



# Surviving Survival: The Art and Science of Resilience

*Laurence Gonzales*

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The shark attacked while she was snorkeling, tearing through Micki Glenn's breast and shredding her right arm. Her husband, a surgeon, saved her life on the spot, but when she was safely home she couldn't just go on with her life. She had entered an even more profound survival journey: the aftermath.

The survival experience changes everything because it invalidates all your previous adaptations, and the old rules don't apply. In some cases survivors suffer more in the aftermath than they did during the actual crisis. In all cases, they have to work hard to reinvent themselves. Drawing on gripping cases across a wide range of life-threatening experiences, Laurence Gonzales fashions a compelling argument about fear, courage, and the adaptability of the human spirit. Micki Glenn was later moved to say: "I don't regret that this happened to me. [It] has been . . . probably the single most positive experience I've ever had."

## **Surviving Survival: The Art and Science of Resilience Details**

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Author : Laurence Gonzales

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## From Reader Review Surviving Survival: The Art and Science of Resilience for online ebook

### Katie Lynn says

Notes to self:

I had a lot marked in this book to review and contemplate more fully. Unfortunately a certain three-year-old boy I know decided it would be thrilling to remove many of my markers. sigh

Love this one on dreams:

"Dreams and dreamlike states are a real and necessary work space in many types of pursuits, because a vast landscape lies beneath our conscious, deliberate lives. ...It is as if we stand on the bow of a great ship with no idea who the captain is, nor what his intentions are, nor what powers far beneath the deck are taking us from place to remarkable place."

And this lengthy bit on travel:

"Every time you travel to an unfamiliar environment, your brain undergoes an important transformation. ...Having an accurate mental map of your environment is extremely important if you're an animal that likes to do things such as eat and avoid predators. Without an up-to-date mental map, you might as well be dead. In fact, your emotional system sets off alarm signals when the map in your head doesn't match the environment. When your emotional system is disrupted by trauma, all that activity can have a salutary effect. ...Those structures in the brain did not evolve with an interpretation of the world that includes the concept of tourism. The emergency of being lost is frightening. Your emotional brain considers it an urgent business. So your brain gets very busy when you're in an unfamiliar place, but busy in a way that you can't perceive at a conscious level. You can feel it getting busy, but you don't know quite what you're feeling. You may simply say that it's exciting to travel, because even while the amygdala is trying to create an emergency response and the hippocampus trying to take in all this new information for its cartographic endeavors, the conscious and rational part of your brain knows that you're safe. So even as the unconscious part of your brain is working as if it's an emergency, your frontal lobes are putting a damper on the response with the aid of reason and logic and the reassuring knowledge that you're safe. It is the tension, the struggle, between these two parts of the brain, that lends an air of fun and excitement to travel."

main characteristics of someone who can decipher their "new life": able to laugh at himself; dedicated to helping; strong social support; true gratitude; humble and maintains his cool; willing to take risks to better himself; will not roll over and quit

Assertive Aggression: activity that arises from a dopamine-fueled motivation (job promotion, home remodel, finding a spouse). Assertive Aggression involves a plan and carrying it out.

Pleasure (the reward system of dopamine) is life's way of telling you that you're doing something right. You have to find a way to get some joy or things will get worse, not better.

This step also helps you develop an internal locus of control, which reinforces the idea that you have some influence over your life.

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### Alisa Kester says

Completely fascinating. And if anything horrible has happened to destroy your life, this book might actually

bring you genuine help and relief.

Loved the confirmation that state of consciousness my brain enters while I write is most like that of a state we normally enter only while asleep. Makes sense, because I certainly feel the \*exact\* same feeling of grogginess when I come out of writing, as when I come out of sleep. Also it's interesting that walking induces theta rhythms in the hippocampus and hypnagogic states that look like sleep. No wonder so many people like Newton and Einstein were compulsive walkers!

Also...knitting. That chapter was worth the price of the book alone. Who knew something as simple as knitting could be so tremendously helpful?

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### **Melissa says**

Say you got lucky when that grizzly bear tried to eat you & he failed. You've been injured horribly but you're still alive. Or your boat sinks & you're adrift for days & your friends go crazy & get eaten by sharks, but you're rescued. What comes next? Do you ride off into the sunset & live happily ever after or are you emotionally scarred & suffering? This is a wonderful book. While it's not as anecdote-heavy as *Deep Survival*, it's almost just as good, an in-depth look at how humans adapt (or not) & survive the new life they're given after a catastrophic event and why our brains are actually pretty cool even though sometimes they get in our way. It also contains some of the most spot-on writing I've ever read that captures what it feels like to be a mother.

"While the baby is building her emotional system, watching, imitating, exploring the world through her mother, it's not a one-way process. The child is also building new spaces inside the mother's brain. Through their interaction, mother and child build these spaces. These are physical spaces filled with neurons and cell assemblies that are dedicated to the child, that are owned by the child . . . the child's colonies in the mother's brain are like an archipelago of neural networks that involve sight, smell, touch, hearing, and many more subtle and unconscious channels of communication . . ."

"The arms are very important. The arms and the hands. The child in your arms makes the space in your brain. New connections form among neurons, new assemblies of cells that hunger to be occupied by the child. . . . Your fingers inscribe a map of the child that can be read, that must be read, by that sensing area of your brain. Those maps are infused with meaning through your emotional system so that the fingers and hands and arms crave the ecstatic touch of the child. . . . The Where Pathway in the parietal lobe of your brain knows the extent of the child, where she is in space, and precisely where your hands and arms must go to hold her. You can lose your keys because they have no emotional claim on you. You cannot lose your child. Once those maps are engraved, you can't lose the child even if she's gone. Neurologically speaking, the child becomes another limb, an organ." Yes, exactly. I've been reading & thinking about being a parent a lot lately & this is simply the best way I've ever seen it put. That's how being a mom feels to me.

In short, if you have a premonition that a man you've just met might be about to kill you with an axe, don't marry him. If you have a bone marrow transplant, moving to another country & learning a new language just might help you regain a sense of self. If that guy at the end of the bridge seems strange to you, he probably is. And even though programs that teach war veterans how to fly fish or knit might seem hokey, they're actually perfect, since basically your brain can rage & want to hurt things or it can learn, but it can't do both at the same time. Read this book!

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### **Dominica says**

Brilliant book. The stories of the survivors are compelling and memorable. But what makes this book even more worth reading is the way in which Laurence Gonzales then uses these stories as a way to talk about the strategies these remarkable people used to deal with the ongoing memories of the traumas they had lived through. His explanations of how our brains (and bodies) deal with life after survival are fascinating. Best of all is the list of characteristics humans have developed to deal with life-altering trauma, and how to cultivate them. I work in an independent bookstore, and I will be recommending this book to our customers!

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### **Gea says**

This is beautiful, inspiring, heart breaking and powerful. What an incredible follow up to Deep Survival. There is a lot of science here but also incredible stories of unbelievable trauma and resilience. Some of their stories, particularly the survivor of the Nazi Death Brigade, brought me to tears. Gonzales is a deeply sensitive writer with a warrior's heart and a poet's eye.

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### **Katherine Addison says**

This is essentially a sequel to DEEP SURVIVAL, asking a question I'm always interested in: what happens after the story is over? After the drama and the catastrophe and the triumph of the protagonist over impossible odds . . . what happens next? I'm interested in this in fiction, but also interested in the same question in real life: how do people deal with HAVING SURVIVED?

Gonzales examines a number of case studies, some from his own interviews, some from books that the survivors have written, some from both. None of his conclusions is terribly surprising, but it's good to see them written down: stay engaged with the world, look for humor, find ways to help other people. (Altruism seems to be a remarkably powerful tool for helping human beings adapt to their situation.)

Gonzales is an excellent writer, and SURVIVING SURVIVAL is an extremely readable book. It lacks the teeth of DEEP SURVIVAL, which was as much about why people die in crisis situations as about why they live, and had the added scarlet thread of Gonzales' own obsession (which you can see as a virtue or a defect, depending), but if you're interested in the question he's asking--for personal reasons or otherwise--it is well worth the read.

Gonzales also earns extra points from me for not falling into one of the traps that Sherwood fell into in THE SURVIVORS CLUB. Gonzales' stories are not simplistic triumphs and they don't all end happily. He recognizes that survival, like other phases of life, is both joyful and sad, funny and painful. He's very clear that after surviving a catastrophe (crocodile attack, shark attack, bear attack, husband attack . . . and I sound like I'm being glib there, but I'm not: two of his survivors are women who came very close to being killed by their husbands), the survivor can't go back. Things can't be the way they were before. They can only be the way they're going to be now.

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### **Gina says**

This book on the psychology of trauma and surviving trauma goes beyond most action/survival/adventure stories to ask "What then?" What happens to the person after they survive? A shark attack, an attempted murder, war, a bear attack - all the survivors were left with trauma that needed to be healed or calmed. He relates useful information, and also explains the science of the nervous system and the brain in terms of trauma and healing. Fascinating, instructive, useful, and well written. I could not put it down. A must read for everyone whether you've lived through a traumatic situation or not. Very informative.

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### **Deb says**

\*\* Living with while living on.\*\*

There are those books you read that are intellectually satisfying, and those that are emotionally stimulating. This one is both!

Laurence Gonzales melds his incredible writing talent with his curiosity, compassion, and personal journey to bring grounding to the earth-shaking aftermath of trauma. His second book in exploring the impact of trauma, *\_Surviving Survival\_* poignantly conveys how trauma recovery is not a matter of getting over, but of getting on:

“When I wrote Deep Survival, I was attempting to deal with brief intervals in the lives of people, the times they’ve had to muster all their resources to live through a specific, isolated event. But now, as I look at entire lives spanning many decades, I can see them as a series of journeys through survival, like moving through the swell of waves, some towering, some small. There is no resting place. Things are not settled until death. There is only the question of whether we will have the depth and poise, the grace, to sail through the next storm...Life in the aftermath may be even more dramatic, sometimes more painful, than the experience of survival itself. But it can be beautiful and fulfilling, too, and a more lasting achievement than the survival that began it all. What comes after survival is, after all, the rest of your life.”  
(pp. 183, 7).

Living on after a traumatic event entails living with the aftermath. Weaving together what he has learned from his work with trauma survivors and the neurological underpinnings of trauma recovery, Laurence creates an approach using 12 key strategies for moving forward after a trauma (pp. 211-218):

1. Want it, need it, have it.

Devote yourself passionately to something: an art, craft, a musical instrument, a language, a horse, or your own education. Your pursuit can be anything. At first, you will want it. Then, if you persist, you will grow passionate and need it, for it will have formed maps in your brain. In embracing this strategy, you are in effect imagining your ideal self. It also helps you develop an internal locus of control, which reinforces the idea that you have some influence over your life.

2. Be here now.

This is the strategy of mindfulness. We must strive for this level of attention even when there seems to be no

emergency. Life is the emergency. What seems trivial can become monumental. This strategy also dispels illusions and makes you flexible.

### 3. Be patient.

Everything takes eight times as long as it's supposed to. As noted by Zen master Eugene Herrigel: "The more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for the sake of hitting the goal, the less you will succeed in the one and the further the other will recede." In other words, surrender control of the outcome and trust the process. Do your work, then step back.

### 4. Be tough.

Learn to suffer well. "To achieve the greatest psychological health, some kind of suffering is \*necessary.\* When suffering does happen to you, expect it and experience it: "This is my suffering. It is my turn to suffer." Use it to prepare for the next stage in the journey of survival. Another way to be tough is to exercise, to eat well, and to stay strong and healthy, while at the same time practicing what is difficult. "Here's a straw: Suck it up."

### 5. Get the small picture.

People who suffer do not have to suffer all the time. Even those in Nazi death camps found beauty and inspiration in their days. Find one thing each day to possess as your own and to feel good about. Then try finding two.

### 6. Put things in their place.

Traumatic memories don't go away. Rituals are one way of controlling when and how you experience them. If the memories are encapsulated in a ritual time and place, they are less able to torment you the rest of the time. You create a new set of retrieval cues for those memories. That puts you in charge, so that the memories occur when and where you want them. This type of activity also reduces your chances of falling into depression by introducing predictability and controllability into the experience of pain. Putting things into place also means facing your fears. By facing your fears and putting them into a rational context, you regain control of emotions and introduce predictability into what you feel. You eliminate the element of surprise.

### 7. Work, work, work.

Staying busy is the most effective means of adaptation after a trauma. This step can also be used in the short term for troubles less serious than major trauma. It's a good everyday coping tactic.

### 8. See one, do one, teach one.

This three-step strategy first involves the idea of seeing one, either literally or in your imagination, when you desire something. Doing one is about actually working to execute what you've seen. The third element of this strategy involves altruism: doing for others, not for yourself alone. In doing so, you can practice the posture of being the rescuer, not the victim. Having a higher purpose in your efforts can take you out of yourself and make you feel more effective, more in control, more powerful.

### 9. Touch someone.

Staying socially connected is one of the most important and effective adaptations. This means staying close to family and friends and making a decision to be with people who have the right attitudes. People who are socially connected and healthier and live longer. Being socially connected also means physical touching. Like our ancestors, we humans thrive on the physical touch of others. Touching can reduce pain, relieve depression, lower stress hormones, and improve the functioning of the immune system. Skin-to-skin contact reduces pain and produces oxytocin, the hormone of love.

## 10. Be grateful.

Whatever the survival event was, you're here to deal with it. No matter how crazy your life seems at the moment, being alive is cause for celebration, for only the living can celebrate. And most people can find much more to enjoy than breathing in and breathing out. Above all, avoid self-pity.

## 11. Walk the walk.

Act as if you're better. Find small things that you can do that give you a sense of being normal.

## 12. Life is deep; shallow up.

Humor is essential, quieting the amygdala and reducing stress. Laugh at the world. Laugh at yourself.

Although trauma can no doubt be devastating, it can also be a catalyst for a more deep and meaningful life.

Surviving Survival offers the hope and framework for living with while living on.

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## **Johanna Rothman says**

It doesn't matter if you have had an "event" or not. You should read this book.

Gonzales writes the drama of the events magnificently. You could read the book for that. And, where people have let him into their daily lives, post-event, where they cope with the loss, the day-to-day \*living\*, that is where the book shines.

I found great comfort in knowing I didn't have to "talk through" the craziness that happened to me. That sublimation was a great thing. In fact, he suggests

- Sublimation
- Altruism
- Suppression
- Anticipation
- Humor

I can do that! In fact, that's exactly what I do. Because if you have had a random thing happen to you, as I have, you can't make sense of it. Why bother? It's not worth the time or aggravation. You move on. And, every so often, it still comes up with a two-by-four to hit you upside the head and say, "I'm here." That's why I found Chapter 14, "The Science of Adaptation: There's No Revenge Like Success," so helpful.

And, Chapter 15, his twelve rules to live by, are surprisingly close to my "system" for managing my new life. My full review on my blog is here: <http://wp.me/p1MbJp-kO>

We all have disruptions in our lives. We all need to adapt. Gonzales has written a masterful book about how to live a life. No matter what.

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## **OnceMoreWithFailing says**

This book relies a little too heavily on lurid survivor stories. Even though it has some solid strategies for

coping with and recovering from trauma, it often comes across as trauma porn. Over half of the book relies on the gory details of various personal disasters in order to drive home the idea that if these people can do this, so can you. It's fascinating, but also unfortunate that audiences have a taste for reading about others' pain for the shock value alone. Gonzalez seems to be well aware of the fact that stuff like this sells. It always has.

He eventually addresses this, though the way he does it comes across as a bit disingenuous. He mentions that considering the fact that other people have it worse than you do can be a powerful coping mechanism...and then he couches that statement in a more positive, general recommendation for altruism and empathy. It stumbles into territory that I like to call the "Pain Olympics," in which people compete to decide whose pain is worse. He even goes as far as mentioning that he has had his own traumatic experiences, but decided not to go into detail in the book, because he felt guilty knowing that others had clearly suffered more than he had. These sentiments rely on pity and self-directed guilt for having suffered at all, which runs contrary to the overall message of the book. Why bother mentioning it, unless it was a half-hearted attempt to say, "Hey, I've suffered too, so I'm not really using these people for my own ends?" Immediately afterward, he mentions that his wife suffered from traumatic events in her life...and gives more details about her than he did himself. He relies on other people as the emotional heart of his work, but I was just left feeling like he used them.

The last three, brief chapters contain most of the beneficial strategies, and the rest of the book has some decent information about brain function and behavior associated with trauma survivors. Given the over-reliance on stories of "extreme" trauma, he misses a few important points:

- 1) There is exactly one chapter--plus another couple of sentences--that doesn't regard people who haven't responded with desirable coping mechanisms as inferior. That chapter ends badly for its subject, and the author specifically notes that he included this story so as not to pretend that everything ends well for trauma survivors. Of course, anyone can see the conclusion from a mile away, because Gonzalez clearly pushes you in that direction, throughout.
- 2) When dissociation is listed as an "Immature Defense," he completely fails to note that dissociation is often part of the natural "fight-or-flight" response when faced with extreme stress--i.e., the victim may not be in control during dissociative states. Instead, dissociation is treated as an "ineffective strategy," placing fault with the victim. Basically, this seems to be a hole in his otherwise fairly thorough research.
- 2) As a result of the idea of engaging in the Pain Olympics, he almost completely dismisses everyday suffering in favor of telling the more sensational stories. WWII epics and stories of various animal attacks are given significantly more real estate than cancer survivors, for instance.
- 3) He presents snippets of established research on mirror neurons, "flow," intuition, and learning for mastery...but sometimes adds buzzwords in an effort to rebrand prior sources. For example, he references a number of concepts popularized by Malcolm Gladwell, and only gets deliberate when it comes to either a) his own previous book (really?), or b) the Study of Adult Development.
- 4) Though his recommendations for survival are well-worth considering and using on a regular basis, he completely ignores medical interventions. Counseling/therapy are mentioned in the context of individual survivor stories, but never as an actual coping strategy. He never once mentions psychiatric care or medication. Given that many sufferers of PTSD, anxiety, and depression rely on a multitude of strategies, including meds, it would have been more responsible to include a section on the subject, regardless of how Gonzalez chose to present it (positive/negative/neutral).

5) The chapter on travel, though accurate in terms of how it describes forming new mental models and maps of consciousness, is ridiculous. It relies heavily on privilege and fails to recognize poverty, disability, and other realities that make travel extremely difficult for many people. All he would have had to do is acknowledge that fact, but he chose not to do so.

Overall, I was a little disappointed with the overall tone of this book. That said, it did offer some reasonable and important strategies used by successful survivors. It is worth reading for that reason alone.

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### **Claudia Putnam says**

I'm not sure the 4-star rating would mean much to others. I got a lot out of this book, but it's mostly a synthetic project, which means that for each section there is original work that probably goes deeper and may be better rendered. However, this book delivers a lot of rich material in a convenient package that, for me, provided food for thought.

Such as:

How the sixth sense works--not as extrasensory, but as the underpinning of our senses, and often the key to our survival, if we can listen to it. Sometimes an added reason for PTSD, if we don't.

The ability to let go as a key to resilience. For example, amputees often do better than those who try to hang on to limbs.

Suppressing painful memories is often more adaptive--our World War II and Depression Era parents were onto something.

The book is spotty and it depends on what strikes you. But for me, as with his other book, Deep Survival, the couple of key insights that hit me were well worth sifting through what I already knew.

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### **Hayley says**

A very interesting book about what happens after surviving a traumatic event. Not limiting itself to PTSD, it explores coping, resilience, emotion and starting over with intense case studies and eloquent explanations based on neuroscience.

But Gonzales also makes a few dubious claims in his attempt to wax lyrical about the evolution and nature of being human. Without proper referencing it's hard to distinguish fact from fanciful and unsubstantiated musings.

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## **Christopher Brennan says**

Man I wish I'd read this when I bought it. Or two years ago. Or last year. Still, glad I made time for it.

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## **Michelle says**

I picked up this book because I was very interested in the topic of how people recover (or don't) from traumatic, life-threatening events. I don't think Gonzales has more real answers to this question than could fill a long magazine article.

Full length review: <http://perpetualspiralreviews.blogspot.com/2011/03/review-pts-dissociation.html>

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## **David says**

### **Great book for those dealing with pts**

I am a firefighter emt with experience in trauma. This book provided perspective on my own experiences as well as strategies to help overcome the effects in myself and others. Thank you to the author. I highly recommend this book for anyone with pts or dealing with others who are suffering from its effects.

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