

Forge Podcast with Debbie Duncan.mp3

Peter Wooding: [00:00:09] Happy Easter everyone and welcome to the Forge Leadership podcast. This week Simon Barrington is joined by Nurse, lecturer and Pastor's wife Debbie Duncan. Debbie recently won the prestigious Queen's Award for nursing and is the author of two books "The Daily art of resilience" and Brave - being courageous in all seasons of life.

Simon Barrington: [00:00:29] Welcome to the Forge Leadership Podcast. Today I am joined by Debbie Duncan. Debbie is a nurse and a nurse lecturer and she's been writing about the issues of resilience and bravery and courage for quite some time now. Debbie, welcome to the podcast.

Debbie Duncan: [00:00:46] Thank you. It's lovely to be here.

Debbie Duncan: [00:00:48] Brilliant so how did you first become aware that maybe resilience was an issue in those people who are around you.

Debbie Duncan: [00:00:57] There was a couple of scenarios. One was several years ago I was with a friend. We were in Kenya and we were at a conference for missionaries from all over Africa. And while we were there we actually did a seminar on resilience because at the time it was a sort of buzz word in sort of health and well-being. But we also realised that actually these individuals hadn't had time to think about it. How did they how could they improve their own physical mental, spiritual resilience because they were so busy and many of them were parents with small children. Often these children had illnesses and everytime they had an illness they were concerned it was malaria and it actually made me think gosh I'm sure there's things we can do. And then the second was actually in our own lives because we had several sudden deaths in our family. And after each one I became quite poorly. I think I had flu, I had a clot in my lung and I thought gosh what is it about death and bereavement that makes you particularly vulnerable and can you actually do something so that you can improve your own resilience.

Simon Barrington: [00:02:11] And how did you face up to those issues yourself and where has this understanding of how you can deal with resilience come from. You're a nurse, you're a teacher, you're a pastor's wife. How has that kind of inputted into the way you're now helping other people deal with this issue of resilience.

Debbie Duncan: [00:02:31] I think it's a quite an interesting topic but also as a nurse in a way where we base what we do on that theories of Florence Nightingale. So obviously I think one of the first nurses as such she based care or the model of care upon looking after somebody body soul and mind. And so as a nurse I've always been taught that that's what I should do. And her theory of nursing very much came from her faith, her personal faith and from the Beatitudes. And then looking at scripture I think I began to realise actually we are tripartite - very much like God in that we are made made in His image and again we're body soul and mind and there's times when we don't always think about the impact of one or the other I hope that makes sense.

Simon Barrington: [00:03:22] Yeah it does. absolutely. So what do you see happening. How how is people's mental resilience impacted by their physical resilience. How is there spiritual resilience impacted by their mental resilience. How do those things interaction and play off one another.

Debbie Duncan: [00:03:38] There's some really good examples I think like I said before grief is one of them. So interestingly, you know you hear the old story that that person died of a broken heart. So an example would be when James Callaghan died of pneumonia in 1992, obviously as a UK prime minister his death was in the press. His wife died, and he only died 10 days after his wife and again and these are extreme examples but it just shows you actually how the the physical can

impact the mental and spiritual. Another example was Carrie Fisher and some of us are Star Wars fans may well know her from the Star Wars films. So in December 2016 she died very suddenly on the way back to the States and her mother died just you know I think several days later of a stroke. And she was dealing with grief and you know when we deal with some of these physical things they have an impact on our mental way of wellbeing and I think sometimes we forget that we are made, we have these three parts of ourselves. I know in the press at the moment there's a lot about mental illness, mental health, but we all have mental health. Like we all have physical health, like we all have spiritual health and they do impact one another. I think a good example of that in the Bible is Jonah and how depressed he became when he didn't step into God's will and he didn't want to go to Ninevah and he became quite depressed. And he sat under the tree and was very upset when it withered and died. So I think these are just some of the examples of it.

Debbie Duncan: [00:05:25] That's great. Now you're married to a church leader to Malcolm. Are there particular issues that impact people who are leading churches or who are in pastoral care of people and are there particular stresses and strains that impact their resilience and their ability to cope in difficult and trying circumstances.

Debbie Duncan: [00:05:50] Absolutely. I think the biggest is the workload. In that we don't, we're not always very good with our our life work balance. Sometimes because we have a acute needs that we're dealing with, supporting people but there's a fantastic translation in the message of the Beatitudes when it says, when you are care-full that's when you are being cared for. And it's that whole that that whole aspect of us giving so much to care for people that sometimes our own reserves dwindle and we have to be so reliant on God. And sometimes we are so busy looking after people, supporting people, helping people that we forget about our own physical well-being. I think that's quite a key area.

Simon Barrington: [00:06:43] Yeah. What are the coping mechanisms are you trying to help people put into place in their daily lives both at the spiritual level, physical level and mental as well. How do you help people try to address this issue of resilience.

Debbie Duncan: [00:07:00] I think going back right back to what resilience means it's our ability to bounce back and that's from an event or personal tragedy. And I describe it very much like an elastic band. We can stretch an elastic band but it never goes back to the shape it was originally. And I think when we go through lots of different events in our lives whatever those personal events are as Christians we would not expect to go back to where we were before because obviously God is doing a work in us. But we can develop, we can develop strategies to help us to perhaps bounce back slightly better. So an example would be um I say to people you know consider that you are made of these parts. So try and keep yourself well physically whether that's base simply as you know making sure that you have a really healthy diet, that you're eating at the right times, that you're you're perhaps taking multi-vitamins and that you regularly exercise. All the things that we know about and we're not so good at. I think if we remind ourselves that if we do these things they actually impact our spiritual well-being and our mental well-being, then perhaps we'll do them or we try to do them a bit better. The kind of spiritual areas um things like spiritual disciplines, absolutely key. They are so helpful. We all develop our own rhythm, we know that we should rest. God has showed us that his pattern of rest and wellbeing and so I use examples from that and again like using Spiritual disciplines. Developing our own sort of work life balances. All of those sort of practical things are really helpful. And then the other thing is to think about our actual spiritual well-being. And there were lots of health checks that we can do or their spiritual health check. I know CWR have got one. And individuall in this resilience book I've actually put together a simple one and I use the the kind of picture of the body um and things like you know digestion and our eyes and our ears as examples of the kind of things that we could think about our spiritual well-being. And doing a health check, looking at those areas seeing what we can improve.

Simon Barrington: [00:09:20] And what role does prayer play in become daily resilient do you think.

Debbie Duncan: [00:09:30] Absolutely key. Absolutely key and I think you know when we're busy we don't always pray as we want to or as we should but I love the story of Susanna Wesley. I think they had 19 kids altogether and am there and how do you pray.

Simon Barrington: [00:09:45] So stressful that sounds stressful.

Debbie Duncan: [00:09:49] And she also wrote books as well you know she wrote theology books she taught in her own right. You know she was a leader as well. So how do you find that balance and there was this description of her sitting in a corner of a room and putting her apron over her head and her family knew that's when she was having a quiet time and so I called them my tea-towel moments. That actually you can centre yourself and you only need a couple of minutes to be able to centre yourself on Christ and just pray and say Lord help me to centre my life again just now if you're in the middle of chaos. So absolutely regular prayer and having those moments is so important.

Simon Barrington: [00:10:31] Now I find in my own life that I actually am finding a rhythm that works for me is really important. You know I was CEO of a big organization for 14 years and I would on a Friday lunchtime go out and prayer walk for two hours and that just worked for me. It doesn't work for everybody but it worked for me in terms of helping me keep my mental health in step probably getting my physical health in step but also in terms of giving me perspective. How much do people have to experiment do you think with the rhythms that work for them and are their different rhythms for different seasons of life do you think.

Debbie Duncan: [00:11:13] I do. I think there is. I know that when I was younger I didn't have a family then I would get up much earlier in the morning and have a more prolonged quiet time. That has changed as my life has changed. But I think you have to find the rhythm that works for you. And some people their rhythm is a very very fast beat. My husband's is like that. He has a very very fast beat to the core of his life. Mine is perhaps a little bit slower. But we have to find what works for us. Some people absolutely love how you know having a jog in the morning that sets them up for the day. Other people just take themselves off quietly to a room somewhere. You've just got to find out what works with you and then when you find it you're to utilize it. My favourite if I get a chance is to go to the gym and plugging in my headphones and watching the TV programs I want to watch that nobody else wants to see and I know that I'm kind of chilling out.

Simon Barrington: [00:12:18] Is there a sense in which you know that fills your tank and builds capacity in you to face up to stresses or strains that might come in the week. Is that is what you're doing when you're when you're doing that.

Debbie Duncan: [00:12:33] Yeah because I will have time to pray, reflect, think. It's not always about you know watching TV and doing things. You know I'm not a particularly sporty person but it supports my exercise tolerance, it helps me just process things are going in my life. It's time out from my normal timetable and um and I find it quite important. And the other thing that I think is important for us as Christians is discipline and it helps me being more disciplined. So the times when I haven't been going and I haven't been going recently, I really know and it really does impact me.

Simon Barrington: [00:13:10] Now self care seems to be a big issue for leaders and I'll often say to leaders actually the biggest gift you can give to the people around you is actually to look after

yourself. Because actually if you burn yourself you are no use to anybody. Why is self care such a big issue for leaders why is it so difficult do you think for leaders to get to that point where they have a healthy rhythm and they are leading out of who they are rather than leading out of low reserves or more white. Why is such a big issue.

Debbie Duncan: [00:13:46] I think there's a couple of things. I think you know as leaders we should be examples for people shouldn't we. We should be illustrating these principles in our own lives but also we have a very very strong work ethic or have and we've lived in the wake of that. But we also have this idea that rest is a bad thing and it's not. And if we remind ourselves that actually you know our creator God rested. And he taught us he taught us these principles as well that actually rest doesn't have to be just lying on a sofa watching TV it comes in lots of shapes and forms and we look after ourselves and we make sure that we work and rest. And they are really good principles that we're instilling in other people so it's so important that we do look after ourselves and also you know if you are unwell, if you don't look at yourself you're not going to be able to cope at the moment of crisis then you really aren't going to help the people around you whether it's your team or the people that you're helping to support because you yourself are unwell.

Simon Barrington: [00:14:56] Do you think there's a theological blockage there. You know that actually we don't care for ourselves in a way that reflects a theological understanding of who we are in Christ almost.

Debbie Duncan: [00:15:13] I think there is I mean there was this kind of theology of work but we're not so good at thinking about what is does a theology of rest look like and you know like I said lying down resting has sometimes been considered as being idle you know stopping there's not problem with stopping it's a good thing to be able to do it. We know that Jesus actually intentionally walked up a mountain to get away from people and have some quiet time or deliberately stepped into a boat to get you know to go into the middle of the lake so he would get away from people and have time out. And so it's really important. It is a good principle to have. We've lived in the history of that now we've lived in the history of that and also I think particularly if we talk perhaps to mission partners often they've said well I've been called I'm working overseas and if I think about the mission partners I've spoken to and I've said to them you know have you gone for your health check, when did you last have your blood pressure done and often they will say I haven't because God is looking after me. Well actually God expects us to also look after ourselves and we've got medicine and social sciences he's gifted us those things and we can utilize them to look after ourselves.

Simon Barrington: [00:16:27] Now I had an instant back in my early career where I was commuting down to London every day and just wearing myself out and I sat down with my church pastor who basically said to me Simon you know could you work from home a day a week or maybe even two days a week. And I went Oh Gosh, I'm not sure I can do that and he said to me can you trust God enough that actually it's his organization and that he can do what he needs to do without you killing yourself in the process. And for me it was a theological issue of trust actually, do you see that in the leaders you're working with and the people you're working with?

Debbie Duncan: [00:17:10] Yes I think that's it's also an issue too. I think perhaps it also depends on your personality type as well or your background. You know if you feel that you have to prove something or prove your self-worth then perhaps you're going to work harder and harder and harder. But actually not give yourself time out as you should.

Simon Barrington: [00:17:28] So it's an issue of security in people's identity really drives them to overwork him rather than resting and trusting God and doing the self care that you've been talking about.

Simon Barrington: [00:17:42] Yes and we can see that really clearly in the secular world you know if we take banking as an example you know there have been cases where there have been I think there was an individual couple of years ago that died from overwork basically they were a young man and they just were doing far too many hours to prove themselves. In one of the banks.

Simon Barrington: [00:18:04] That's tragic isn't it, absolutely tragic. Now how can leaders help their followers to become more resilient. What are the things leaders can put into place in their churches and their organisations that will encourage the kind of disciplines that you're talking about at a mental physical and spiritual level.

Debbie Duncan: [00:18:29] I love the fact that we are thinking more about mental health and I know that people like Christy Wimber and Catherine Welby have been very much involved in educating and supporting people. And there's also a lot about Christian mindfulness, people like Sean Lambert's that's been involved in that and just reminding us that we are people that have a body a soul and a mind and reminding us and I think that as leaders its so important to remind the people that we're working with that is the case and that we are spiritual beings but we also have these other sides to our nature and it's important that we are reminded of that.

Simon Barrington: [00:19:12] You've written another book following on from your resilience book about bravery. Tell us about that, Debbie.

Debbie Duncan: [00:19:23] There were a couple of reasons why I did it and one of them you will laugh I think at and that was we had a oh dear, an event coming up and I had to be brave for it. And I remember standing in the shop thinking I've got so many grey hairs I want to dye my hair red and be like Merida the girl in the Brave film, the Disney Pixar film of 2012. But actually there was more to it than that. Because a few weeks later somebody came up to me in church and said, actually God has wants to remind you that yuo have to keep on me they've made a lot of blather about the colour of my hair or anything and God sort of test really challenged me about what bravery looks like and I think sometimes we have this idea that it's a lion or someone that can achieve these amazing things because there's so many superhero movies out there at the moment and actually quite often being is just doing the everyday things, even just get getting out of bed in the morning can be an example of being brave. I think looking at what bravery means I think I thought well actually bravery is courage for said. Examples of scripture are often individuals that are brave for a period of time for that season that they need it for. Yeah that's brave.

Simon Barrington: [00:20:47] Now, have you seen, maybe you can tell us some stories of people around you who you've seen been brave in those ordinary moments in life. When a crisis hits or a massive challenge hits. What kind of things do you see people doing that you would describe as brave that may be otherwise we wouldn't even think of as being courageous.

Debbie Duncan: [00:21:09] I think for the people that I've met and we have the privilege don't we in church of meeting so many people. There are individuals that live with long term disabilities and they don't complain and they're their in church and they are often prayer warriors and their lives are extraordinary, the things that they have gone through. And we don't always appreciate the backstory to people, the things that they've gone through, the things that they do. So in nursing as well, I've met some extraordinary people and the things that they've gone through or the challenges that they live with.

Simon Barrington: [00:21:49] So one of the things that we need to do in ourselves to understand how brave or courageous we're being I suppose.

Debbie Duncan: [00:21:56] I think you know the Bible has about 500 words for fear or it's mentioned five hundred times and it reminds us actually that you know we we are people that we are often afraid and we were not of brave as we could be and that bravery will come from God. He will give us the courage that we need for the season that we're in.

Simon Barrington: [00:22:20] I really really love that. Now when you were at school or nursing school, or did you go to Bible College Debbie, what did they not teach you about bravery, courage and resilience that they wish you wish they had taught you when you were back in your teens and 20s and that actually would solve a lot of heartache for people if they only knew it when they were younger.

Debbie Duncan: [00:22:49] It's really interesting actually because in universities in schools now they are actually teaching them things that you know mindfulness, looking after your mental health and wellbeing and there's also they often in universities or do a session on resilience for the students and certainly that wasn't something that was ever mentioned either when I did my degree in nursing or while my husband was at Bible college. It wasn't something that we necessarily thought about. They did talk about particularly at Bible College about the body being a temple and looking after your bodies, but not always about your mental well-being. And I think if they had mentioned that or if I knew about or thought about that in their earlier years of my life then perhaps I would have built up some of the reserves I needed to take some of the challenges that we have found.

Simon Barrington: [00:23:35] And finally for those leaders who maybe find themselves in the midst of the crisis right now or are completely stressed out and challenged by their circumstances. When you're in the midst of a crisis like that and you know you're up against everything and back against the wall, what are the first things you can do and what are the early steps that you can take just to be brave to set yourself on a path of a greater level of resilience in your life.

Debbie Duncan: [00:24:10] I think encourage your spirit. Isaiah 42 v3 says "a bruised reed he will not break" is one of my favourite verses because we do bend, we are stretched. But God gives us the help that we need and the first place to go back to is Scripture and obviously praying and beings very honest and transparent with the Lord as well. You know sharing what you're going through with him. I love the verse in 2nd Corinthians Chapter 1 Verse 8 9 and it says "We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure and we thought we would never live through it. In fact we expected to die as a result. We stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God who raises the dead, it's incredible and actually in all of the books I've written I've put that at the beginning because it has become a live verse.

Simon Barrington: [00:25:09] That's fantastic and I know I'll be a great encouragement to people who maybe find themselves in a very difficult spot right now. Debbie remind us of the names of your books so that people can look out for them when they're next in their bookshop or browsing on Amazon.

Debbie Duncan: [00:25:29] So they're both published by Monarch Lion and the one that came out last year it's called "The Art of daily resilience - how to develop a durable spirit" and it is very much linking in theory, theology and experience or testimony - the three T's. And then the book on bravery is basically just called Brave. And that again is just out this month with Monarch Lion. And I think I want them to be resources things that you know people can use that will perhaps help them either with resilience, thinking about it what does it look like, what is the shape of it, How do you actually develop that in your own life, are there things you can do and there's lots and lots of practical examples in both of the books.

Simon Barrington: [00:26:18] That's fantastic and just from listening to you and the experience

you've had in helping people through and resolve these issues in their life. I know those books will be a great help to many people. Debbie Duncan thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

Debbie Duncan: [00:26:34] Thank you very much.

Peter Wooding: [00:26:36] Thanks so much for listening. Time to work now on your disciplines, rhythms and healthy practices especially if you have overindulged on Easter eggs! One great way to get into a good rhythm is to subscribe to the Forge Leadership podcast to ensure that every episode gets delivered to your device rather than you having to search for it every week. You can subscribe on our website www.forge-leadership-podcast.com