



FINDING JOY THROUGH RESILIENCE - LORCA SMETANA

Lorca Smetana is a climber – in both the literal and metaphorical sense. Her father was a renowned climber, and from early on climbing became both a love and an identity. But it also brought trauma.

At the age of 16, Lorca was on a school climbing trip that left nine of her classmates and teachers dead. It was a traumatic experience that has shaped but not vanquished her life. A life sometimes spent climbing out of deep, dark places.

To survive, Lorca started collecting tools. “I wanted to feel better, so I tried this; if it worked, it went in the toolbox. Then, when needed, I’d try again. If it stopped working, I’d try something different. I recognized that it wasn’t going to be one thing, but that there always had to be something. My goal was that I would always have some next step.” What developed was resilience.

More than 30 years later, Lorca has a full toolbox. She shares her wisdom on resilience mentoring and healing others as a coach, consultant and speaker.

Lorca describes the healing process as a helix trajectory. “After trauma, you first think, ‘I am a victim;’ but then you tire of being defined by that. I reached that point and declared, ‘I am not a victim, I am a survivor.’ That felt stronger, like I had something to grab onto to move forward. Then there is a third progression, a purifying function to tragedy and crisis. When it occurs, it grabs all your attention and all the little things you thought were important fall away. You realize you don’t need to put energy there. You see this when someone gets cancer, loses someone, has an almost fatal accident. You realize, ‘I am not speaking the truth.’ That is leadership.”

Lorca continues, “This progression from victim to survivor to leader happens if there is continued healing and will. A will to say ‘I am not going to settle for OK, mostly better or what I was before, I am not going to settle for less than fully joyous!’”

Lorca’s students include everyone from emergency workers to executives and kindergarten teachers to those in trauma, all looking to develop resilience and leadership. Two years ago she also began sharing her teachings with students and faculty at MSU through the Leadership Fellows program. “I was brought in to bring resilience thinking into leadership development, broadening the question of what it is to be a leader,” she explains.

So what happens to her students? “They get brave, vulnerable, intimate and speak into what they really want. This is humans as we all want to be,” she smiles. “I call it resilience because I don’t have a better word for it, but I teach humanity!”

For Lorca, it is about designing for a life that is bursting with generosity. “This fullness inside us is what lets us be all that we love being. When we are deflated, anyone that says, ‘I want, I need,’ to us is met with no, or worse, we flip out, burn out, implode,” she explains. “When you are at your fullest self, a screaming child is met with a hug; an environmental crisis, let’s get to work.” Instead of feeling overwhelmed, you feel able and willing.

At this point, that particular climb is a small part of who she is. Lorca explains, “If I had made other choices and not worked to add trust back into being human and joy back into climbing and let blame and bitterness stay in conversations, then that tragedy would be the defining part of my life.”

“Now, I feel joy. There are no hooks left for the trauma to grab back into,” Lorca concedes. There are just lots of holds with which to climb up. Find more of Lorca’s story and teachings at lorcasmetana.com. 

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