

Past, present and future resilience

Shamshad Khan

Heightened sensitivity and the ability to feel intensely are accepted attributes for a poet. Poets have a history of going under, not surviving, let alone flourishing in our professions. If we are to cherish our sensibilities, we need to manage the dangers. We need to learn how to dive for poetic treasures and surface safely.

Under my duvet with pen and paper. Poetry books scattered on the bed around me. I tip the last chocolate flakes along an open yellow funnel, mindfully melting away. What I love to do helps me write from a place of deeper intuition. Some resilient actions I take instinctively, others I have learnt as part of my working practice.

Observing the lives of contemporary poets, it is evident that certain social constraints and pressures experienced by poets of the last century still prevail. However, the landscape has changed – my own trajectory is evidence of that. I embrace a new wave of optimism. Any current inequalities for women and marginalised groups being acknowledged and set aside as the present-past. This is not a soft option or a sell-out. It requires hardcore rewiring of old habits of thought and perceived realities. It means savouring small pleasures here and now as a recipe for future thriving.

The ability to recover quickly from setbacks, cope with everyday pressures of life and adapt to change is all part of resilience. Whilst resilience is determined by factors including our genes and past experiences, our current thoughts and actions are also factors. Neural rewiring of our brains is achieved by systematically focusing on success rather than on limitations; remembering happy times and uplifting facts. In a nutshell, being and reso-

nating with the future we want.

As new technologies bring a faster pace of change, we all need more than ever to be able to adapt. Interestingly, poetry, with its use of words and images, integrates the left and right hemispheres of the brain, so it is itself a reliable way to decondition old patterns of thoughts and feelings. (I'm referring here to *Bouncing Back* by Linda Graham.) We could say that resilient societies need poetry and therefore poets. We are doing ourselves and society a service when we learn how to be poets and resilient.

I want to end by mentioning Chanje Kunda as an example of a poet successfully exploring ways to thrive. Chanje attended a resilience course I delivered in Manchester in 2019. In her latest show, *Plant Fetish*, she references her personal journey of well-being. We see her in lotus pose breathing deeply. Discarding things that do not give her joy, we laugh with her as she is left with only a handful of skimpy knickers after an over-enthusiastic clear out. We relate to her lust for change, recognise her desire for an eligible lover. We cheer her on as she eyes up an unsuspecting parlour palm as a potential suitor. She questions the glass of red wine she uses as a prop. We stretch with her, discovering that bliss is elastic.

Whether we draw on the writings of Virginia Woolf to stake out a personal space for ourselves or Audre Lorde to galvanise our spirits with powerful agency, for me it's the poetic life and work of living poets such as Kunda that delights and warmly celebrates the humanness I'm speaking of. Be good to yourself. Resilience is easy, simply follow your fetish.

Shamshad Khan

Shamshad Khan is a poet and resilience coach. She works with individuals and organisations using writing and coaching techniques to empower and engage. Her poetry collection *Megalomaniac*, published by Salt (2007) has

been studied on the Lancaster University English Literature degree course. Her work has been featured on BBC Radio 3 and 4.

Shamshad has collaborated with artists and theatres including Horse and Bamboo Puppet Theatre as co-writer/director of the multi-media show *The Moonwatcher* (2018). She worked with Olympias Music on *Making Manchester*, a show combining physical theatre, music and poetry (RNCM, 2019), and on 'Dancing with Words' (Books UpNorth, 2019).

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A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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