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Resilience and Transformation, not Resolutions

By Ann Rosen Spector, PhD.

I am an urban dweller by choice. I crave the hustle and bustle of the traffic as well as the diversity of city life. Love the perpendicular grid of the streets, the casual conversations with neighbors as we walk to and fro, the abundance of restaurants and cultural offerings.

But, occasionally, I venture into the wilderness (and by that I mean anything west of Broad Street...I mean, City Line Avenue…Just kidding…west of Pittsburgh...). I love the outdoors in small doses; two weeks of country is my max.

And what I love, when I walk or hike through rugged (meaning any incline greater than 15 degrees) terrain, are my two essential aspects of nature: wildflowers and butterflies. Perhaps it's too predictably feminine, but I love them.

Not just because they are Nature's eye candy but more for what they represent.

To me, wildflowers are nature's surprise gift. Just when you round a corner (do they call them corners on cliffs?), there they are, peeking out in an explosion of color. I gasp at their inherent sense of unrestrained freedom. How do they survive without someone to tend to them? Dependent on rain for watering…how does that work? Sometimes, in the shade all day. No one to get rid of the weeds. Not manicured or planted, they can grow anywhere. And they do…free spirits of the plant world.

Wildflowers are proof of whatever one calls the force bigger than we can imagine. There may be a simpler botanical explanation but I don't want to know it.

They represent resilience, the ability to beat the odds. This is essential to survival for all of us. Part of it is learning how to foresee trouble ahead and develop and implement a strategy to prevail.

But, there will be times when no matter what we do, life will smack the stuffing out of us. We can't always avoid it, although we try, but what do we do when we get hurt or fail or screw up?

We try again. And maybe again. But not the same way we've done it in the past. Einstein's definition of insanity is "Doing things the same way over and over and expecting a different result."

Yet, many people say they can't do anything.

They are waiting for an opportunity. Waiting and waiting and waiting.
Or waiting for other people to change. Waiting and waiting and waiting.

Within each of us is the potential to seize the day and change ourselves. Not necessarily in some cinematic "Aha!" moment, but to do something to alter our life path toward what we want. To identify our goals and then work toward them. There may be setbacks and detours, and we may have to reconsider the original route. But at least we're being proactive rather than passive and defeated.

The wildflower symbolizes that for me, as the butterfly illustrates also the power of transformation, with both the guts and the glory. More than attractive, butterflies have an agonizingly slow journey toward perfect beauty and a survival rate in the wild of less than 1 percent. Many of the species are endangered, not only by natural predators but also by environmental problems.

While some butterflies live months, some live only for 14 days. So why bother? Thank goodness they do because seeing the flutter of those intensely colored wings is a treat for the eye, the spirit, and the soul.

From egg to larva (caterpillar, the ugly, crawly little worm!), to the pupa or chrysalis (I love the very sound of that. It's like a bubbling brook on a sunny day with perfect temperature, no humidity) through the metamorphosis to become a Monarch or Gossamer Wing. Even the names of butterflies make you want to swoon.

How do they do it? Their survival depends on multiple factors that are obviously not in their favor. The caterpillar and pupa are usually camouflaged to look like their host plants so they won't be gobbled up by birds or other predators. Eventually, they become gorgeous, grow wings and fly from flower to flower, sipping the sweet nectar. The other payoff is that they're now sexually mature and ready to party.

Transformation and resilience.

All this makes the annual end-of-the-year vague and half-hearted New Year's resolutions to eat healthier, lose weight, and spend less money seem really lame. We're the driver in our own lives; we can make a difference. We just have to turn on the engine and steer toward our destination…but only if we put the car into gear.

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