

Calm Within the Storm: A Pathway to Everyday Resiliency by Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe

Margaret Paxton
SD 39

A friend gave me a t-shirt. Printed on the shirt are the words, "Being a principal is easy. It's like riding a bike. Except the bike is on fire. You're on fire. Everything is on fire." Funny, right? Except some days, especially

in the last year, it does feel like everything is on fire. All the time. *Calm Within the Storm: A Pathway to Everyday Resiliency* is a new book by Canadian researcher and psychologist Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe. It could not have been published at a better time.

Dr. Hanley-Dafoe defines resiliency in a number of different ways. It is the ability to bounce back or to take something that is broken and make something new. It is a sense of "being okay, no matter what." It is not something you do or do not have, she writes. And it is not reserved for "the mentally tough, the strong or the fearless." The definition that stuck with me long after finishing the book is, "Resiliency to me means doing the right next thing."

In Part I, Dr. Hanley-Dafoe tells us her own story of resiliency. As a troubled teen, the school she attended failed her. She was expelled and spent time in a psychiatric unit. She survived a horrific car accident. Somehow, there were conditions in place that allowed her to rise, to finish school and go on to become a successful academic. *What went right?*

A few years ago, during BCPVPA Short Course II in Kelowna, we listened to David Weiss declare that we live in a VUCA world. VUCA stands for volatile, uncertain, chaotic and ambiguous. Part II of *Calm Within the Storm* is about three things that come from living in a VUCA world: stress, fear and stigma, and how they prevent us from moving through our discomfort to a better place. An antidote to stress is altruism. A cure for fear is stoicism: rationalizing the irrational (*read about the Fear-Setting strategy*). And the medicine for stigma is owning your story. "When you own your own story, no one can use it against you." Rather than denying stress, fear and stigma, Dr. Hanley-Dafoe suggests accepting and, in that acceptance, to take back your power. "Acceptance," she writes, "is a small quiet room."



Photo Courtesy Flash Adams

Along with acceptance, belonging, perspective, hope and humour make up the Five Pillars of Resiliency. Drawing on the work of other researchers, poets and philosophers, Dr. Hanley-Dafoe describes how intentionally choosing to nurture these dispositions in oneself can arm us against adversity. She tells many anecdotes about members of the Canadian Armed Forces. One soldier tells her that after several tours in the Middle East, he believes he should have PTSD, but does not. This troubles him. Is he just hard-hearted and cold? After more conversation, he comes to the realization that after every tragic thing he witnessed or was part of, he *chose* to learn something, to grow and be grateful. Hope, too, is a choice.

As I read *Calm Within the Storm* I thought a lot about what our staff members and students have been through over the last year. How can we use Dr. Hanley-Dafoe's Resiliency Trajectory Model to support folks who have been traumatized by the pandemic or who have experienced ongoing fear, loss, uncertainty, sadness, loneliness and fatigue? Certainly, modelling our own vulnerability and resiliency can lend some calm to others. The many helpful suggestions and examples in this book will help light your path. In a career where it is common to feel that we are never doing enough, can we pause and reflect on the fact that we can be lighthouses in the storm? Having the courage to name our fears and attest to the fact that we are enough as we are, will give us the confidence to "do the right next thing."

Dr. Hanley-Dafoe ends with a quote from Buckminster Fuller, that I know will resonate with Principals and Vice-Principals. He asks,

"What is my job on the planet? What is it that needs doing that I know something about, that probably won't happen unless I take responsibility for it?"

Instead of letting that responsibility weigh heavily on us, let's support each other to reframe it as an opportunity. This pandemic is a perfect opportunity. A former superintendent I worked with used to like to say, "Never waste a crisis."



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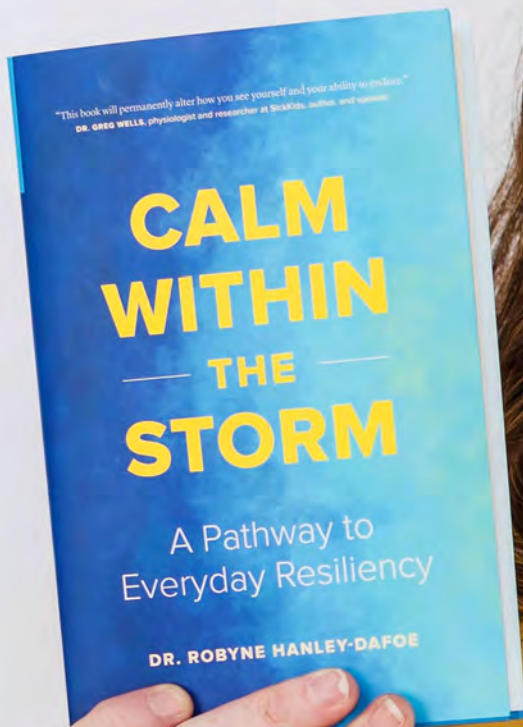
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I've thought a lot about those words this past year. How can we use the opportunities the pandemic has brought us as a way to strengthen belonging, perspective, and hope in our schools, to find the hidden moments of humour and enjoy the peace that acceptance brings? I don't know about you, but I am looking forward to hugs and handshakes, calmer seas and sunnier skies ahead.

Margaret Paxton is an elementary school Principal in Vancouver. She is the mom of two resilient adults, an avid trail runner and a dedicated reader.



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