.

Table 1 can help us understand the narratives of Laura, Alex, and James. Laura is a case of chronic dysfunction. In her own words, Laura is “stuck.” The high point of her life was when her baby was born. At that time, she and the baby’s father had good jobs and numerous happy moments. Since her baby’s death, her life has spiraled downward. She does not trust anyone, not even family members or her inner circle of friends. Her relationship with her boyfriend is abusive. She repeatedly named him as an obstacle to her own growth. Laura lives largely moment to moment, trying to survive. She has little vision of a long-term plan to move forward. She is socially isolated. She used to be dependent on marijuana to get through the day; now she takes four prescribed mental health medications. Laura is low on all the elements of PERMA. However, she is employed and feels valued at work. Her hopes for progress lie in becoming more successful at work.

Alex is coping. For the first time in more than a decade, his life has reached equilibrium. He has recovered from mental illness and left behind most drugs and alcohol. He has regular daily habits, such as reading the Bible, and has a close relationship with his girlfriend whom he talks to every day. Alex’s major obstacles toward progress are education and work. He has had odd jobs on and off but has not been steadily employed in several years. He hopes to begin studying at the local community college and get a job. Alex has articulated goals, but his behaviors are inconsistent. He started going back to church, but does not necessarily go every week. He has quit most drugs and drinking, but admitted that he drank with a friend who showed up with a case of beer the night before I met him. Alex is high on some, but not all, elements of PERMA. He experiences many positive emotions, and has a strong sense of meaning grounded in his faith. But Alex is notably low on

the achievement dimension of PERMA. He has lacked stability in relationships, and is seeking to repair that.

James is resilient. He went through emotional, physical and spiritual recovery during college and is now thriving. His relationship with his mother was always strong. Recently, his relationships with his father and brother have improved—he has forgiven them for hurting him and spends more time with them. James has an articulate set of values that guide his choices about work. He has a close group of friends and daily habits of meditation that sustain his psychological wellbeing. His greatest goal in life is to give back to others, and he gives a large part of his income and much of his time to help others through various community organizations. James is high on all levels of PERMA. Even so, he hopes to develop even stronger personal relationships in the future, especially a romantic relationship with a woman.

Methods

Interviewee Selection and Characteristics

Because I was interested in understanding the variety of ways that religion influences resilience, I analyzed survey data from the NSYR and interviewed 26 youth who reported high levels of hardship and varying levels of resilience. NSYR was designed as a nationally representative sample of 3,370 youth who were recruited via a random-digit-dialing telephone survey method. The first survey was conducted in 2002, when youth were ages 13 to 17. The initial survey asked extensive questions about friendships, social behaviors, religious beliefs, and relationships with parents. The demographic characteristics of NSYR respondents are similar to other major surveys of adolescents in the U.S., such as Monitoring the Future, the National Household Education Survey, and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Because teenage years are a time of many transitions, NSYR conducted a second round of phone interviews when the youth were ages 16 to 21, and a third round when they were ages 18 to 23. Following each telephone survey, NSYR researchers selected a few hundred youth for in-person interviews as well. A fourth and

final wave of follow-up surveys of all respondents began in January 2013, when the respondents were in their mid to late 20s.²

In July 2013, the research team obtained a preliminary dataset of 1,800 respondents to the fourth wave of NSYR. Our goal was to identify people who had experienced traumatic events, and identify some who seemed resilient and some who did not, and then interview them in person. We used the fourth-wave NSYR survey instrument questions on stressful life events (3 indicators), and two measures of resilience: psychological wellbeing (14 indicators) and altruistic behavior (3 indicators).³ Because NSYR is a national sample of young adults, I was able to interview young adults from various religious backgrounds, beliefs, and practices.

As personal religious beliefs and practices are influenced by one's social context, I chose to interview young adults in three regions—the South, the Northeast, and the West—which vary in terms of the dominant religious culture. I contacted 30 people, of and 26 agreed to be interviewed. I traveled to nine different states to meet each interviewee in his or her hometown. In order to protect the confidentiality of the respondents, I cannot disclose the exact locations of the interviews. Most respondents replied to my first attempt to contact them. I called, emailed, and/or texted up to a total of four times before I stopped contact attempts. Of those who agreed to be interviewed, all of them completed their interviews. I paid each respondent \$110 for his or her time. In a few instances, when the respondent agreed to the interview but hesitated to confirm a specific date, I increased the amount to \$125.

NSYR data provided detailed information on the religious lives of the young adults. Because I wanted to interview youth from a variety of religious backgrounds and levels of practice, I did not choose interviewees based on how religious they were. However, during each interview I had a contact sheet in front of me that listed each interviewee's basic demographic information and his or her fourth-wave NSYR responses to questions on religion, hardship, psychological wellbeing, and altruism. Table 2 summarizes the interviewees' characteristics.

² For more information on NSYR research design, visit <http://www.youthandreligion.org/research>.

³ Further information on how we selected interviewees is available upon request.

Table 2. Interviewee Characteristics

Characteristic	N = 26
Race	
Black	6
White	20
Gender	
Female	11
Male	15
Psychological Wellbeing & Altruism	
Low	16
High	10
Location	
South	15
West	7
Northeast	4
Belief in God	
Believes in God	16
Not sure	5
Does not believe in God	5
Church Attendance	
Attends church	5
Does not attend church	21
Religion	
Protestant	7
Catholic	1
Other	2
No denomination	16

Interview Structure

I met all interviewees in a public place and recorded all the interviews on two digital recorders. Prior to their interviews, interviewees were instructed that the questions I would ask had been reviewed by Yale University's Human Research Protection Program and would not put them at risk. I reminded them that their participation was voluntary and that they could refuse to answer any question or end the interview at any time. I assured them that I would keep their identity and location confidential. Because I did not want them to know in advance what my theoretical questions of interest were, I told them I would be happy to answer questions about me or about the study once the formal interview was completed. To establish rapport prior to starting the interviews, I

tried to smile a lot at the start of the meeting and ask casual questions about the city where we were. I initially wondered if people would disclose the exact nature of hardships they had experienced. In nearly all cases, the interviewees revealed a traumatic event within the first 15 minutes of the interview, and the rest disclosed their hardships later on in the interview.

Normally within 24 hours of concluding the interview, I typed up a summary using notes I had taken. These memos recorded notable elements of the interviewees' manners of dressing, patterns of speech, and any awkward or revealing moments in our conversations. I also recorded the phrases or ideas that were most telling about an interviewee's narrative. I later had the full interviews transcribed and read through each transcript, taking notes on emerging themes about my major questions of interest.

Members of the project team developed a questionnaire focused on three broad areas of interest: (1) the experiences, emotions, and events that young adults associate with their relationships with parents, peers, and romantic partners; (2) young adults' religious lives, including both traditional forms of church attendance and prayer, and also thoughts about God, listening to religious music or reading religious books, and friendships with religious people; and (3) young adults' future goals regarding work and family, their sense of progress toward those goals, and the meaning garnered from key relationships and activities. After the first four interviews I revised the questionnaire, primarily to extend the questions to include more non-traditional religious beliefs and practices. I also drafted more probing questions about meaning and purpose.

Religious Narratives and Resilience

After outlining resilience, we can evaluate how the interviews I conducted help further the understanding of religion and resilience. Psychologist Kenneth Pargament's pioneering work (1997) presents a variety of ways that religion supports coping and resilience. He describes four main functions, which can operate independently or simultaneously: providing a meaning structure, generating emotional comfort or reducing anxiety, promoting social connections, and enhancing one's relationship with God himself (Pargament 2010). Many sociological accounts of religion

emphasize the instrumental benefits of religion (Riesebrodt 2010). Especially when examining religion and resilience, it is important not to overlook that, for many people, the constitutive end of religious belief and practice is establishing the right relationship with God (Mooney and Manglos-Weber 2014: forthcoming).

Pargament's work points us in the right direction, but without examining individual lives and particular narratives one cannot easily tell which aspects of religion help most with resilience and coping. The religious beliefs and practices of the young adults I interviewed spanned the spectrum from two atheists who rarely think about God (both from the West), to three devout Protestant women whose lives center on their faith and local religious communities (all from the South). Most of my interviewees attended religious services irregularly, some prayed daily, and some prayed occasionally. Among those I interviewed, the most common way religion supported resilience was by providing a meaningful structure that helped make sense of traumatic events. Second most common was narratives about prayer or meditation to calm anxiety. Third most common was a personal relationship with God, whether that was feeling a presence in meditation or praying alone with scriptures. As Pargament has noted, spiritual struggles with God sometimes worsen trauma, which is the case with Laura, who feels God is not "100 percent there" for her. Although the literature on religion and health sometimes discusses people experiencing anger at God for stress or health problems, only two of my interviewees said they felt angry with God. Both said that they later realized they could not blame God for their problems. The least common way religion supported coping or resilience among my interviewees was through social connections. Only five of my respondents attend church, but all five have very strong connections with many people from church. Several others, like Alex, had supportive connections with churchgoers, but those relationships were not regular interactions. Interestingly, several interviewees who did not believe in God received social support from people who did believe in God.

The two following narratives demonstrate how people with and without religious affiliations can have strong religious beliefs that have helped them deal with trauma. In the two narratives I present next, we see that although Monica's strong commitment to her

Baptist faith provides a center to everything in her life, even the religiously nonaffiliated like Sherry sometimes have surprisingly strong religious beliefs that have helped them deal with trauma. The difference that emerges from my interviews is hence not one between those with supernatural beliefs and religious practices and those without such beliefs and practices, but rather whether beliefs and practices are embedded in relationships, communities, and larger narratives, which enhance the power of personal beliefs and practices to support resilience.

Narrative Summaries Continued

Sherry: 25, White, from the West. She is religiously unaffiliated but God saved her.

Sherry was one of 16 respondents who believes in God, but does not have a particular religious affiliation. When we met in an affluent neighborhood out West, Sherry arrived wearing bright colored pants and had a cheerful smile. The traumas in Sherry's life relate closely to her serious heart condition called supraventricular tachycardia (SVT). Although most people with SVT, including Sherry's father and sister, live practically normal lives, Sherry's symptoms were so severe that she had three heart surgeries before the age of 15, when she finally stabilized. Her experiences between the ages of 9 and 15 of being rushed to the emergency room twice a week to have her heart restarted led Sherry to be a "morbid" child who feared that death was around the corner. She even had out-of-body experiences the hundreds of times that her heart stopped. My eyes bulged as Sherry described her painful illness and how it made it so difficult for her to have any friends. But she covered up her inner pain with a cheerful smile and even light-hearted laughter as she described her traumas.

Even though Sherry was a high school cheerleader, got straight As in high school and college, and is highly successful at work, Sherry refuses to let herself grow close to anyone emotionally. To illustrate her problems with intimacy, she bluntly told me that she coldheartedly rejected the first guy who fell in love with her. He was the first guy she ever had sex with, and she could not stand that he wanted to look her in the eyes and touch her face while they made love. She cheated on him by having causal sex with another guy who did not want intimacy, just sex. She "felt really cold and

detached” when she broke the heart of the guy who loved her and wanted to marry her. She humbly admitted she has a “sick mind” with regard to sex and intimacy. She hopes to someday learn to experience intimacy with sex.

Sherry was raised Lutheran and attended weekly services with her family growing up. But as she went through confirmation classes, she began to doubt whether Jesus was God. She was kicked out of the classes when she said, “I feel really comfortable praying to God, but this Jesus guy I think he was just a man.” Sherry’s mother called her an atheist because she does not believe Jesus is God, but Sherry insisted, “I believe in God very strongly, I just don’t know if Jesus is my homeboy.”

I asked Sherry if she ever prayed to God during her many heart failures and surgeries. Although she had previously told me she once tried to commit suicide by taking pills, Sherry’s voice slowed as she admitted there was a “memorable moment” when she tried to kill herself with razor blades. Sherry had a wondering look in her eyes as she explained, “This is when I was kind of questioning things in general and I just felt so alone, and I didn’t feel like anyone understood me, and so I was going to do it, I was going to do it, I was going to do it...I was so depressed!” Her voice became very emphatic as she repeated “I was just so hysterical, so hysterical; I was going to do it, like I had like the razor in my hand.”

But it was not just revealing the fact that she tried to commit suicide that got Sherry tongue-tied. Her speech patterns, which were full of words such as “like” and “kinda,” illustrate how much Sherry struggled to describe the supernatural experience she had on that cold bathroom floor as she sobbed uncontrollably and prepared to end her life: “I was like crying and I remember I just had this moment where I just felt calm and like just relaxed and just felt like just kinda something on my shoulder like, you’re okay, don’t do it, like it’s going to be okay [laughs].” Her laughter indicated incredulity and her own difficulty in speaking about what happened to her. I did not interrupt her as she described this experience because I wanted to hear her own words, even if she was rambling.

Sherry continued trying to find words to describe her experience:

Like I just felt this like weird calm and I was just like, whoa, I think that's God [laughs]. Like I remember thinking, like I just couldn't explain what it was, but I just felt like this calm sensation and I just decided not to do it and I was just like oh that's weird, it was so instant that I just like, I don't know.

Given her earlier revelations that she struggles with intimacy, her last statement about this “memorable moment” really struck me: “[This event] just always kind of impacted like the way I thought, like I've just never really felt alone since then.” When Sherry finally paused after telling this dramatic story, I gently probed her about how this experience affected her faith. Sherry still struggles to understand what happened that day. She even read books about Christianity and Buddhism, but nothing she read matches her own experiences with God. Sherry clearly admitted that she does not understand what happened to her that day on the bathroom floor. She added that she is not sure she is even meant to understand it, and she's okay with that. If God helped her this one time when she was so desperate, does Sherry ask God to help her with her health or psychological problems? Sherry said she is not a Christian, but she likes her Christian friends and respects her parents' fervent beliefs. She even went with her friends a few times to some Evangelical megachurches, but found them “culty.” She did not like that people acted so feverishly moved by God and then asked God for help, often through the mediation of a pastor. “I don't really like to ask for anything because I feel like again that's kind of like using religion as, like to your benefit, which I don't think you're supposed to do anyway to get what you want out of something,” she explained. She particularly does not want to ask a man—a pastor or even Jesus—to mediate between her and God.

Through praying all alone in her home or by going out for long walks in the mountains, Sherry does try to connect with the force that saved her life. Although Sherry was on anti-depressants during her teenage years, she did not like feeling “numb” and lamented not having a normal range of emotions. Instead, she meditates when she feels down. She has never felt as low as she did that night with the razor blade in her hand. Although she goes to extreme lengths to block intimacy with other people, Sherry takes great consolation in “a presence” that is with her all the time, even though she does not know what that presence is.

At the end of the interview, I asked Sherry how her relationship with her family had changed over time. This was the only time during the entire interview that Sherry displayed sadness. She sobbed while describing her estrangement from her older half-brother, a “lost soul.” Sherry’s mother fled her abusive first marriage with Sherry’s elder half-brother. Sherry’s mother remarried to Sherry’s father. Although Sherry’s father never wanted kids, especially daughters, Sherry’s mother had two girls with her second husband. Sherry idolized her older half-brother, but he rebelled and then ran away when she was 10 years old. Her half-brother became homeless, got involved with crime and drugs, and was eventually institutionalized with schizophrenia.

Sherry admitted that talking about her brother is “the one thing that kind of like chokes me up.” She added that she worries so much about her brother that she talks to God for him. “So if I do pray he’s like the number one person that I kind of like ask for, like ‘If you do watch out for anyone, can you watch out for him?’”

Sitting outside at a Starbucks on a sunny day at the base of beautiful mountains, tears rolled down my face. Sherry had even awkwardly laughed as she described her suicide attempts as “not the most glamorous thing ever.” Seeing Sherry cry for her brother led me to cry for Sherry’s inability to feel emotions for herself. Even though Sherry earns \$100,000 a year, just bought a house, and drives a fancy car, her greatest hope is to develop intimate relationships so that she could be “a functioning human being, a member of society.”

Although Sherry is outwardly successful, her narrative reveals that she is unable to find the depth in her human relationships and her relationship with the supernatural that she seeks. She believes without a doubt that a supernatural force stopped her from killing herself. She always feels that supernatural “presence” with her. She prays to God to help her despondent brother. Although she believes God is capable of saving her life and helping her brother in his suffering, she is unwilling to ask God to relieve her own suffering. Sherry expressed both social and theological reasons why she feels uncomfortable attending religious services. She has read extensively about various religions. Although Sherry can understand why it is difficult for her to connect with others, and to God, she does not know what to do to move forward. She has yet

to fit her own life narrative, including her religious experiences, into a larger narrative that would give her journey a sense of purpose and direction.

Monica: 26, White, from the South. She gives thanks to God for everything, all the time.

Sherry's lack of a larger narrative within which to understand her experiences contrasts with Monica's narrative. Monica, a 26-year old, White woman I met in the South, described a strong personal faith, buttressed by strong relationships at church and a loving relationship with her husband. In Monica's narrative, we can see how all of the four elements of religion and resilience identified by Pargament work in tandem, and have allowed her to be personally successful, happy, and give back to her community.

Monica bounced joyously into Chick-Fil-A in a suburb of a Southern city wearing her favorite football team's shirt and beaming cheerfully. The first thing Monica told me was that her parents recently divorced because her father is a "cheating butthead." When she was a baby, her father spent five years in jail for having sex with students at his school. He became a Christian while in jail and even earned a Master of Divinity when he got out of jail. However, he continued to cheat on Monica's mother and eventually left her and moved in with his female boss. Among other things, Monica's father taught her that there are a lot of fake Christians, and he taught her exactly what not to do in marriage.

Monica admitted that she wavered from the Baptist faith of her childhood, especially during her first year at a local state university. Monica loved watching football at fraternity houses, and failed out of school because she was partying and drinking too much. She moved back home and met her husband while working at a local grocery store. This was the first clear instance that Monica cited God's providence in her life: "God is sovereign, and that was his plan all along." Her husband is a devout Christian who slowly and gently pulled her away from the wrong people.

Monica grew up Southern Baptist but is now Reformed Baptist. Reformed Baptists trace their roots to the 1689 Baptist Confession of London, which was an attempt to go back to the real claims of Martin Luther's Reformation. Southern Baptists today, according to Monica, are just like Sunday Christians who dress up

and want to be part of a group. Although Monica said her first conversion was at age 10, she admitted that she liked the “attention of the world” and “went a little crazy,” especially in college. Largely because of her husband’s influence, she returned to her faith and knows for sure that her faith is “the truth, the way, and the life.”

She articulated clear reasons for becoming a Reformed Baptist, demonstrating greater theological knowledge than any of the other interviewees. Monica repeatedly told me that her husband teaches Sunday school at their church, and they go to church activities four or five times a week. Her church is her “family,” especially since her husband’s mother and stepfather died in a tragic motorcycle accident. “We know that they were saved and they’re in heaven,” which she said helped with their grief. Their church is small, with only 30 people. Most of their friends are from church, and Monica said that “they felt the loss that we felt” when her husband’s parents died. Monica recounted that the event was bittersweet, as she and her husband inherited land and money when his parents died. They used the money to buy an apartment complex that she and her husband manage. The majority of her paycheck as a nurse goes straight to their retirement account. The same morning that she met me she had just come from the bank where she and her husband had gotten a mortgage to buy their first home.

She further explained that being close to Christ makes it easier to handle suffering in her own life, and the suffering she sees as an emergency room nurse. Monica prays at work for patience and for people’s physical healing. She constantly gives thanks to God because she loves her job. Monica must have used the word “thankful” about 25 times during our interview, and about half of those times she said she was thankful to God. Her younger siblings have not fared as well as she has in dealing with her “narcissistic” father. Monica helps her mom and three younger siblings emotionally and financially.

Monica constantly praised her husband for his virtue, frugality, and strong faith. She had no problem admitting that they have a very traditional marriage. Her church teaches that a woman’s place is in the home, and she agrees with that. But, she added that you can work if you must, as long as your family is always the most important thing. Although she submits to her husband as the head

of the household, they believe in a covenant marriage. This involves bringing God into their marriage through their church community, who holds her husband accountable to God for how he treats her. When needed, her husband receives counsel from the pastor, and she receives counsel from the pastor's wife. She further explained that the relationship itself is a "good" that has to be maintained. She believes their relationship is more important than the individuals in it. Although her husband is the head of their household, they make most decisions together. Her husband has ultimate authority on finances, though, and discourages her from buying the kinds of designer clothes and handbags she used to buy when she aspired to be a "Southern belle." She is thankful for his prudence because they have saved money.

When I asked Monica if her hardships had made her a stronger person or harmed her, she said that her faith has helped her to not become depressed. She said that her hardships prepared her to deal with tough things. Although she plans a lot for her future, she said she did not "have ultimate control, because he [God] does." Monica stood out among my interviewees for having a clear doctrinal understanding of her faith. For example, when I asked her to describe her God, she gave a detailed answer describing God's characteristics and the meaning of mercy:

I know that there's God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. They've all been there from the beginning, and they'll all be there till the end...He is just, he is love, but at the same time, you have to realize we're sinners. He's holy, those two cannot coincide unless he has mercy on us. The ultimate show of his mercy and grace was sending his son to die for our sins and imputing his son's holiness and righteousness onto the ones that he's called to be believers.

She does not think God is "my lovey-dovey best friend, but I can go to him with my needs." Because there is this gap between God and man, she emphatically said she would never let her future kids wear the type of shirts some people used to wear at her high school that said, "Jesus is my homeboy." At the end of the interview, Monica revealed that she and her husband have not yet been able to conceive a child. For doctrinal reasons, she only believes in conception through sexual intercourse. She is studying

the body's natural fertility cycles to try to conceive a child. If they can not conceive naturally, they plan to adopt children. When Monica's husband picked her up from Chick-Fil-A, she explained that they would listen to someone reading John Calvin's teachings on a podcast as they drove, celebrating the new home they had just bought and hoped to fill with children.

Monica's narrative illustrates how four ways that Pargament describes religion (2010) can contribute to and reinforce resilience. For example, the social connections she has at church strengthen her personal devotion. In addition, having a larger meaning structure to understand her in-laws' tragic death does not take away her sadness but keeps her from getting depressed. In comparing Sherry and Monica's narratives, we can see that both Sherry and Monica are seeking meaning structures, and both seek a relationship with God or the supernatural. For both, their relationships with the supernatural comfort their anxiety. The difference is that Monica's religious practices and beliefs are grounded in a series of relationships with her husband, their pastors, and their whole church community. Sherry has undoubtedly overcome much hardship, but she admitted that few people even know about her struggles. She feels socially isolated and has few ties to any social institutions. Monica's narrative is embedded in a meaningful structure that Sherry seeks but still lacks.

Moral Purpose, Cultural Narratives, and Social Structures

Few interviewees talked about religion as profoundly as Monica. However, everyone I talked to, even the religiously unaffiliated and the atheists, were reflective about their purposes in this world and asked moral questions, such as: "Is there a finish line to my suffering?", "Is there a happiness that will last longer than the buzz of drugs and alcohol?", and "How can I give back for the blessings I received?" Perhaps because everyone I talked to had experienced unexpected, difficult life events, they did not see their lives or God in terms of efficiency or control, characteristic of the managerial, bureaucratic world that MacIntyre (2007 [1981]) says is the part of the modern condition (or modern illusion). Rather than seeing human persons as purpose-centered and meaning-seeking, in sociology—even in sociology of religion—we often

implicitly or explicitly portray people as strategic, utilitarian, and individualistic (Archer 2000; Archer 2011; Mooney 2014; Forthcoming; Smith 2010). Perhaps it was my interviewees' suffering and trauma that broke this modern American narrative of success and control.

Understanding resilience hence requires understanding people's views of their moral purpose. Religious narratives, such as Monica's, provide coherence between a personal moral narrative and a communal moral narrative that tie traumatic events to a higher purpose. Religious narratives can give people a sense of meaning and direction despite setbacks, slip-ups, and pain. Like Monica, other devoutly religious people I interviewed had teleological narratives that referred back to God's plans for them: God did this, now I'm going there, my life has a purpose, and my hardship prepared me to help others.

How well do survey measures of religion such as attendance at services, belief in God, or even frequency of prayer, capture the search for moral purpose among young adults today? Surveys may shed light on some specific beliefs or practices, but narratives are needed in order to understand how people link those beliefs and practices to moral purposes. As Peter Berger noted, we do not have a sacred canopy uniting us all into one cosmos (1967), and we know that fewer and fewer young adults claim a particular sacred umbrella, such as a religious denomination or subculture, that ties their moral purpose to a larger narrative (Smith 1998). Even if traditional forms of religious belief and practice have declined, it does not necessarily follow that people are not asking moral questions to create an overarching meaning in their lives.

Although one might expect people who have undergone trauma to report dramatic supernatural interventions, only two people I interviewed discussed miraculous events. One was Sherry's experience of a supernatural force that stopped her from committing suicide. The other was Renee, a woman I met in the South who was sexually abused by her stepfather and was "into self-mutilation," promiscuity, and drinking. She was raised Southern Baptist but did not really practice religion until she had a dramatic conversion to a Pentecostal community, which helped her experience physical healing of bodily ailments and healing of painful memories. After Renee's conversion, God called her to

give her whole life to helping other young women who had been abused, so she enrolled in a Pentecostal ministry school to prepare for her own healing ministry. In contrast, Sherry's miraculous experience did not lead to a commitment to any religious community.

Renee and Sherry's dramatic supernatural experiences were uncommon. Much more often, as people healed from trauma, they began to see God's action behind ordinary events. Therefore, beyond just asking about the frequency of certain religious beliefs and practices, understanding religious narratives tells us how people's experiences with the sacred evolve in relation to the most important events, relationships, and desires in their lives. Even for those who do return to traditional religious practices—such as reading the Bible more frequently or attending services—it is also important to understand mundane ways they see God working in their lives. Religious narratives extend beyond pious practices and include finding sacred meanings behind ordinary events.

For example, Alex's narrative of turning away from a life of crime and drugs included learning to see supernatural meanings behind mundane events. Although Alex did start attending church again and reading the Bible daily, his experiences of God did not all happen while engaging in religious activities. Rather, numerous ordinary but surprising events reassured Alex that God was looking out for him. For example, one day Alex was feeling terrible and went to a friend's house. His friend's seven-year old sister looked at him, holding her teddy bear, and told him everything would be okay. Alex attributed moral significance to that event: God was speaking to him through that girl. Another time, Alex showed up to register for classes at a local community college. The person at the desk told Alex that he had just called Alex the previous day to ask him to come in and apply for a special scholarship for classes. Once again, Alex saw that event as a sign that God was guiding him. Alex and several others were very clear that even though they prayed daily, they did not expect God to heal them miraculously. But praying and trusting in God helped them to see how God leads them through their struggles, often in very ordinary ways. Discovering moral significance in ordinary events is thus crucial to resilience. Although all my interviewees sought moral purpose, what differed were the cultural narratives and social structures that

influenced their versions of the moral significance of everyday events and relationships.

Although it is common to contrast religious people as having beliefs in unseen or unknowable things with atheists who do not have beliefs about God, even the atheists I interviewed had confronted events in their lives they could not explain. These events led them to reflect on the moral purpose guiding their lives. For example, one man from the West named George described himself as an atheist. His mother's death when he was a teenager left him very sad. "It sucked," he said several times. His mother's death threw him down a path of drugs and alcohol that he was fortunate to abandon with the help of good friends, including one who is a devout Christian. Looking back, George has regrets about his behavior, and knows he is lucky to have turned his life around. His greatest moral purpose is maintaining a strong relationship with his father, spending time with friends, and treating his girlfriend well.

Steve, who also lives in the West, became an alcoholic in college and describes himself as agnostic. After blacking out from drinking nightly for several months, and after a scary event in Las Vegas, Steve quit drinking cold turkey. How did he suddenly give up his addiction to alcohol and remain substance-free for the last seven years? Steve knows he is lucky alcohol did not get the best of him like it did his mother, but he could not explain why he escaped the bondage to alcohol that ruined his mother's life. He also knew he was lucky that his mother's alcoholism did not damage him emotionally as much as it did his older brother, who is unhappy and estranged from nearly everyone.

For most interviewees, finding moral purpose nearly always involved some form of transcendence—going beyond their own personal experience of the world and connecting to others. For example, Steve and George ask clear questions about the right ways of being and acting in the world, but they do not look to traditional religion to answer those questions. Even those who are not believers in supernatural powers expressed concerns for higher goods that are not material and not individualistic. For example, both George and Steve placed their highest values on relationships. Steve is very successful financially but laments that he works too

hard to enjoy it. Thinking about his future, he and his wife want to start a family. "I want to be wealthy in relationships," he explained.

In contrast to the stereotype of atheists being hostile to religion or people rejecting traditional religion, George, who said he does not believe in God, and Steve, who is not sure he believes in God, acknowledged that religious faith and religious communities can provide a sense of moral purpose. Interestingly, both George and Steve said that their one Christian friend stood out to them as someone with a clear sense of purpose. In both cases, their Christian friend was the most supportive when they turned away from alcohol abuse.

Jessica is another example of how even those who do not identify personally as religious found religious people or communities to help them with their trauma. Jessica, who is white, 27 years old, and lives out West, does not believe in God. Although she has never been to college, she sounded like she had read Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]) as she described the powerful group solidarity among Mormons who helped her stay on track during her teenage years. Growing up, Jessica's mother was sick with cancer and addicted to painkillers. Her father worked overtime to support the family. Jessica largely raised herself with little parental guidance or supervision. During high school, Jessica attended all the Mormon social activities she could. She particularly loved the knitting club. But because Jessica does not believe in God, she felt like a free-rider and eventually stopped going to the Mormon church events.

In contrast to Sherry, who believes in supernatural powers but feels uncomfortable around social community of believers, Jessica loves the social aspect of the Mormon church, but does not believe in anything supernatural. Durkheim argued that religious rituals were about group solidarity itself, not a connection to the supernatural. Interestingly for Jessica, the only time she has experienced such strong group solidarity was in a group of people who believes in the supernatural. Although many people like Jessica had close friendships, only two interviewees described secular social rituals that provide group solidarity, and both were describing their military communities.

Despite not believing in God, Jessica described how thoughts about God just pop into her head, and she asks God to help her. As

she explained, “when you get into a bad position...when you’re upset or when you need something or you’re scared, you want to believe in something bigger.” Jessica finds comfort in believing that everything happens for a reason, even if she does not know exactly what the reason is. Believing things happen for a reason, albeit an unknown one, and that something bigger than you exists, even though she does not know what that something is, is better than “bottling all these emotions and taking on all this stress... so sometimes when you’re upset you’re hoping that there’s something out there that’s like ‘please help me.’” Struggling to find words to describe how she prays occasionally, Jessica shrugged her shoulders and incessantly bounced her leg under the table. Jessica’s home situation led her to be depressed, but she managed to get off medication for bipolar disorder. As her mom was addicted to legal painkillers, Jessica fears developing an addiction herself. She has slowly learned to regulate her emotions. Her mom died two years before I met her, which freed her from the responsibility of caring for her mother with whom she never really bonded, Jessica feels free to pursue her dream of going to college.

Although Jessica had mitigated the worst aspects of her family crisis, she admitted that her life lacks a clear forward direction. When she graduated from high school, her father expected her to care for her sick mother and would not help her pay for college. His lack of support for her desire to attend college led her to move out as soon as she turned 18. She supports herself working as a bartender and a physical therapist. She still wants to attend college in the future. She stopped attending the Mormon church years ago, but has not found any secular groups which provide her with solidarity and direction.

Just as the people who called themselves atheist or agnostic were brought up in households with little religious belief or practice, those brought up in religiously devout households rarely abandoned all personal belief. More often, institutional practices of religion were replaced with personal and often inconsistent forms of practice and belief. For example, another woman I interviewed in the South, Bethany, has drifted from her strict Baptist upbringing. She prays occasionally on her own, and said it is important to do what is right. She calls herself a Christian by background, but feels more comfortable naming her own faith:

“Bethanyism.” She seemed to have no idea that Robert Bellah and colleagues found something very similar they called “Sheilaism” in *Habits of the Heart* (1985) nearly 20 years before. Bethany’s view of religion entails no obligations to God and no obligations to a community. She does have a sense of obligation to her husband, and sees him as a partner, but she lacks involvement in any religious or social group that would tie her to a larger narrative or provide a way to give to others. The similarities between Bethanyism and Sheilaism illustrate that, ironically, the narrative of finding one’s own individual religion draws on larger culture around us. The lack of community participation among some of the people I interviewed leaves them mostly with some form of Bethanyism: groping to find a larger meaning to make sense of their own narrative.

Conclusion

Psychologists have shown that even the most vulnerable human can take baby steps towards resilience. Sociologists have further shown that community leaders, civic institutions, and strong relationships can help both people and communities bounce back from hardship and generate new relationships and institutions. Studies of religion and resilience have enumerated ways in which beliefs in God, religious practices, social connections, and larger meaning structures help people cope with hardship. But most research on trauma still starts from a disease model of health and focuses on how people cope with the negative effects of stress. Understanding resilience requires asking what is good for persons and societies. Resilience as sustainable motion toward a *telos* requires identifying more than a material or individual end for persons and communities. Resilience requires transforming bad things into personal growth, and finding moral purpose in both large narratives and ordinary events.

Where do young adults find moral purpose today? Some people I interviewed viewed their struggles as part of God’s providence and his plan for their lives. Others emphasized a local sense of meaning focusing on their primary personal relationships with friends and family. But the personal narratives I have recounted raise questions about social structures: What are the historical reasons that resources both psychologists and

sociologists identify that help people both cope with trauma and be resilient—strong families, strong communities, involvement in religious institutions or civic groups—are so weak among many of the young adults I spoke with? Everyone desired close relationship with family, friends, and peers, but many people did not have high-quality relationships—not even in their families of origin. Why are some people's lives devoid of even one person whom they love, trust, and share intimate emotions with? Laura's narrative is telling in this regard: her trauma is not only personal, as lonely and addicted people do not build society.

Because recovering from trauma is a process that unfolds over time, I plan to re-interview all 26 respondents during the next year. How will they have progressed toward their goals in work, family, and relationships? Will some who were moving forward have slipped backward? Will any have changed their religious beliefs and practices? Will new events or relationships have influence the meaning attributed to past events? Future interviews might also focus on goods that are inherent in relationships—trust, love and intimacy came up repeatedly as goods people seek in their primary relationships. The lack of relational goods such as intimacy, love, and trust also put people at risk to experience trauma, either because those who should love them hurt them, or because people turn to alcohol and drugs to cope with emotional pain. Understanding the contexts, practices, and narratives that create and sustain such relational goods is crucial to understanding resilience, coping, and chronic dysfunction.

There are numerous ways to help people cope with trauma. Economic opportunity, psychological counseling, psychiatric medication, and social capital may all help people move toward a *telos*. But a *telos* entails a higher moral purpose to life, and such a purpose requires transcendence—going beyond oneself. Intimate relationships provide great fulfillment but also can be hurtful and disappointing. Meaningful communities buttress and guide intimate relationships. The narratives I have presented indicate which aspects of American culture and social structure influence vulnerability and resilience. Personal religious faith that is often distant from a religious community, weak families, and the lack of good jobs for the middle class all do not bode well for resilience. It is likely a combination of economic changes, family changes, and

cultural changes have made people more vulnerable to a variety of stressful events. But overcoming vulnerability is not only about changing social structures; it is also about discovering a moral purpose that ties one's own life to a larger, meaningful narrative and aligning one's actions with that purpose.

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