Many people are inspired by others who have passed on from this life but made a lasting impression on them and their values. Sometimes clarity about what is important comes from remembering that our time here is limited.

I am fortunate enough to have inherited a wealth of life lessons. My father, a police officer for 40 years, passed away this August. I learned from the successes and misfortunes throughout his police career and personal life. He inspired me in life and continues to be a model for my process of building a resilient life.

There are many other sources of inspiration living among us now. Last year I was giving a talk on building resilience and asked a large roomful of police officers who they identified as a person who embodied the idea of resilience. After a few moments of awkward silence, I began to hear a rumbling and laughter in the back of the room. I asked what was being discussed and an officer replied that they could easily tell me who wasn’t a role model for resilience an officer that motivated him and others in what NOT to do to survive the psychological demands of police work.

This didn’t surprise me; I have heard it regularly in my current research on resilience. Police officers, not unlike people in other situations, learn what doesn’t work for them by looking at the bad experiences of others.

In my years as a police officer I heard of many instances of a policy being informally referred to by the name of the officer whose behaviour led to its creation. I think there is much to be gained from knowing what we don’t want to be. Many younger officers look at their parents’ over-commitment to work and the costs of this extreme level of dedication.

Learning vicariously from the misfortunes of others only takes us so far in building our resilience. Sure, we can say we will do the opposite of what they did but I don’t believe that is enough direction to always work out well. For instance, if we determine that another person was over-committed to their work and we believe it resulted in burnout, do we under-commit to our work? A middle ground level of commitment? What does that even mean?

I think we have to take ourselves a bit further by clarifying what we DO want in our lives, not just what we DON’T want. It is important to identify a positive model for resilience. This could be one person or a combination of people.

If you know the person(s) and interact with them regularly, you can observe and even inquire about how they are able to achieve and maintain a resilient life. How do they manage complications shift work, health concerns, parenting and financial issues?

You shouldn’t limit yourself to people you have access to. I have been inspired by people I don’t know personally. I have read about them or their work and their values resonate with mine. I believe it requires that you identify what matters most to you. What do you value? What kind of life do you want? What kind of person do you want to be?

What lessons do you want your children to learn from the life you are living? (After all... you are their model.)

Once we have some answers to these questions, we are better able to connect with those who are similar and develop strategies for crafting a meaningful life which, in turn, boosts our resilience.

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