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# **Resilience in Turbulence**

**Gillian Stamp, September 2000**

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## Resilience in Turbulence

### Images

Turbulence and resilience are words in frequent use as people live with what they feel to be unprecedented pace and diversity of change.

In this paper I suggest that resilience is about making the most of turbulence. Turbulence has certain characteristics and resilience has qualities with the potential to make the most of them. But each of these qualities is fragile not only in itself but also in the web of connections with the others. So the qualities require underpinning and sustaining by three activities - 'tasking', 'trusting' and 'tending' that can be used to deepen the resilience of the self and of an enterprise.

The image of "permanent white water" is widely used to convey turbulence - "surprising, novel, obtrusive events with unknown causes, unknown remedies, unknown urgencies, unknown times to completion and unknown compounding factors that will create additional complexity at later points in the process".<sup>1</sup>

Resilience - the capacity to 'bounce back' (to resile) in even the most demanding circumstances - is a quality sought in both individuals and organisations. "Resilient" seems to have replaced "robust" - perhaps because it has a more dynamic sense?

### Flow

Over the last forty or so years there has been a steadily growing interest in 'well-being' as a complement to studies of physical illness, dysfunction and distress. One of the earliest researchers in this field was Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi<sup>ii</sup> whose concept of being "in flow" is now widely used. In the BioSS community we are very familiar with our version of it and of the impact it has when we are working with individuals and offering them ways of thinking about their working lives.

Being "in flow" - the phrase many people use to describe their experience - depends on being in a situation where one's capabilities match what one is doing. The 'doing' could be rock climbing, surgery, inputting data, studying, caring for livestock. What happens is that the person knows that control is possible in principle, they have a clear sense of intrinsic meaning because one cannot enter flow unless the challenge is personally meaningful. Awareness of self diminishes and the activity is intrinsically rewarding, pursued on its own ("autotelic").

Flow is not a luxury but a staple of life; its function seems to be to induce the person to grow in that s/he will seek the intrinsic meaning and reward as often as possible and will achieve it only as they face growing challenge and develop capabilities.

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Csikszentmihalyi's experience is that the "autotelic" or optimising personality can be seen most clearly in stark circumstances where some people find ways to turn bleak conditions into meaningful experience. They are able to "draw order from disorder, to harness energy that would otherwise be dispersed, and to change constraints into opportunities for freedom and creativity."

Richard Logan wrote about flow in solitary ordeals and concluded that "the most important trait of survivors is a strongly directed purpose that is not self-seeking.....their energy is not bent on dominating the environment as much as on finding a way to function within it harmoniously".<sup>iii</sup>

## **Resilience**

Aaron Antonovsky<sup>iv</sup> was drawn to study resilience out of his research with people who had survived the Holocaust and years later, were still functioning well. He was a medical sociologist and had not come across Csikszentmihalyi's work, so asked himself afresh the question "whence the strength?"<sup>v</sup> He came to the view that it depended on three elements: meaningfulness - the sense that a challenge is worth investing energy and attention; comprehensibility - the confidence that one will be able to find some order in the situation; and manageability - confidence that the resources required are accessible. The elements are crystallised in three simple questions: does one think that one can understand? Does one think that one can manage? Does one wish to manage?

As he refined his understanding, Antonovsky came to the view that meaningfulness has primacy. A requirement for the sense that resources are available is that one have a clear picture of demands, so high manageability is contingent on high comprehensibility. But being high on comprehensibility does not necessarily mean that one believes one can manage well. High comprehensibility combined with low manageability leads to strong pressure to change, with the direction of movement determined by the person's sense of meaningfulness - if they care strongly, there is powerful motivation to seek out resources. Without such motivation people cease to respond to stimuli and the world soon becomes incomprehensible; nor are they impelled to search for resources. Even if the person is high on comprehensibility and manageability, without caring they will fall behind in understanding and lose command of resources.

There are many clear connections between these elements of resilience and 'flow'. Four points are particularly significant: a) both are about drawing order from disorder; b) both take the person beyond searching for certainty, making it possible for them to live effectively in uncertainty; c) both refer to shaping one's own destiny and d) key components in both are meaningfulness and comprehensibility.

Descriptions of flow and resilience are a rediscovery of what Aristotle 2,3000 years ago called "eudaimonia"<sup>viii</sup> - flourishing; Hildegard of Bingen in the eleventh century called "viriditas" - greenness, and Marion Milner in the twentieth calls " an intuitive sense of how one should live".

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## Well-being

Antonovsky drew an analogy between resilience and the body's immune system. Recent studies in psycho-neuro-immunology (the webs of connections between the nervous and immune systems and consciousness) are very pertinent to the physiological implications of resilience. Here I briefly outline only four<sup>viii</sup>

Len Syme<sup>ix</sup> has been working on “the mystery factor determining our health” for many years. He started by examining social support networks and then became interested in the implications of the studies of UK civil servants briefly described below. He puts forward the hypothesis that the key quality in health and well-being is “control of destiny”, and refers to a number of studies that demonstrate a clear link between resilience in dealing with the demands of life and improved health. The link between health and economic and social status in well-known and adjusting for that factor still shows the importance of “control of destiny”. Syme's team at the University of California produced a Wellness Guide that says, “at each phase of life there are major challenges we all experience. Here are some ways to deal with those problems and here's where you can get help in your community.....it tries to give people secrets about how they can negotiate their life.” Within eight months the young mothers who used the Guide had substantially increased confidence and resilience not only about the issues in the Guide, but also in other areas.

Michael Marmot<sup>x</sup> undertook two studies of thousands of UK civil servants against the background of studies across the developed world which produce the universal observation that for virtually every disease there is a step-wise gradient. Marmot adjusted for all obvious factors - social class, smoking, diet etc. - and found that the common factor that predicted poor health was “demand latitude” - high demands and very little latitude in discretion for dealing with those demands. He showed that showed low control (specific to work place) and effort/reward imbalance (reflection of labour market) both predict the risk of coronary disease because they affect the body directly through the brain and hormones.

Bruce McEwen's<sup>xi</sup> studies also demonstrate that loss of control affects the brain directly through cortisone levels and hormone functioning. He describes “bad stress” as the persistence in the system of cortisol and adrenalin produced to respond to stress, and the “the biggest source of stress is boredom”. This “allostatic load” is very likely to lead to accumulation of abdominal fat.

J.C. Pearce<sup>xii</sup> points out that molecular biologists have discovered that the heart is the body's most important endocrine gland. In response to our experiences of the world it produces and releases a major hormone that profoundly affects the “emotional brain”. Neurocardiologists have found that 60% to 65% of the cells of the heart are neural cells not muscle cells as previously believed. And biophysicists have discovered that the heart is a powerful electro-magnetic generator and that the field it generates is profoundly affected by our emotional responses to the challenges, surprises and opportunities of the world. In short to turbulence.

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## Turbulence

Key qualities of both resilience and flow make it possible to stay afloat in turbulence and uncertainty: neither retreating from nor seeking to dominate the environment but finding ways of being in it harmoniously; being unselfconscious; and going beyond searching for certainty, making it possible to live effectively in uncertainty. So rather than allowing turbulence to overwhelm them, resilient people make the most of it. They follow the advice of Eastern philosophies and writers like Buckminster Fuller and Gregory Bateson to “work with the forces in a system rather than against them..... to use systemic wisdom”<sup>xiii</sup>.

Understanding of turbulence is repeated in a number of fields - among them, mathematics, physics, biochemistry, neural functioning, neo Darwinism. Without undue oversimplification turbulence can be summarised in three prominent characteristics:

- there is ‘order for free’ - in what appear to be the most unstable circumstances where everything is fluid and unpredictable, completely new forms and opportunities emerge spontaneously
- there are ‘regular irregularities’ - the system is unpredictable over extended periods but there are themes that can be discerned
- tiny, often unnoticed differences can have huge and completely unexpected consequences, popularly known as ‘the butterfly effect’.

To make the most of ‘order for free’, ‘regular irregularities’ and ‘tiny differences’, a living system - an individual or an organisation - needs three qualities we have already seen in descriptions of resilience and flow. Here I use slightly different words but the qualities are the same:

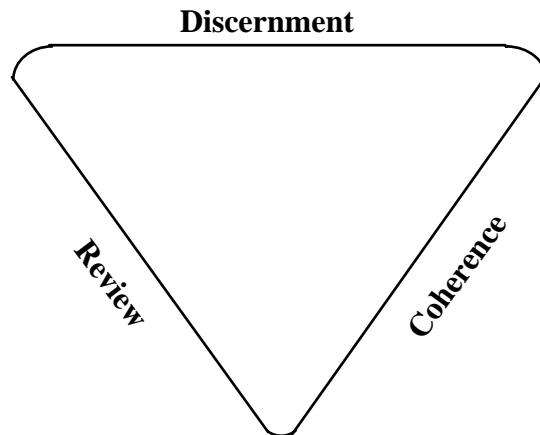
- *coherence* - meaningfulness for individual and/or an organisation as a whole - makes it more likely that things will happen by themselves, that new ways of doing things will emerge spontaneously. A common image is ‘resonance’ - the apparently spontaneous movement together of a shoal of fish or a flight of birds as they change direction. Coherence is the touchstone for individual judgement; in an organisation, it ensures that judgements about resources and initiatives are aligned to serve purpose.
- *discernment* - makes the most of the “regular irregularities” that wind their way through turbulence; a banker described discernment as “like a scout it moves softly through the forest tracking that beautiful beast reality and discovers signs of its passage, the metaphorical ‘bent twigs and broken flowers’<sup>xiv</sup>

Discernment is the precursor of ‘comprehensibility’, judgement and the robust decisions that signal responsible stewardship of resources (manageability).

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- *review* - maximises the chances of spotting ‘tiny differences’ which could have unexpected implications for reputation, resources and manageability. One of the outcomes of being in flow is that we have energy to focus attention on tiny details in the environment and we are drawn learning.

Review encourages learning - about where resources were found, how they were used, what happened, what worked, what could have been done differently - without blame and with the forgiveness that Hannah Arendt described as the “remedy” for the irreversibility in turbulent conditions.

The link between review and manageability is not as direct as those between meaningfulness and coherence, comprehensibility and discernment, but both are concerned with resources - where they are or might be available, how they have been applied.



### **Bioss experience**

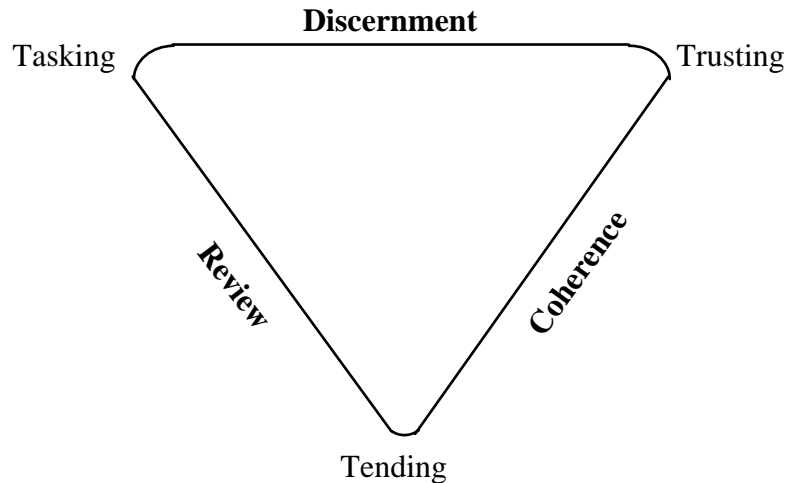
Many hours spent listening to people talking about their working lives led me to see that coherence, discernment and review are fragile both in themselves and in their web of connections. Holding them together requires constant underpinning and we have learned from individuals that it is most effectively provided by three complementary activities:

- ~ tasking shares intention, agrees what is to be done by when, agrees resources, thus bounds the discretionary space for work and prepares for review
- ~ trusting entrusts with purpose and trusts individual judgement against the touchstone of coherence
- ~ tending is the work that keeps things working especially in turbulence; continual mindfulness, monitoring without crowding. Like housework or gardening, tending is rarely seen as “real work”, perhaps because the outcome - a contented household, a

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flourishing garden, a thriving team, a life-long friendship, a resilient organisation - can seem to “just happen”.

### **Resilience in Turbulence**



The Tripod has been used in different countries and organisations for individual, leadership and organisation development. It makes immediate sense to us as the way of working - as an individual and with others - we would want for ourselves, for others and for our organisation. Disappointment arises when we realise that this apparently simple and wholly desirable way of doing things is extraordinarily difficult to achieve and even more so to sustain.

Both Antonovsky and Csikszentmihalyi wrote about the impact of social conditions and the latter wrote that to enhance quality of life one could - a) change social conditions in order to make them more conducive to flow, and/or b) strengthen the person’s resources so that they are able to experience flow regardless of social conditions.

Each of us can seek to strengthen our resources if we choose. Some people are in a position and have the responsibility to provide conditions for people and organisations to be resilient - this could be seen as a key element of leadership.

A step in learning how to have more experiences of ‘flow’ and to strengthen resilience is to use the three ts - tasking, trusting and tending - to understand the self.<sup>xv</sup> It may be that what Csikszentmihalyi calls “autotelic personalities” draw on the three ts without awareness that they are doing so. It is only when - for whatever reason - flow/resilience is no longer there that people start to think about how to return to that state of being.

People do become aware that they are not ‘in flow’ and/or not as resilient as they were or would wish to be and it is then that they are open to reflect for purely personal reasons,

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because they are trying to cope with change, because they have leadership responsibilities. Recent studies of leadership in the US show ‘reflectiveness’ as the quality most valued by those who are led and those who lead leaders.<sup>xvi</sup>

### **Three ts for the self**

Much contemporary writing about leadership advocates this kind of reflection. For example Dee Hock the man who founded the Visa organisation writes that 50% of the time of a leader should be spent on self-understanding.<sup>xvii</sup> Robert Greenleaf author of *The Servant Leader*<sup>xviii</sup> makes the same point. The Quaker scholar Parker Palmer also emphasises the inner journey - “a leader is a person who has an unusual degree of power to project on other people his or her shadow, his or her light. A leader is a person who has an unusual degree of power to create the condition under which other people must live and move and have their being.....a leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what’s going on inside him or herself.....lest the act of leadership create more harm than good”.<sup>xix</sup>

Tasking the self is an important discipline, an expression of the ancient wisdom “know thyself” - strengths, vulnerabilities, graces and thirsts. And, as Schumacher<sup>xx</sup> pointed out, there is an essential complement in knowing how others see us so that we can couple awareness of self with insight about the connection between our attributes and behaviour and the reaction of others. It is helpful to be aware that we judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their actions; and other people do the same!

Much has been written about understanding the self and each person will seek their own sources. Here I briefly describe the impact of the way we direct our attention - key to both ‘flow’ and resilience.

As she pursued her journey - with the task of becoming more and more aware - Marion Milner discovered that there were two ways in which she paid attention: “narrow attention” when she had a particular purpose to realise - “it was a questing beast, keeping its nose close down to the trail, running this way and that upon the scent, but blind to the wider surroundings. It saw items according to whether they served its purposes, saw them as a means to its own ends, not interested in them at all for their own sake. This attitude was probably essential for practical life so I supposed that from the biological point of view it had to be one that came naturally to the mind.”<sup>xxi</sup>

But her best moments, when she was “in flow”, building resilience came when “the questing purposes were held in leash. Then, since one wanted nothing, there was no need to select one item to look at rather than another, so it became possible to look at the whole at once”. To attend to something/someone yet want nothing from them is to use “wide attention”.

Trusting one's inner resources is at the heart of being ‘in flow’, an important element in ‘comprehensibility’ and the core of discerning and using one’s own judgement.

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Each of us is very sensitive indeed to being in or out of flow: when we are 'in flow' discerning is spontaneous, judgements just come and we feel confident and not self-conscious; 'out of flow' our inner resources slip from our grasp, seem flimsy, even absent or tantalising in that one moment they are there, the next gone. One person described it well - "when you are in flow, intuition is leading you. When you are out of flow, you become a searcher. You search everywhere and you cannot trust what comes to you. So you try to delay and avoid decisions".

In writing of her inner resources Milner described an "answering activity" and linking it to 'wide attention' explained that "the price of ...finding...(it) was that I must want nothing from it. I must turn to it with complete acceptance of what it is, expecting nothing, wanting to change nothing".<sup>xxiii</sup>

So trusting or looking to trust inner resources is the first hint of whether or not we are in flow. If we know we are not 'in flow' and we have responsibility only for ourselves, we can think about asking for less or more responsibility, changing roles, organisations etc. But if we have responsibilities for others at work, if we are leading in any way, then the realisation that we are not 'in flow' creates a "duty of care" to others. If we are underwhelmed by the challenges of our role, we may choose to use that spare capacity to give extra energy, attention and reflection to leadership. Or we can use it to undermine. If we are overwhelmed, then we have a responsibility either to give up or to renegotiate the scope of our leadership. Much writing about leadership has focussed on style and suitability for situation.

Tending the self is the core of living in and with turbulence, uncertainty, impermanence. It could be walking, listening to music, learning a new skill, sport, keeping pigeons. But, as soon as there are demands - especially when they are temptations to deny the inevitability of uncertainty - we are likely not to find the time for those activities that sustain us. And/or to find ourselves dwelling in the past, leaping to or fearing the future rather than "being here now", living in the "dimension of the present moment"<sup>xxiii</sup> accepting its transience. Tending is so often neglected partly because, for the self it can so readily seem "selfish"; while tending others or a team, department or organisation does not seem like real work. As someone put it - "it's like the plumbing, no-one knows it's there until it breaks down".

The Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus described the duty of care to tend the self: "Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful; he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also....never cease chiselling your statue".<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **The three ts for resilience in people and organisation<sup>xxv</sup>**

If one has responsibility for the conditions in which others work - if one 'casts one's shadow and light widely' as Parker Palmer puts it - then one can use tasking, trusting and tending to deepen the resilience of both individuals and the enterprise.

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Tasking for others shares intention, agrees objectives in outputs by sharing expectations of quality, cost and delivery parameters, establishes an intended time-scale for completion and prepares for review.

Trusting ensures effective decision-making by entrusting people with the responsibility to use their discernment to the limit of their current capabilities to achieve the outputs expected. To be fully motivated, individuals need to feel trusted to use their best judgement, and neither over-loaded in terms of what they can achieve, nor 'underwhelmed' by the scope of the work they have been given.

Tending takes account of uncertainty by monitoring through continual mindfulness; ensuring that the work assigned is still relevant and that the resources required are being used appropriately according to the current priorities; communicating a sense of purpose and relevance for the work so that individuals have a context within which to perceive their work and to use their judgement to make adjustments in specific cases on their own initiative.

If all three activities are in balance, there are specific beneficial outcomes:

**Tasking** and **trusting** shape discernment and **judgement** and that in turn allows appropriate level specific decisions to be made. Tasking sets the limits and trusting encourages each person to use their judgement and ensures they are neither over- nor underwhelmed.

**Tasking** and **tending** ensure **review** whereby the manager keeps in touch with the progress of the work, checks that it remains appropriate as circumstances change and that the work remains relevant to the purposes of the organisation. Tasking prepares for review by establishing completion times and tending prepares for review by keeping systems, practices and people heading in the right direction at the right pace. The organisation has an in-built capability to learn, continuously to update knowledge about perceptions of the outside world, and its internal processes.

**Trusting** and **tending** ensure the sense of **coherence** that individuals need to sustain their belief that the work is important and has meaning. Trusting entrusts people with purposes and tending keeps that understanding alive through communication - the outcome is a shared, coherent understanding of purpose so that every detail and decision is an expression of it. A vivid image is Indra's Net a necklace in which the whole can be seen in each pearl.

This 'optimal tripod' looks outward to the turbulent environment - for example, the built-in capacity to review means that "environmental scanning" is no longer left to strategic planners; each person is encouraged to keep an eye out for the tiny indications that something is happening or that a service could be provided in a different way. Through the bounding of judgement by tasking, encouragement through trusting, and sustaining of a supportive climate by tending, people are freed to use their initiative and creativity. Each person and section is encouraged to seek out and come to a view about opportunities, threats, unusual patterns of events and influences in the parts of the outside world where their work has, or could have, an impact.

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## **The resilient organisation in the world**

The three ts can also be used to underpin and deepen resilience in working relationships with joint venture partners, local and national government agencies and institutions, contractors, suppliers, distributors and customers.

The effectiveness of any enterprise depends on a supportive environment of “shared destiny” relationships. Realising a shared destiny depends on controlling the financial, social and individual costs of transacting working relationships, and on creating and sustaining reciprocity and mutual advantage rather than adversarialism or dependency. Promoting trust is costly, lack of it more costly still.

All too often the initial climate for these partnerships is one of opportunism rather than the shared meaning of coherence; of minimal discretion rather than individual judgement; and quick search for redress rather than the shared learning from review. This climate is often supported by wariness instead of vigilant trust, by detailed contracts in an attempt to deal with all eventualities instead of tending (despite the accepted legal phrase “incomplete contracting”); and by specifying exactitude instead of the sharing of intent, resource allocation and completion times of tasking.

The outcome is that instead of the resilience that would make the most of the inevitable turbulence in these working relationships, there are escalating transaction costs and mutual suspicion that readily becomes passive and/or active aggression.

The key to resilience in these working partnerships is ‘vigilant trust’ supported by tasking and tending. Vigilant trust allows people to define and experience trust in such a way that they can distinguish it clearly from the distrust which is often the mark of adversarial relationships, and the unquestioning faith of dependent relationships. Vigilant trust keeps watch to:

- support each party to the relationship as they use their judgement within the limits agreed to complete projects without interference but with accountability
- make sure that neither party is understretched or overwhelmed by the complexities of their assignments.

Tasking faces transactional dilemmas inherent in any relationship. In their own interests each party seeks terms favourable to themselves and this leads to opportunism and haggling. It is in the interests of the relationship that the parties be joined in such a way as to maintain trust and reciprocity and avoid both bargaining and the indirect costs generated in the process.

Clear tasking is the first step towards realising the mutual interests of the relationship.

Tasking:

- 
- shares intention
  - agrees objectives, resources
  - anticipates transaction costs
  - evaluates the comparative costs of planning, adapting, and monitoring the work under alternative governance structures

Tending minimises transaction costs through continuous work to preserve the relationship. Tending minimises running costs and avoids the costs of the relationship breaking down. It involves:

- mutually agreeing the arrangements that will come into play if there are disputes and/or defaults
- nurturing the relationship so that they are less likely to arise; if they do, ensuring fairness in resolving them
- putting and keeping in place the systems and processes needed to support the relationship
- establishing the tone of the relationship and making sure it is not violated.

### **Coherence, judgement and review**

A key relationship in which vigilant trust has been supported by tasking and sustained by tending will have the three distinctive qualities of resilience:

- the parties will share a coherent understanding of the meaning, purpose and direction of particular projects and of the relationship
- they will use their discernment and judgement in the service of the mutual interests of the relationship
- there will be an in-built capacity to review performance, efficiency of use of resources and agree ways of remedying faults, defects, delays.

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## **Resilience in turbulence**

Despite its length, this paper makes a very simple point: turbulence has characteristics of order for free, regular irregularities and tiny differences. Resilience and flow have three qualities - of meaningfulness/coherence, discerning/understanding, manageability/review. Each of these qualities is fragile per se and vulnerable in its connections with the others. Without underpinning and sustaining, each quality is at risk of stiffening to resist turbulence (coherence becomes the alienation of imposed meaning, discernment fades into frustration, review becomes policing), or weakening and disappearing into turbulence (coherence becomes the emptiness of meaninglessness, judgement becomes guesswork, review is neglect).

BioSS experience has shown that the underpinning can be done through tasking, trusting and tending to sustain resilience and flow in the self and the enterprise as a whole. The art is to get the tension right<sup>xxvi</sup> - too much tasking and too little trusting gives too little scope for discernment and judgement; too much trusting and too little tasking creates worry and confusion; getting tending 'just right' is an art in itself, judging when to be present (actually or virtually), when to be absent, how always to be available, in short, how to be mindful.

Tasking to bound, trusting to free and tending to be mindful allow appreciation rather than fear of uncertainty, allow going beyond searching for certainty and making it possible to live effectively in uncertainty -in short, resilience in turbulence. They allow us to understand the Buddha's wisdom that "suffering because life cannot satisfy our thirst for certainty is like suffering because a banana tree will not bear mangoes".

**Gillian Stamp**  
**September 2000.**

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