

Curriculum Project for Website Dialogue in the Humanities

Module 6: “Resilience: Strategies for Survival and Change.”

Referring to Abdul Rahman and Isabella, Kwame Anthony Appiah says, “They made the best they could of their circumstances. They found ways to figure out forms of solidarity, forms of resistance, forms of accepting what was going on, including, religious forms of acceptance in order to live their lives.” That is, they became *resilient*.

Abdul Rahman made many decisions in his life about when and how to struggle and resist the constraints of slavery, and when to accept his situation and work to ameliorate his condition within slavery. Users are asked to consider and interpret Abdul Rahman’s crucial choices over forty years, beginning with his capture in 1788, his struggle to simply survive aboard the *Africa*, his subsequent escape from Thomas Foster’s plantation and his eventual voluntary return, his rise to a position of leadership on the plantation, and his final struggle to win freedom for himself and his family.

This process and its result is what we mean by the term *resilience*. In physical terms, resilience describes the ability of a material to absorb energy when struck, and then return to its original form. Psychologically, resilience is the capacity to cope with the onslaught of stress and adversity—bouncing back from it or steeling against it such that one’s ability to function returns to (or approaches) “normal” (its original form, as it were).

Serenity Prayer

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference. – Reinhold Niebuhr

Extended version:

God, grant us the...
Serenity to accept things we cannot change,
Courage to change the things we can, and the
Wisdom to know the difference
Patience for the things that take time
Appreciation for all that we have, and
Tolerance for those with different struggles
Freedom to live beyond the limitations of our past ways, the
Ability to feel your love for us and our love for each other and the
Strength to get up and try again even when we feel it is hopeless.

Niebuhr’s prayer outlines a workable strategy for cultivating resilience. All of the elements included in Niebuhr’s outline, Abdul Rahman found in the Qur’an. As a child, he had memorized large portions of Islam’s holy book. Research has confirmed that he was well schooled in many subjects, so he no doubt could turn for strength to the Hadith and other materials as well.

Adhan

[Text]

Surah al-Fatiha “The Opener” (1)

[Text]

“We strengthen their hearts with patience.” [Qur’an – what surah/verse? Could be 22:35; see also 23:111]

Surah An-Nasr “The Help” (110)

NOTE: African Muslims in Antebellum America by AUTHOR includes photos of the chapter of the Qur’an written out by America’s early Muslims.

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

1. When God’s help comes, and the victory,
2. And you see mankind entering the religion of God in multitudes,
3. Then celebrate the praise of your Lord and seek His forgiveness. He is ever disposed to show mercy.

Examples of resistance

- Was sold to Thomas Foster as a “brute Negro” – which meant that he had to endure “seasoning” once he got to Natchez. [This is mentioned in the film; get more images of seasoning.] This may have been what precipitated his decision to flee.
- “I tried to tell Mr Foster that I was a Prince in Africa...”: not willing to let go of identity easily.
- Mos Def: “Abdul Rahman refused to clear the fields. Defiance, in turn, brought the whip and deepened his resentment...” Abdul Rahman escapes!
- When has chance meeting with Dr Cox, A R resists temptation to go with him (as Cox asks).
- When finally takes advantage of the opportunity to write a letter home to Africa, Terry Alford says it was a way of protesting the negative situation unfolding on the plantation. [See script p. 11]
- Wins passage back to Africa for himself, but is reluctant to leave his family behind; works to gain their release, too. [See script p. 12, 13, 14]
- When Gallaudet asks AR to write the Lord’s Prayer in Arabic, what he writes is actually the Fatiha.

Examples of acceptance of situation and work to ameliorate it

- Chained and crammed in hold of slave ship: he must have accepted the situation and found ways to stay alive. That he made it to the Caribbean is significant. (See Alford book for details beyond film script.) [Illustration of slave ship hold]

- Made a decision to “go with the flow” during the layover in the Caribbean. (See Alford)
- Mos Def: “Slaveholders seasoned them as slaves, forcing them to learn English, stripping them of their customs and identities...” Abdul Rahman seems to have accepted the need to learn English, and learned the language quite well [eventually; probably only after the escape episode]
- Zaid Shakir: “...in the wilderness, it dawned on him that he is no longer a prince...”
- Terry Alford: “Someone brought up in Futa-Jallon believes that...it was part of a divine plan. His resignation to the will of God was demanded.”
- A-R returns to Foster’s farm; lays on floor, and puts Mrs Foster’s foot on his own neck to signal submission.
- From point of return from the escape, A R does whatever job Foster assigns him; apparently does these jobs well; goes beyond that to demonstrate effective leadership; makes himself indispensable.
- Decides to marry Isabella (accepting the fact that he’ll never make it back to his wife and children in Africa); goes along with a “Christian” wedding ceremony of sorts.
- A R rises to position of authority on the Foster plantation. David Dreyer says “...he wasn’t made overseer; he was the de facto overseer.”
- When has chance meeting with Dr Cox, A R accepts the reality of his situation, and is not tempted to violate local custom.
- Does not correct Marschalk’s exaggerations, embellishments of his story.
- When Henry Clay and others think he’s Moroccan, he chooses not to correct their assumption.
- On fund-raising tour, “A R played to the press” and does not correct misimpressions and exaggerations; treats exceptionality as an advantage. [Script p. 13]
- Has opportunity to write home to Africa, but delays.
- When Gallaudet asks him to write the Lord’s Prayer in Arabic, he obliges (at least, he seems to). [Script 14] [NOTE: close-up of hand-written text, transliteration, translation]
- Plays the agenda of the powerful American Colonization Society to his advantage.
- Realizes that the political landscape is changing; accepts the need to depart for Africa, even though it means leaving his children and grandchildren behind; leaves on the *Harriet*, as guest of US government. [Script p. 16]