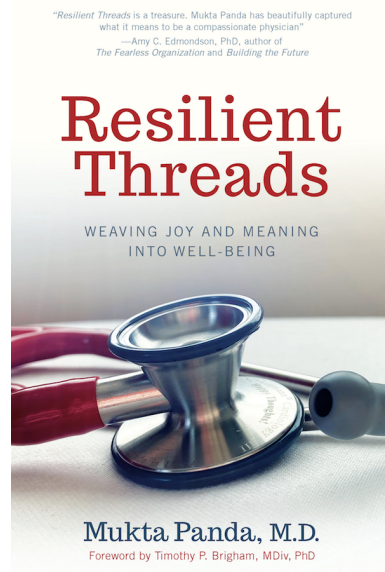


BOOK EXCERPT



RESILIENT THREADS

Weaving Joy and Meaning into Well-Being
by Mukta Panda, MD

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I'm grateful to Mukta for having the courage to share how she keeps her heart open despite heartbreak, and is teaching her medical students and residents to do the same. Internal medicine may be Mukta's clinical speciality, but she is a healer of the inner life as well.

— Parker J. Palmer, author of *The Courage to Teach*,
A Hidden Wholeness, and *Let Your Life Speak*

Recharging in Real Time

— from chapter 17, "A How to Live Curriculum"

I precept on the inpatient wards for a short time every month. The team represents all levels of learners—residents, medical students, pharmacist, and physician-assistant (PA) students. To be able to work as a whole team requires keeping a pulse on the temperature of the team. I say we have to be thermostats, not thermometers. We have to be calm and composed ourselves because we are meeting our patients and families at their worst times.

I like to pick a time when we're not rushed, toward the end of the day when we're winding down. There are big windows on a few of the hospital floors where we can see the bridge over the Tennessee River—it's a beautiful view. I prefer to gather students in this spacious, sunlit lobby so that we can get recharged by looking out into nature. Our physical environment can be a barrier to physician well-being. In the winter, arriving and leaving the hospital in the dark can cause seasonal affective disorder.

I tell them, "You spend most of your time looking at your computers, let's pause for a bit."

The team sits back, discussing what loose ends need tied up, recapping the day. I pass the candy bag around the circle. Depending on the week, at the end of a rotation, I will say, "We've had a good time together and learned a lot. We had the opportunity to take care of patients."

Then I ask them to reflect on three questions. *What gave you hope? What inspired you? What surprised you?"*

We take time to think about those three questions. It's as useful to me as it is for the team. We discuss what helped us, what made us better, and how we were touched by our patients in a way that was unique to this experience?

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Reflection often works best when you can contrast the positive with the more challenging or negative situations.

A Tale of Two Patients

One week we cared for an 80-year-old gentleman from the countryside of rural Tennessee. He was in the end-stages of his cancer with a lot of pain and discomfort. Every day I'd go in, knowing we were trying to make him comfortable and prepare him for the end-of-life conversations. When I met him, he had already been in the hospital for more than ten days. He was tired and exhausted. With his nearly toothless smile, he was always quick with a joke. He greeted me by saying I was beautiful. We were able to laugh about our respective accents, which were both a little hard for the other to understand.

One day he asked aloud, "How do people find it in themselves to be strong?" It was the day before he was going to be discharged with hospice care, and his daughter was there too. He didn't seem to need an answer. He just looked at me and said, "You've been very kind. I will never forget you."

"Me neither," I said. "I will always remember your smile." His daughter and I were both crying. The team was behind me. I used to be ashamed of and hid my tears, but not anymore. I carry in my pocket small heart-shaped stones I call "healing hearts" and gave him one.

That evening at precept circle, this patient was mentioned many times.

One student said, "I feel so sad that I can't do anything for the patient." Another said, "I wish I had more time to sit and listen to his stories. I bet he had so many fun stories."

Only one resident actually took care of this patient (we divide patients among team), but this 80-year old man also touched those who didn't care for him directly. The residents saw that inspiration not only comes from the patient but the family. Hope comes from giving care not cure. We discussed how to remain positive despite knowing the end is in sight.

The same week we had quite the opposite situation. There was a young man who did everything to jeopardize his own health. He was labeled as a difficult patient because he continued to make lifestyle choices that were detrimental to his health, such as IV drug use, smoking. He required heart surgery due to the damage from IV drug abuse.

The residents voiced complaints about this patient. "He's always wanting pain meds or wanting to go out for a smoke."

I was struck by the different emotions toward our two patients, both very sick but for one there was empathy and the other, frustration. One student noted the cliché question, "why do the worst things happen to the best people?" We often deal with this paradox—some patients we can relate to, others we cannot. How do we overcome our biases and see such a person as a human crying out for help? It's our job and duty, a tenet of our oath, to help irrespective of where the patient comes from.

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Reflective questions are rarely resolved in a single conversation. If we create a safe space to talk with others about the soul-deep questions of our profession and our lives, we begin to understand that we have these feelings as humans and we can learn to hold the paradoxes. The goal of such conversations is not to find answers, nor to fix or save each other, but to give us permission to be human. Mindful reflection allows us to give voice to our emotions in a meaningful way. Simply hearing the shared thoughts of others helps us look in the mirror for ourselves. That is why reflecting (or being introspective) in a supportive community can nurture our resilience.

What gave you hope? What inspired you? What surprised you? By bringing the team together to find meaning in our work, the conversation reminds us to reconnect our passion to our purpose and recharge each day. I hope my learners ask themselves these questions every day, even if I'm not there. Making time to reclaim meaning in one's work is a vital form of self-care.

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### About the Author:

**Mukta Panda, MD**, MACP, FRCP-London, is an award-winning physician, speaker, and facilitator whose work seeks to transform the heart of patient care and medical education. She serves as the Assistant Dean for Well-Being and Medical Student Education and a Professor of Medicine at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine at Chattanooga. To rejuvenate, Mukta likes to take long walks, cook good Indian meals, and plan surprise parties for loved ones. Visit her online at [www.MuktaPandaMD.com](http://www.MuktaPandaMD.com) and follow her on Twitter [@MuktaPandaMD](https://twitter.com/MuktaPandaMD).



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