

**One step forward . . .  
. . . or one step back?**

Thomas A. Gorr

Montmirail Feb 7-9, 2020  
Retreat of Swiss Quakers

**Life crises, Failure –  
and how we cope with it**



# Montmirail 2020



<b>Freitag, 07.02.</b>	
Ab 16	Arrivals
18:30	Dinner
19:45	Welcome and practical details
20:00	Introduction to the theme by Thomas Gorr
20:45	Meeting for Worship starting with a short text
<b>Samstag, 08.02.</b>	
8	breakfast
9	Meeting for Worship
10	Break, coffee and tea
10:30 – 12:00	Session 2: Presentation by brother Adrian from the Rapperswil Monastery – time for questions after the presentation
12:30	Lunch
13:30	Free time
15:30	Afternoon break, coffee and tea in the lobby
16:00 – 18:30	Session 3: deepening of the theme in small groups
18:30	Dinner
20:00	Session 4: Self-awareness – Body Scan
21:00	Epilogue
<b>Sonntag, 09.02.</b>	
8:00	Breakfast
9:30	Meeting for Worship
10:30	Break, coffee and tea
11:00	Closing session – what do I take home with me?
11:45	Ideas for the next retreat: Theme? Preparatory group?
12:30	Lunch
13:30	Good-Bye

## What this retreat can and cannot do:

- Talk about personal failure and resiliency strategies - *if one is ready and willing*
- What are personal, interpersonal and spiritual resources for resiliency?
- Is a life crisis a spiritual crisis?
- Coming out of your crisis: What helped, what did not?
- What are possible chances following failure?
- Assistance in a Capuchin monastery; a Franciscan view on resiliency
- This retreat will deliver food-for-thought, *not therapy*
- You will take your own, not *right or wrong*, messages as answers.

# **This Introductory Presentation – Table of Contents:**

- **Failure on societal, cantonal and personal level**
- **Own accounting on failure and “bouncing back”** (summary, no details)
- **Quaker perspective: “Broken for life” by Jocelyn Burnell, incl. Christian foundations for suffering and recreation**
- **Research on resiliency: what helps, what does not?**

## Länder mit der höchsten Suizidrate, 2016

Anzahl Suizide pro 100'000 Einwohner

	LAND	SUIZIDRATE
1	Litauen	31,9
2	Russland	31,0
3	Guyana	29,2
4	Südkorea	26,9
5	Weissrussland	26,2
6	Suriname	22,8
7	Kasachstan	22,5
8	Ukraine	22,4
9	Lettland	21,2
10	Lesotho	21,2
11	Belgien	20,7
12	Ungarn	19,1
13	Slowenien	18,6
14	<b>Japan</b>	18,5
15	Uruguay	18,4
16	Estland	17,8
17	Frankreich	17,7
18	<b>Schweiz</b>	17,2
19	Kroatien	16,5

*Countries with highest suicide rates, 2016 (# suicides per 100'000 people)*

## Failure in wealthy Switzerland

on societal level

Armut in der Schweiz



Caritas, 2017



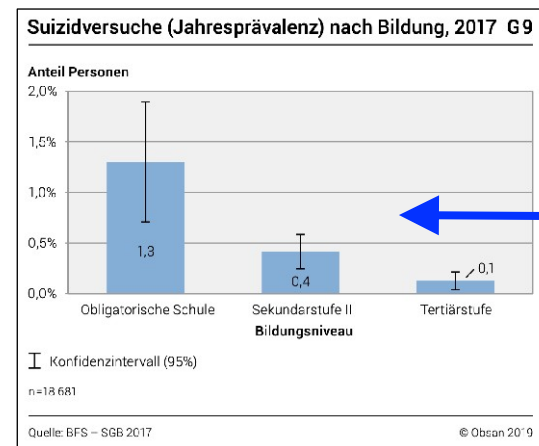
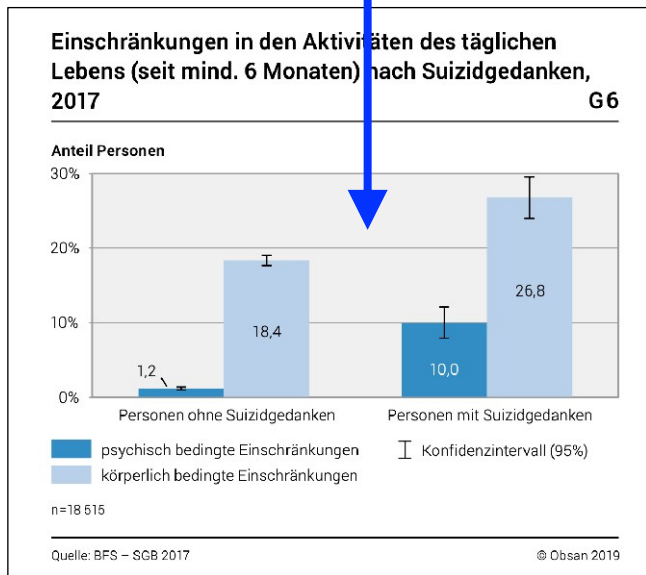
In proportion to the total population, Europeans commit suicide far more frequently than people in war-ravaged and poverty-ridden regions in Africa and the Near East!

# WHO & Obsan reports (Swiss Health Observatory) 2019 on suicide tendencies and rates in Swiss Society

- in Switzerland in 2016 approx. 1000 people committed suicide
- across middle age classes suicide rates in Switzerland (~12 per 100000 population) are average for European countries
- suicide tendencies correlate with chronic illness

WHO Global Health Observatory - Crude Suicide rates 2016  
(per 100'000 population)

Switzerland	Both sexes	♂	♀
10-19 years	4.1	5.8	2.4
20-29 years	9	13.6	4.3
30-39 years	9.8	13.9	5.8
40-49 years	14.9	21.1	8.6
50-59 years	21.7	29.3	13.9
60-69 years	21.5	30.3	13
70-79 years	28.1	37.5	20
80+ years	84.6	107.3	71.1

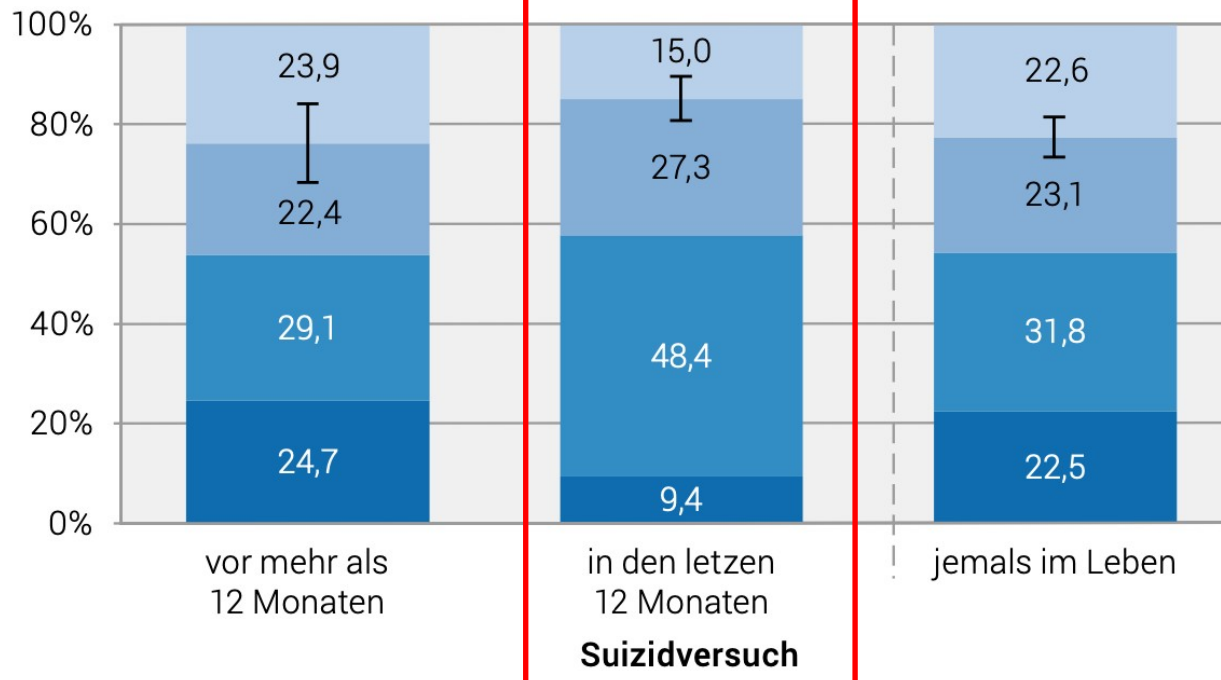


- suicide tendencies correlate inversely with education

# Mit wem wurde über Suizidversuch gesprochen, 2017

G13

## Anteil Personen



mit niemandem  
mit Person im privaten Umfeld

mit Gesundheitsfachperson  
mit Person im privaten Umfeld sowie Gesundheitsfachperson

I Konfidenzintervall (95%)

n=577

Anmerkung: Die 95%-KI beziehen sich auf alle Personen, die mit irgendjemanden gesprochen haben (alle drei Subgruppen zusammen)

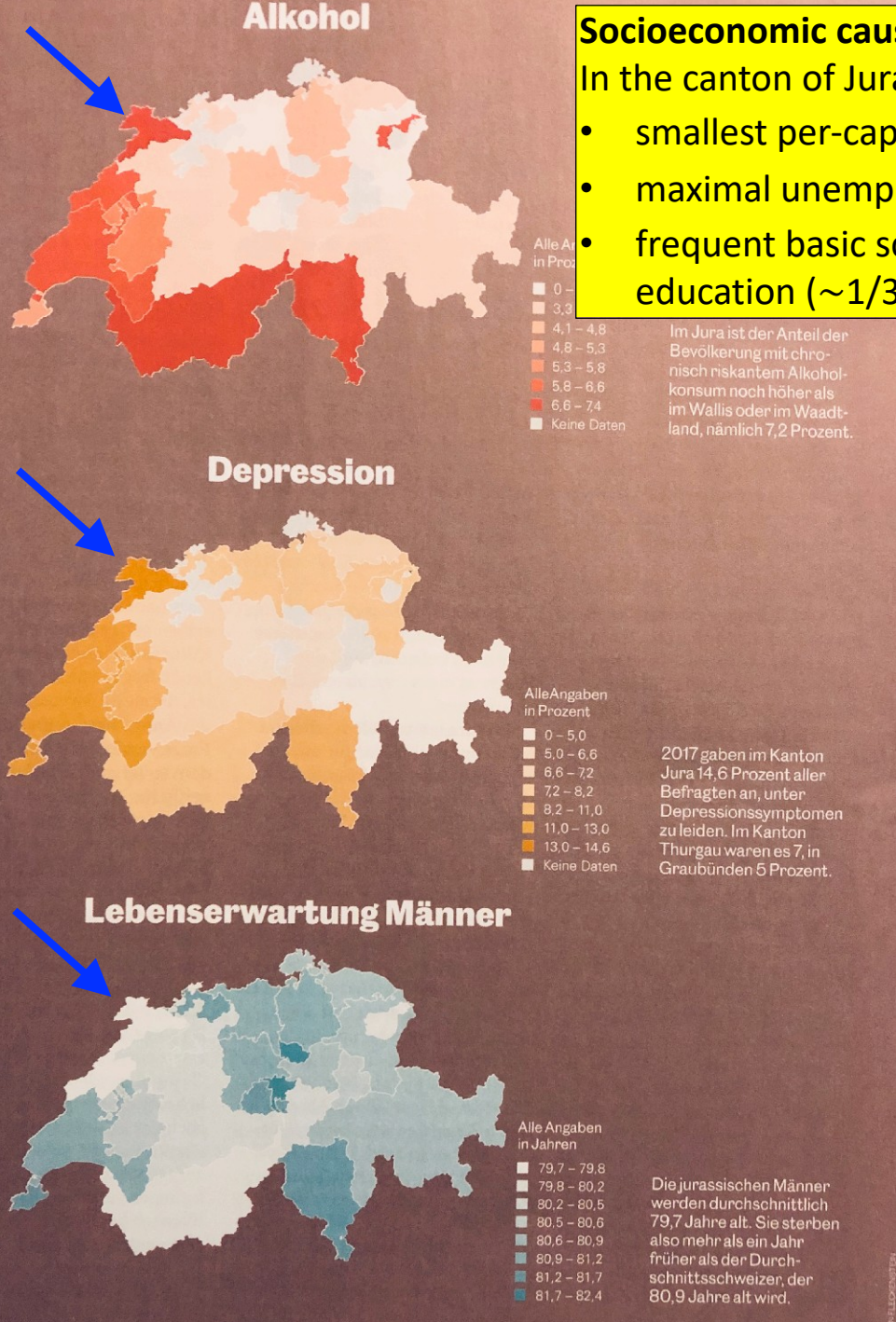
**Risk of failing varies markedly across Swiss cantons**

**Jura: the sick canton** →  
*NZZ Folio #343, Feb. 2020*

Compared with other cantons the canton of Jura shows a higher prevalence of

- chronic alcohol abuse
- depressive disorders
- chronic diseases of heart and circulatory system

and men in canton of Jura die on average 1 year earlier than Swiss men elsewhere



**Socioeconomic causes (in part):**  
 In the canton of Jura one finds ...

- smallest per-capita income
- maximal unemployment rate
- frequent basic school education (~1/3 population)

Every “man” can fall: **personal failures** in Zurich –  
 phone interview with Walter von Arburg, Communications Officer,  
 Pfarrer Sieber relief organization (Sozialwerke & Stiftung)



Ernst Sieber (1927-2018), Swiss pastor and social activist

**Jeder Mensch kann fallen**

Sozialwerk Pfarrer Sieber

~ 60-70 people in Zurich attend sleeping quarters per night → more than that are homeless (not registered, chose it)

entry into spiral:  
 • drugs  
 • medication  
 • loss (job, partner)  
 • psych. instable  
 • suicidal

entry into spiral:  
 • no residence  
 • social disintegration  
 • chronically ill / handicapped

harmful:  
 • anonymity  
 • no social contacts  
 • no affiliation / belonging

The larger the city, the larger these problems

Pfarrer Sieber staff tries to stabilize lifes; little chance of full reintegration

**Spirituality / God plays role in converting lifes ("first, they consumed drugs, then God")**

**Johverlust**  
 Unemployment  
 Gesundheitsprobleme  
 Einsamkeit  
 Illness  
 Loneliness

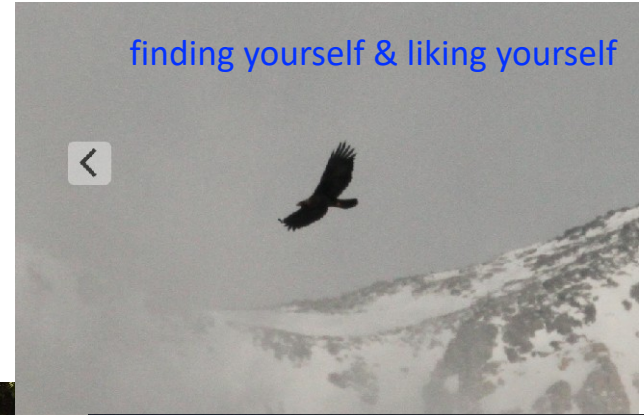
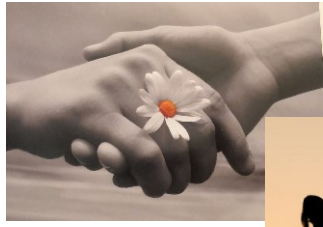
**Alkohol**  
 Alcohol

**Sucht**  
 Addiction

**Schulden**  
 Debts  
 Crisis in relationship  
 Beziehungskrise



# Collage of **My Life**: Crises, Coping, Chan(g/c)es



# Broken for Life

Jocelyn Bell Burnell

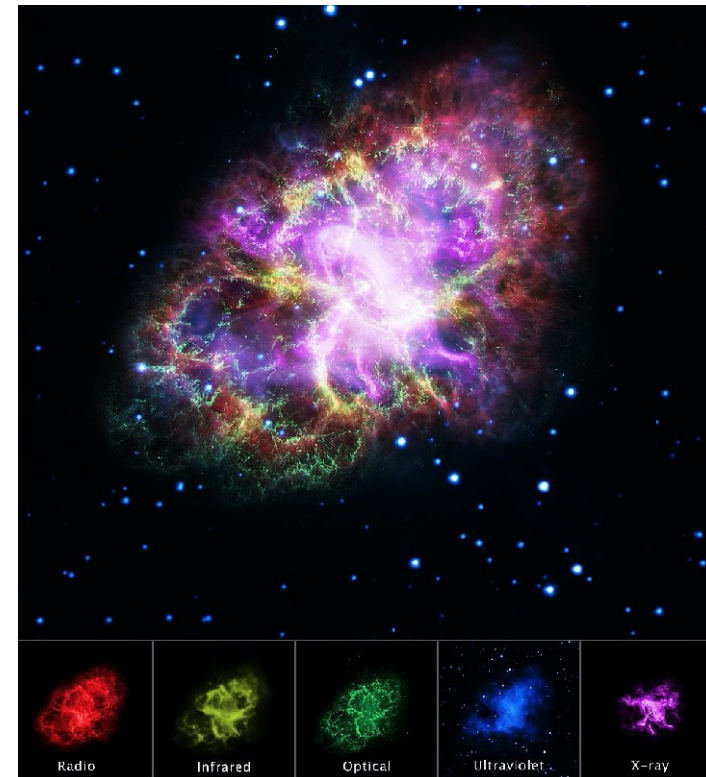
Swarthmore Lecture 1989



JBB in 2009

## Crab nebula:

remnant of 1054 supernova;  
Center of crab nebula is a  
**rotating neutron star**, which  
emits very **regularly pulses** of  
ranging from **radio signals** to  
gamma rays.



# **Twin themes of the book:**

**a) broken for the rest of live**

**b) broken in order to give life**

**Book examines living with wounds that won't mend (quickly)  
and the healing that the wounded may bring.**

*Just as the broken stone reveals things that were not previously visible, can the wounded person offer something to the rest of us*

# Introduction

*Texts from the book in purple*

In our society **success, health, wealth and achievement are applauded**: to be positive is an important attitude. **Wholeness is assumed** and subjects like failure, pain, disability are not always acknowledged. Perhaps even our Society, **the Religious Society of Friends, is not exempt from this attitude**. Being an active Friend is commended. **Our Advices and Queries**, which offer guidance about spiritual and temporal life, **presume a competent, controlled way of life** and fail adequately to recognize old age, illness, handicap.

Perhaps **more people than we imagine at first have experience of living with pain, with hurts that won't mend**, with the broken or the imperfect. Amongst my friends are several families where there is a **child, or children, with an incurable disease**. In some cases the child will lead a relatively normal life; in others the parents will probably outlive the child. There are adults, too, with disabilities and handicaps, and people who have been badly hurt by things that have happened to them in life: **perhaps the break-up of a marriage, a period of unemployment, the death of somebody close to them** (... and, of course, **"all of the above" misfortunes**).

# The “Happy Ending Syndrome”

- Are we hooked on the happy ending?
  - Do we find pain too uncomfortable to face?
  - What keeps us from opening ourselves to the reality of the world?
  - Could it be that we cannot accept our powerlessness and are only willing to see those wounds that we can heal?
- 
- It is hard to allow these questions to go beyond the level of rhetoric and to sense in our innermost self **how much we resent our powerlessness?**
  - Can you find a **wholeness that includes pain** and a readiness to suffer?

# Brokenness

*The broken shell reveals  
the beauty of its whorl.  
The broken home reveals  
the beauty of its hall.  
The broken life reveals  
the beauty of us all.*

Nina Steane, 1988



*Broken Tea Cup – Buddhism*

*Cracks are gilded!*

# Why is there suffering?

## The suffering servant (Isaiah: 4-6 NEB):

*Yet on himself he bore our sufferings,  
our torments he endured,  
while we counted him smitten by God,  
struck down by disease and misery;  
but he was pierced for our transgressions,  
tortured for our iniquities;  
the chastisement he bore is health for us  
and by his scourging we are healed.*

The servant is aware that God has chosen him for an important role and his close fellowship with God helps him bear the suffering. He knows that in the end there will be vindication and honour. Meanwhile he suffers for the sake of others, other he may not know. **His suffering borne willingly becomes God's power for restoring, renewing humankind** (p. 20+21).

When we speak in our **Quaker meetings for worship**, however, we do so believing that we are **being God's agents**, and in other forms of service we may similarly have that sense. One of our functions as agents is to **help heal breaches on the relationship between God and humans**. We all participate in the give and take of everyday life and know how unselfish actions can help the world along (p. 21).

# Why is there suffering?

“And I told him at that time the sins of mankind were upon him, and their inequities and transgressions with which he was wounded, which he was to bear, and to be an offering for them as he was man, but died not as he was God; and so, in that he died for all men, and tasted death for every man, he was an offering for the sins of the whole world”

George Fox in response to Priest Stephen, in J.L. Nickalls: The Journal of George Fox, 1952.

The suffering servant theme, however, has been developed; the crucifixion is believed to be a once-and-for all offering by Christ, for the sins of the whole world.

This is not simply an offering by a man but in the sense a sacrifice offered by God himself – the **suffering on the cross** is not a price paid to win God’s love, but **is the suffering of that love itself**. Through the crucifixion God’s grace is poured out to all the Earth; in addition to overcoming sin the **crucifixion marks a new relationship between God and humankind** (p. 23).



# Why is there suffering?

What **God is saying to us through the crucifixion** is ... “Forgive yourself; accept the frailties of others. **Be reassured that however far you feel you have fallen from grace you have not put yourself beyond the pale, beyond the bounds of my love**” (p. 24)

**There is a lot more in the crucifixion besides the message of triumph over sin and death.** It demonstrates to us the depth of God’s love; it shows that soft options are not always available; it reminds us that powerlessness can be a way; **it teaches us that suffering, sorrow and defeat have strengths** (p. 24).



Christianity has always insisted that the **cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. To be a Christian, one must take up his cross**, with all of its difficulties and agonizing and tragedy-packed content, and carry it **until that very cross leaves its mark upon us** and redeems us to that more excellent way which comes only through suffering” (p. 25).

Martin Luther King, “Strength to Love”  
1964



*Agnus Dei*

# Coping

- one must **come to terms with own suffering**, before one can help others
  - find + accept help from others, especially from people who understand and will stick with the pain (in contrast to those who just say so...) – **problem recognized and called it by its name is a vital first step**; others have experienced agony too
  - the paradox: **beginning of healing is in the solidarity with the pain** (p. 32)
  - to comfort, one has to be more **concerned with the need and feelings of the sufferer than with one's own** (i.e. don't minimise, disguise, criticise his/her emotions; if they need to blame God, blame other`s, blame themselves – let them)
  - the most painful situations are those that are apparently beyond our control → **helplessness and loss of control** are immediate and frequent symptoms of crises
  - accept that there is unfairness, uncertainty, fear, loneliness and hurt in the world
  - for some: struggle provokes growth; **we can grow in depth and grace** (self-reflection)
- What is striking about this approach (TG: personal struggle) is that the **suffering is not overcome ... or put behind us, but lived with and transcended or transmuted. To achieve this takes a lot of thought, searching and prayer . . .**

## Central quotes

“The maturity we seek as whole people, whole Christians, comes very often through pain”.

Mary Endersbee, 1981

“How else but through a broken heart  
May Lord Christ enter in?”

Oscar Wilde, 1978

“My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;  
a wounded heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

(King David, in Psalm 51: 17 NEB)

# Jacob

... Jacob wrestled with a man until daybreak ... Jacob's hip was dislocated as they wrestled ...

- The man said: "Let me go, for day is breaking", but Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me". He said to Jacob, "What is your name", and he answered "Jacob". The man said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you strove with God and with men, and prevailed". And he gave him his blessing.

➤ Note that **Jacob is left wounded** and may even bear the mark of that encounter for the rest of his life. **Healing so as to eradicate all trace of the encounter is not part of the package.**



# Accepting the constraint and the change

A constraint need not be a limitation; accepted, it may become the medium for something ... (FILL IN what suits you)

- Accept your constraint(s) = face it/them, don't run away from it / them
- don't succumb to it – rather use it, exploit it (we have to wrestle as Jacob did)
- see your hardship as what it is: a pain, a challenge AND a chance for renewal
- Instead of becoming less myself by suffering, I become more myself; instead of ceasing to live because of what I suffer, I live more fully and deeply because of it
- **Suffering remains as the medium and the agent of fulfilment and the happiness** (just as Christ bears the marks of the nail and the spear after his resurrection) (p. 50)
- There is a **cyclical nature to many things with breaking down being a vital part of the cycle**; without the breaking the cycle is halted. But in the cycle a reincarnation, or rejuvenation, a building up again is intimately associated with the breaking down . . .
- The **brokenness is justified by what follows after**.
- The **wounded offer a special ministry**; this is in part through a sensitivity ... and through an **identification with the situation, a congruence of experience**. There are things only the wounded can do . . .

## Conclusion “Broken for Life”

- Making ourselves and our experience available for use by God is ... key to much of this; an attitude of openness and offering is required.
- Even if we feel we have only pain and discord to offer to God, it is important that we offer it.
- Our vulnerability may be all we can reach out with.
- Many of us find it difficult to allow ourselves to be made available in this way, but **the more we have faced pain the more whole we are**, and the more capable we are of suffering and of loving.
- Then our brokenness, made available to God, leads to renewal and recreation. **Through our vulnerability we become channels of comfort and consolation.**
- **By our faithfulness in risking ourselves we open barriers and enable God’s grace to flow into the world.**

# Research on “failing better”

**Prof. Dr. Theo Wehner** (ETHZ Emeritus):

Talk on “Psychological Resiliency”

Nov 1, 2018

## Those “fail better” that have/come with:

- strong self-confidence (be “*tough* on yourself”)
- active coping (*awareness of stressor*, reducing negative outcome)
- perceived self-efficacy (“*my skills / talents* are able to handle this ...”)
- optimism (focus on things that *can be done*)
- social network / *seek support*
- *cognitive dealing* with situation (*leave victim role*)
- ***spirituality***
- *positive experience* in previous stress situations

“All of old.  
Nothing else ever.  
Ever tried.  
Ever failed.  
No matter.  
Try again.  
Fail again.  
Fail better.”

Samuel Beckett, 1983  
“Worstward Ho”

Antonovsky’s concept of **salutogenesis** (1977):

- what keeps us healthy?
- strong sense of **coherence**:
  - **comprehensibility**
  - **manageability**
  - **meaningfulness**

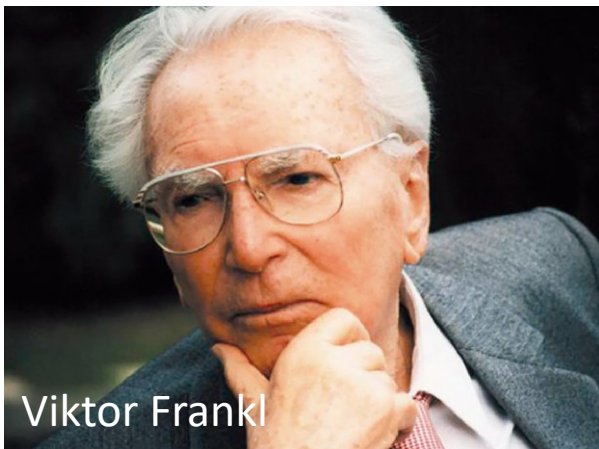
# Resiliency



**Examples: what do they have in common?**

## Resilient personalities:

- know what is good for them and pursue that
- know what they can and cannot do
- know on how to obtain what they need
- know that someone is there for them
  
- cherish things they consider good
- have a strong self-confidence (“can do” attitude)
- can block out distractions and disturbances
- are internally relaxed, humorous and **thankful**





# Resiliency Research

Prof. Theo Wehner (ETHZ Emeritus) und Marina Berini (Personal + Resiliency Coach)

presentations Nov 1, 2018

## The 7 factors promoting / supporting resiliency:

- **acceptance** (of things the way they are in the sense of the *AA serenity prayer*)
- **optimism** (approach problems in a positive manner; see coherence - *manageability*)
- **solution-driven thinking and acting** (not “who did it” ... but “*how can we solve it*”)
- **becoming responsible** (move from passive sufferer to *active “sculptur” of your destiny*)
- **leave role as a victim** (*overcome your feeling of powerlessness and helplessness*)
- **start / continue networking** (*re-built supportive and soothing contacts*)
- **envision future events** (*have visions + perspectives + projects, include worst-case scenarios*).

# How does one interact with a suffering person?

Dipl.-Psych. Jutta Stahl, ZHAW School of Applied Psychology

Talk on “Raus aus der Negativ Spirale”

Sept. 02., 2019

## Tips handling depressive patients

Helpful / Use is advised	Not helpful / Abstain from
Focus on what still can be done	Appeasement
Focus on available resources	Consolation & Promises
Show empathy and understanding	Comparisons
Offer concrete help	”Pull yourself together”
Expect no gratitude	Pity
Expect long-time inconveniences	Militaristic friend-enemy language
Uphold own limitations	Naïve outlooks (“as good as new”)
Motivate for professional help	Pseudo-expertise when, in fact, clueless

**... and start by simply listening: as sign of respecting their situation and to indicate your aim of restoring a little bit of self-control in his/her life.**