

A Shift to Humility: Resilience & Change by Andrew Zolli

Krista Tippett, host: Most of us were born into a twentieth century which aspired to solve every problem. That never succeeded, in part because it's just not the way life works, for individuals or societies, even at the best of times. You solve one problem and new ones emerge. Even sustainability implies a confidence that balance can finally be achieved.

Andrew Zolli is thought leader and curator of a new idea, "resilience thinking," which is galvanizing scientists, governments, and social innovators. Resilience asks how to support people and create systems that know how to recover, persist, and even to thrive in the face of change. In our age, disruption is around every corner by way of globally connected economies, inevitable superstorms, and technology's endless reinvention. And a new generation is seeking wisdom and health amidst this reality.

Mr. Andrew Zolli: Failure is intrinsic, healthy, normal, and necessary to most complex systems. We need systems that are better at sensing emerging disruption that encourage cooperation, rather than division. We need systems where a failure in one component of the system doesn't bring down every other component of the system. Those are really sort of a design brief for the 21st century.

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett. This On Being from APM, American Public Media.

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Ms. Tippett: Andrew Zolli studied cognitive science and has been a strategic marketer and a fellow of the National Geographic Society. He's the author of *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*. And he's curator and executive director of PopTech, an annual conference in Camden, Maine, at the center of a global web of social innovators.

Ms. Tippett: You may know this: I start all my interviews, whoever I'm talking with, by asking if there was a religious or spiritual background to your childhood?

Mr. Zolli: Yes, very much so. You know, I grew up in a Catholic family in New England. I actually at one point sort of flirted in my childhood with the idea that there might be a calling for me there.

Ms. Tippett: As a priest?

Mr. Zolli: Well, I wasn't sure actually. It's kind of, you know, it's, so let me sort of back up for a moment. So when I was a boy, my mom got cancer and people

were shielding me. So, you know, as a child what you pick up on is not the specifics of what's going on, but the kind of ambient anxiety that, you know, children attenuate to just perfectly, even if they don't understand the specifics of what's going on. And people weren't sure she was going to live. And when she went through all of that, she had a religious conversion.

And it was a real struggle for me. I think what happened was when it washed out of my system, what it left behind was a kind of residue of a deep conviction, a deep spiritual conviction about the world — a deep theological belief about the world or an instinct about the world that later in the course of my own journey I had to reconcile with other things that I knew to be true. You know, the theory of evolution is true. The cosmological history of the universe, the sort of scientific understanding that we have.

And reconciling those two led me to a place of a couple basic insights. And one of them was that that molecules in the chair that's currently levitating my rear end sufficiently so that I can speak into the microphone can be carefully rearranged. Just very gently rearranged and have a few added molecules, and become sensate, which is really an amazing miracle in front of us, right? That the stuff of the universe appropriately organized can turn into you and me. That the stuff cannot just become sensate but mindful in that in the process a kind of deep commandment emerges, which is the commandment to amplify the mindfulness of that stuff. That really drives both gratitude, mindfulness, and service. So those have been kind of central convictions of most systems of faith.

Ms. Tippet: Right, right.

Mr. Zolli: In one aspect or another.

Ms. Tippet: With often, with different vocabulary. Yes.

Mr. Zolli: Yes. And solving different specific problems.

Ms. Tippet: Yeah. There's something you wrote or said in another interview, which really intrigued me. And it is: "My whole life I've been interested in hybrids. What happens when one field or discipline rubs up against another." So I'm curious, like when did you first start to see that in the world? How do you think that got planted in you, that way of seeing as much as anything else?

Mr. Zolli: When I was in high school, I read philosophy way too early. So I got very interested in philosophy. And began study at the University level.

Ms. Tippet: Then didn't you study cognitive science in college too?

Mr. Zolli: I did. I did, and I sort of went back and forth between neuroscience, which felt too specific. We're going to spend all of our time essentially poking this neuron with a stick and seeing what happens. And philosophy, which was full of great questions, the kind of questions you wish you had answers to, but none of the tools for answering them. And then magically this field had emerged in the middle, which combined neuroscience and artificial intelligence and computer science and linguistics and philosophy of mind. And it was kind of a hybrid field in which people who had a shared interest in the nature of mind and brain were slowly figuring out their own vernacular.

Ms. Tippet: And that just absolutely points at, I think, one of the defining features of the

world we are leaving behind. Right? And one of the things that you are illuminating in such practical ways is how we specialized in the parts and we didn't see the whole. You know, the fact that medicine divided our bodies into specialties, right? Or that in social programs or politics or economic development, we focused on solving problems. In fact, as we now see, in isolation. And yet, we had this idea that we were going to just achieve, that we could accomplish equilibrium. And so this realm you're working in — I mean, one of the words that you are using and that you're thinking and work is associated with now is this, let's call it a new paradigm of resilience. So why don't you talk to me about, you know, how resilience changes the equation, in terms of how we see ourselves as human beings and really all of our endeavors.

Mr. Zolli: We're in a moment now as a species, as societies, as communities, at all different levels, where we are experiencing increasing amounts of volatility. So 10 years ago, we used to marvel — and you could sort of see it entered the culture — that a butterfly could flap its wings on one side of the planet and you could have a hurricane on the other side of the planet. Well, in an era where every butterfly is connected to every hurricane, you start to worry about the flapping of those butterfly wings. Oh my goodness, what can we do to stop that from happening? Because the ecological system, the economic system, the geopolitical system, the climate system, the food security system are all connected to each other in ways that cause very complex highly unpredictable nonlinear outcomes. So all of those systems being connected leads us to a place where increasingly instead of trying to find an equilibrium in a planet that's out of balance, we also have to try and manage with the unbalances, the imbalances. We have to manage in a world that's intrinsically out of order. And that means protecting, especially vulnerable people from the shocks and disruptions that are becoming the hallmark of the age.

(Sound bite of music)

Ms. Tippet: So it's interesting here too is that when we, when things were in silos and they were in tidy compartments, or we could pretend like they were, it was also easier to pretend that failure and vulnerability and crisis are not completely normal and predictable. There's a way in which there was not a great reality base also. And so what happens with all this interconnection is it amplifies the effects when things, as they always do, in ways we can often not foresee, go wrong.

Mr. Zolli: You are absolutely right about that. And the terrible thing is there's plenty of things that we know are going wrong that we can't organize our political will to deal with — that sit just adjacent to the much larger pool of things that we don't even know are interconnected here. But what you're pointing to, Krista — I think a really astute point — is that the history of the 20th century was the history of a huge explosion of human capacity, which continues to this day. But think about what happened. You know, a man who was alive in 1900 had a life span of about 55, living in the West. By the end of the century, it increased to about 80. Which is dramatic in a really, that's almost a different species ...

Ms. Tippet: Really dramatic. Yes, yes.

Mr. Zolli: ... people who can expect to live that long. We mastered the atom. We invented the contemporary information society. We electrified the planet. And against that backdrop, you can sort of forgive human beings for thinking that they were in control, that they had mastery.

Ms. Tippet: Right, we can do it all. We are going to solve all the problems. Yeah, you can. I think that's great perspective.

Mr. Zolli: Or rather not that we've solved every problem, but that every problem is solvable.

Ms. Tippet: Yes, yes.

Mr. Zolli: You know, and that we just, there's the problems we've solved, and the ones we haven't gotten to yet. Right?

Ms. Tippet: Yes, yes.

Mr. Zolli: So I think what has happened is that now there is a kind of shift to humility. And we really saw this in the community that I work in about five or six years ago. Before the financial crisis of 2008. Over the course of several years, you could see the language start to shift. And the shift in language, and it was really a shift in emphasis as much as language ...

Ms. Tippet: Right.

Mr. Zolli: ... was away from risk mitigation. That is to say, what are the steps we can do or take to ensure that we steer around crises toward risk adaptation, which is to say, my goodness there's no way we can steer around these storms; we had better build a better boat. And when corporate leaders and governmental leaders and scientists and social innovators and all of these folks begin to talk about the same thing — not using the same language, but the same kind of shift — it was like watching the wind blow over the grass. You could just see all the blades shift their polarity. And ...

Ms. Tippet: Can you remember, like, a person or a moment or sometime when this really became clear to you?

Mr. Zolli: Gosh, there are a lot of relevant moments. I was with a farmer in Kenya. So Kenya is a country that is largely fed by smallholder farmers, farmers who are growing very small plots of land. And one of the things that's happened in the Horn of Africa is climate effects have dramatically shifted the pattern of the rains and the pests and what crops can grow, and it's caused all kinds of volatility and real disruption, and not just for farmers in general, but particularly for women and girls, who make up the majority of those farmers. And so I was talking to a woman there who was a farmer, and she was, this is not someone who had access to lots of education and not someone who had access to lots of resources. And she was describing the difficulties, because they were gearing up for whether or not they needed to move. Which meant for her, moving away from schools and clinics — the fixed infrastructure that had been put in place by big multinational aid agencies and the government — and potentially disrupting her future. And she looked right at me and she said, "You're coming here to study me. But I have to tell you, I am your future." And what she meant was the stuff that's happening here is going to happen everywhere.

Ms. Tippet: Right.

Mr. Zolli: And that moment when you look at somebody and the whole context within what you're having the conversation, which is you're the wealthy visitor, right, who is there to understand the context, is suddenly put into the same tribe, the tribe is

enlarged. And the two of you are in it together. And you realized that you really are connected by that web of mutuality and shared destiny.

Ms. Tippett: And that in fact your future well-being might depend very much on how much you learn from her.

Mr. Zolli: Absolutely. In fact, you know, one of the byproducts of the great explosion of 20th-century knowledge is that we got used to this idea that the flow of innovation goes from west to east, and from north to south. It basically radiates out of Silicon Valley and everyone else picks it up. Right? It radiates out of the United States. And so we're going to see a lot of innovation that flows south to south, south to north, east to west. It's going to go everywhere because we need innovations that are happening in Kenya now here in the United States.

(Sound bite of music)

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this On Being, today with Andrew Zolli of PopTech. He's a catalyst in the emerging world of resilience thinking among scientists, governments, and social innovators.

Ms. Tippett: You know, I just want to kind of underline this before we, you know, keep moving on. But it's something you said that's so striking is that one of the things we need are systems that fail gracefully, that don't bring down everything else. And I think that that sentence — you know, for almost everyone, you think about the economic downturn of 2008. You think about Hurricane Katrina, and it makes sense. But this notion of failing gracefully — I mean, it's a sentence that is true in life as well.

Mr. Zolli: Yeah, that's right.

Ms. Tippett: And yet we haven't wanted to think that it would be true in our institutions, in the way we manage and organize our common life. It's scary.

Mr. Zolli: I think that's true. And I think part of the reason is that I think we believed that we could essentially out engineer failure.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Mr. Zolli: That we could inoculate ourselves from it. And you know, again, I'll speak about my own personal journey. My first independent decade as an adult was in the '90s. And so it's interesting to reflect on what was going on then. Right? The Soviet Union had collapsed.

Ms. Tippett: Yes.

Mr. Zolli: We weren't at war. The Internet was ascendant. People writing, publishing books like, the titles like The End of History, it was over. It was like a party that I just arrived at and everyone was going home, which is not the last time that would happen in my life. And the idea was that it was going to be, you know, clear and easy sailing. And that are fights were going to be about economics and creativity and they weren't going to be about over physical resources. And they weren't going to be real wars; we were moving past that.

Ms. Tippett: Right. And there's was going to be nothing that went downward;

everything would go upward.

Mr. Zolli: That's right. People were writing books, the laws of physics had been repealed. And we were busy spending our peace dividend. And contrast that to the decade that came right after — that in many people's minds began with a global active, spectacularly successful global act of terrorism. Preceded through huge expensive complicated painful shocking wars, and natural disasters. And concluded with a huge economic crisis.

You know, I believed that historians years from now will find that the, this decade is going to replace the '70s as the suckiest decade in American history. You know, it's not the one that we're all going to love. But the most important thing is that we moved from a period of relative tranquility to real disruption in basically the blink of an eye. And that fact has begun to permeate our culture. And so you asked about graceful failure. I think the first premise is all things fail. And in fact not only do all things fail, but failure is intrinsic, healthy, normal, and necessary to most complex systems.

Ms. Tippett: Right. Right.

Mr. Zolli: Then the question is, if that's true, how can we weather such failures? And a big part of that story is about emboldening the local. Because we've so tightly connected all of these systems, it's important that we have redundancy. It's important that we have spare capacity. It's important that we have the right kinds of social networks, so that we can share with each other. It's important that we have a shared wisdom, a body of knowledge that helps us be more locally self-reliant.

Ms. Tippett: And you're talking about human wisdom, as well as wisdom wise infrastructure or wise. Right.

Mr. Zolli: Yeah, that's right.

Ms. Tippett: You're talking about relationship and yes, wisdom and that with a capital W.

Mr. Zolli: Yeah, I mean we need systems where, you know, much as in your body, a clot, a very tiny clot in exactly the wrong place at the wrong time can kill you. And we need the kinds of infrastructure. We need systems that can self-reorganize, that are better at sensing emerging disruption. We need systems that encourage cooperation, rather than division. We need systems that, where a failure in one component of the system doesn't bring down every other component of the system. Those are really in many ways, they're sort of a design brief for the 21st century.

Ms. Tippett: And I think something that is provocative and maybe controversial that grows out of this is, I think the word sustainability arose as an initial response to the realization that the way we've been doing things wasn't holistic enough. But you're also saying, you and other people are saying that sustainability fell into some of the same traps. And that resilience really is again something different. I mean, you were just describing that too. But how would you describe that distinction?

Mr. Zolli: Well, first of all, sustainability as a concept has actually been with us now for about four decades. That's a very long time in the public life of ideas. And it's predicated on the idea, which remains true to this day, that human beings must find a way to live in balance with the planet, because we do not want to suffer our own collapse.

You know, and from just a purely self-interested perspective. But it's also true today — and wasn't true, say, in the 1960s — that now we are actually inheriting the consequences of our own inaction.

Ms. Tippet: Right, right.

Mr. Zolli: And you know, it is not a future tense problem. It is a present tense problem. So now we actually have to figure out what are we going to do? Not to change and steer away from the storm, but to steer through it.

Ms. Tippet: So, and something that intrigues me, this notion of resilience also challenges, I would say, the political silos. The silo driven way we have talked about change or a compromise or solutions. And, you know, I even think, you know, one of the things you've said, there are good guys and bad guys and good ideas and bad ideas. "But we have to acknowledge that holy war against bogeymen hasn't worked and isn't likely to anytime soon. In its place, we need approaches that are both more pragmatic and more politically inclusive — rolling with the waves instead of trying to stop the ocean." So how do you think about how this model of resilience as you know it now from social change agents and scientists, you know, how would it inform and challenge our public life, including each of us as political beings?

Mr. Zolli: Well, it's a great question. Immediately there's a few things to say. So when you find resilience, paradoxically there are no seven auras of resilience. It's not a checklist to do these seven things.

Ms. Tippet: I don't think those checklists ever work anyway. So I'm glad to hear you say that.

Mr. Zolli: Yeah, but they particularly don't work. And that's a problem, because of course, you know, our government works by checklists. That's what they work by.

Ms. Tippet: Well, also we like them. I mean they're handy to have, for all of us, yes.

Mr. Zolli: Yeah, that's right, that's right. But particularly given the complexity of these things, really what we need to talk about are tradeoffs. So there's a tradeoff between the agility that comes with short-term thinking and wisdom that comes from long-term thinking. So one of the challenges of our contemporary structure, political structure, is that there's virtually no incentive for most people in Congress to solve long-term problems because the political rewards will accrue to someone else. Right. And it's hard to sell umbrellas in the sunshine. Now that's not true uniformly across what you might think of as a broader definition of our government. So there are places in our government that do have long memories and that do therefore have long points of view. Paradoxically, they're in places like the permanent bureaucracy parts of the State Department and even the military.

Here's an interesting example of this that just runs directly counter to many of our kind of typical notions. So, the nature of war has changed. Now we live in a world in which we have forward operating bases. And supplying these forward operating bases is really expensive. At the height of the war in Afghanistan the cost of a gallon of gasoline was \$400 a gallon. There's a huge incentive for the military to figure out how to decarbonize — that is, to use less gasoline, to become more energy self-sufficient. So here you have the department of blowing things up and killing people talking about local self-sustaining energy ecologies. Now granted, for a very specific purpose that, you know,

it doesn't strike us as being particularly peaceful per se. But the point is that they have to think about the world in much longer time increments than the typical congressperson.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Mr. Zolli: So what you really see in resilient systems is the ability to move at more than one speed.

(Sound bite of music)

Ms. Tippett: You can listen again, download, and share this conversation with Andrew Zolli through our website, onbeing.org. There you can also subscribe to our podcast on iTunes. We're also on Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. Follow our show @beingtweets. I share my thoughts @kristatippett. Coming up, resilience and the next generation of cheerfully earnest activists.

I'm Krista Tippett. This program comes to you from APM, American Public Media.

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Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this On Being. Today we're talking about resilience as a successor to solutions-based strategies and even to sustainability, both of which assume that balance can be achieved. My guest, Andrew Zolli, is a catalyst and curator in the emerging resilience thinking, reframing a new generation's approach to everything from economic development to urban planning in an age of superstorms. Andrew Zolli trained as a cognitive scientist and he now heads the social innovation network PopTech.

Ms. Tippett: How did you discover PopTech? That it was founded, when was it founded? 1996 is that right?

Mr. Zolli: Yeah, that's right.

Ms. Tippett: But were you there right at the beginning?

Mr. Zolli: No, I was invited into this tribe. So, PopTech's really an amazing entity, in that really it's the manifestation in its founding of the values of a very specific community, a very particular place on the coast of Maine, in a little village called Camden of a few thousand people. Many, many years ago, the people in the community started a conference, which continues to this day, called the Camden Conference, which is held in February when no one who is optionally associated with Maine is in the state.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Mr. Zolli: Because Maine in February is not easy. And it gave the community something to do and a way to talk, to bring ideas into itself. So this is a real community with real values and, like many small communities, with lots of interdependent parts. You know, you find people working two or three jobs. And so you see the same person at the library. And you see them again at a shop, and you see them in a restaurant. And like all small communities, it can be challenged by the larger winds of change. And so the citizens of this community started a movement to start their own way of bringing the world to them. And as the dot-com boom was getting started, a group of them said, we should start one

that's just about technology and the way in which technology shapes people's lives. Not about the technology itself, but about its impacts. And that's where PopTech came from. And I came to it in late 2002 when, in the wake of 9/11 and the recession and the fact that dot-com boom had ended, it was in a challenging moment. And I, along with a wonderful team of people, led its resurgence. And in so doing, something really amazing happened, which is as we started to bring these scientists and technologists and engineers and designers and people working in fields that were so new they didn't have a name. One of the highest compliments we can give someone is to call them a weirdo.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Mr. Zolli: Because the reality is the future often belongs to the weirdoes. And all of these collaborations started to occur. And people started to do stuff. And we could barely stop them. What's going on here? All of these people kind of saying, we're going to start this project or start this company. Or we've decided to work on this problem together. And so we began to put in place the infrastructure to identify, train, refine, scale those collaborations. And once a year, they all come to this little village in Maine. And they come back together to share each other's work. And I think part of what makes it work is the sense that we're really in somebody's home. And you walk differently.

Ms. Tippett: There's that paradox, right? There's that paradox of our time. Another paradox of something that is global and dynamic and somehow part of the roots of that and the source of that is that planted, that local sense of place, as you say.

Mr. Zolli: Yeah, I think it's absolutely essential. In particular, in the, you know, if there's a truism about the digital world it's that it makes the analog world more, not less valuable. It makes our face time more important.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Mr. Zolli: Because something happens when you take people out of their everyday urban context or their daily experience and you put them in the context of a community. Their humanity emerges and re-emerges. And they touch a space of creative possibility that I think is something that unfortunately in many of our cubicle-ville daily lives is sort of drummed out of us.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah.

Mr. Zolli: You know, we're taught to edit ourselves to bring only a narrow keyhole of ourselves often to our professional work. And this whole endeavor and network is predicated on a much more expansive notion of who we are.

Ms. Tippett: Well, one of the, I love the language that you use, that PopTech uses to describe what it does. I love uncovering unusual suspects, and also this, you know, this notion of you bringing together innovators to expand the edge of change, which you know, drawing on what we have — where we began this conversation, that's the work and maybe that's the best you can do, rather than solve all the problems. You can expand that edge of change.

Mr. Zolli: Yeah.

Ms. Tippet: But the magnitude of change that you just described, the magnitude and the pace of it is sort of we're not hardwired for that as creatures, right, as human beings biologically. It's very stressful. You know, and so in that context I also see you talking about resilient mind.

Mr. Zolli: Yeah, so there is this incredibly exciting new dialogue in the social sciences among psychologists, neuroscientists, social scientists, organizational theorists about what makes us resilient, or less so, in the face of potentially traumatic circumstances.

Ms. Tippet: Right.

Mr. Zolli: What is a trauma is often in the eye of the beholder. But this is, you know, an obviously a vitally important discussion. So the short answer is there are many things that make you or I and the people we know and everyone we know more or less resilient psychologically, psychosocially. Your social networks, the quality of your intimate relationships, the degree to which you both love and experience love. Your access to other kinds of resources, physical resources. Your physical health, your genes and in particular the interaction between your genes and your life experiences. What's called the GXE, a hypothesis which is the complex interactions between potentially traumatic events and the on and off switches that drive our genes through our lives. And the good news is that human beings are surprisingly resilient, particularly when you look at us at a population scale.

Ms. Tippet: Right.

Mr. Zolli: There's a researcher named George Bonanno at Columbia who studies the experiences of people, whole populations of people who all go through the same traumatic, potentially traumatic events. So for instance, all of the people in a platoon or a battalion who go through a very traumatic experience during times of war, populations of doctors and first responders and those kind of folks. And what he finds is that often between a third and two-thirds of any given population it seems to have no lasting ill effects. That doesn't mean they don't feel sadness. It doesn't mean that they don't feel grief. It's that they're not compromised in their function. The question that raises, of course, is what do you do for the folks who are not in a particular context, psychologically resilient? And there, there's another piece of good news. And that is, that we're beginning to understand the way that new tools and new aspects of mental habits can play a role in bolstering our resilience.

Ms. Tippet: I like that term mental habits, that's good.

Mr. Zolli: Yeah, that's right.

(Sound bite of music)

Mr. Zolli: It turns out there's a field of research called hardiness research where it's social ...

Ms. Tippet: I'm learning all kinds of things from you.

Mr. Zolli: It's like, I would love to work in this field. I think it's great. So, people who are psychologically hardy it turns out believe very prevalently some things about the world. So if you believe that the world is a meaningful place, if you see yourself as having agency within that world, and if you see successes and failures as being placed in your

path to teach you things, you are more likely to be psychologically hardy and therefore more resilient in the face of trauma. This is one reason why some researchers postulate that systems of faith have been so resilient themselves in human history, and so prevalent, so sticky. Not because the individual content of the beliefs or any particular belief about, within those cosmologies is strictly true or not. But because believing in those kinds of things are the very kinds of things that confer psychological resilience upon us.

Ms. Tippet: You know, on this idea of faith traditions and resilience, it strikes me on so many levels that there are echoes here with these cutting-edge things we're learning. You know, as you said, that these traditions have helped people see the world as a meaningful place with themselves having agency in it. But also, you know, when we talked earlier about the kind of idealism that was at the basis of our perfectionism and ambition. I mean our traditions have always told us that suffering is part of life. And you live through it and in fact, have the opportunity to grow through it, that change is inevitable. That we will fall short even when we are reaching for our highest ideals. And, I mean, you used the word humility. You talked about these observations we're making about how the world in fact works. It's just very interesting to me.

Mr. Zolli: So I agree with you. And certainly the story here is complex. Many of those very same systems of faith have been used for exclusionary purposes.

Ms. Tippet: Yeah, absolutely.

Mr. Zolli: And been used to draw lines, not erase them. But there's no question to me that properly understood these systems of faith are great repositories of resilience thinking. They require us to take the other seriously because we may often be in their place.

Ms. Tippet: Right.

Mr. Zolli: If you think about in the Christian system, now again I just pick it because I know it the best. Jesus' sermons in which he says, the first shall be last. Blessed are the meek and the poor. And it's going to be hard for you guys with your Ferraris to get through the front gates of the Pearly Gates. What he's doing is he's saying that this particular arrangement between the two of you is temporary and can be reversed. And in that process properly understood the kind of ensuing behavior — and it's certainly the behavior you saw in the earliest followers of these faiths — in Christianity in particular, was deep service, was a connection to ennobling the weakest among societies. And those are exactly the kinds of things that bolster the resilience of those places.

(Sound bite of music)

Ms. Tippet: I'm Krista Tippet with On Being, today with Andrew Zolli. He's a catalyst and curator in the emerging world of resilience thinking amongst scientists, governments, and social innovators.

Ms. Tippet: So Andrew, how do you take what you learn about all this into your life, you know? How do you think you take in events differently? How do you think you might be different as a spouse or a parent or a leader? I know it's a big question. But what comes to mind?

Mr. Zolli: So, it's a good question. And it makes me ...

Ms. Tippet: It's a challenging question.

Mr. Zolli: No, well yeah, good questions are challenging questions, but this — this one in particular. I decided to work on this project starting in 2007.

Ms. Tippet: The resilience project?

Mr. Zolli: Yeah, it sort of got going in 2007. And just with the idea. Remember 2007 we were on an upward trajectory and everything was fabulous. And remember the stock market was booming.

Ms. Tippet: I vaguely remember that, yes.

Mr. Zolli: Yes, exactly. It's hard. It's amazing how quickly things fade. But, so in 2007 we could start to see the patterns of this new frame begin to emerge. And then at the beginning of 2008, I had my business partner and the person who was my kind of closest working collaborator at the time he got sick. And we thought he had a cold and actually he had a brain tumor.

Ms. Tippet: Was he also young? Was he ...

Mr. Zolli: He was in his 50s. He was in his prime and he passed very suddenly.

Ms. Tippet: Oh.

Mr. Zolli: And that was the beginning of 2008. And then a little bit after that, my wife and I lost a baby. And then a little bit after that, we had the global financial crisis hit. And it felt like it was raining hammers. And I just decided to write a book about resilience. And I began to think about the wisdom of doing this particular project under these circumstances. And I remember, you know, taking chapters and research and showing it to my wife and my friends and family and saying, look at this amazing thing. This is what we're learning. And they would say, are you doing this thing? Because you need this thing right now. You need to do this. You need to stop what you're doing right now and put down the computer and, you know, go do a little contemplative practice for a while. And so my resilience in that time was emboldened enormously by my social network. And by the ability of that, to be honest with that network about what was going on. And to be clear to this, you know, the community I live with is, and then is a kind of a gift economy. And one of the most important sort of the first two rules of all social networks. The first one is you build them before you need them. And the second is you root them in an initial act of generosity. You give to them before you expect anything from them. Otherwise you're just inviting people over to paint your house and do your homework, and that's usually no fun.

So we had done a lot of that. And we made it through. And, you know, like everything not without cost and consequence and reversals. And ...

Ms. Tippet: But to know that that was part of the picture. Is there something just in that acknowledgment, in that as your base of reality and expectation that, does that help?

Mr. Zolli: I think it was helpful to me in the process of working on a project on resilience to experience fear and doubt and genuine pain.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Mr. Zolli: To understand why people curl in on themselves in the face of disruption. You know in the face of ...

Ms. Tippett: And how reasonable in a sense that is, you know.

Mr. Zolli: That is it exactly. When every pore of your being is screaming out, to turn away. Right. And you can see in some ways, you know — to move from my own personal narrative — in the context of our politics in our society, we have moved from a period where we felt invulnerable. We lived in a bubble. We were in control. We were masters of our fate, even if we were subject to, you know, all kinds of politics and I'm talking about as a society, a kind of deep society.

Ms. Tippett: Yeah, you said somewhere, it wasn't the end of history, it was a vacation from history. That's good.

Mr. Zolli: That's right, that's right. It was a long scenic car ride. And so in the middle of all that, we have now arrived at a place where we discover we're not as in control as we thought we were. We're not as invulnerable as we thought we were. We won't solve every problem. We don't have unlimited resources. The decisions of our leadership are not, you know, prescient and perfect. They're sloppy and complicated and all of the things we've talked about. And in an environment like that, to come into the whirlwind when you find yourself in trouble, there are two instincts. And in many ways these instincts are at war in our society right now or they're in conflict in our society. One instinct is to push through the maelstrom into a new reality. And to push forward from the known in the midst of, you know, we're not in Kansas and we're not in Oz. We're in the whirlwind.

And in the whirlwind, you know, one instinct is to go forward and find the new place and find the new reality that exists on the other side. And another is to turn back. And turning back is not retreat.

Ms. Tippett: Right.

Mr. Zolli: If you've ended up in a bad place, turning back is often the wisest path. And the folks who are pushing forward look at those who say, turn back and say, it's impossible. You're yearning after a world that didn't exist in the first place. And the folks who say, turn back through the maelstrom are saying, you're letting go of the coherence of who we've been and who we are. And that's, that is the debate between a world that is defined at the polar ends by Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party and then, you know, politics between Democrats and Republicans, progressives and conservatives and on and on and on. So you know, the goal I think for us is to find deep agreement. It's to go back to those principles of seeing the other fully for whom they are. And to find those places where we can cooperate in the near term to reduce the impacts of the maelstrom, particularly on the weakest among us, because those are not, many of those activities are not political. They're not things that require big changes in policy. They can be executed through lots of different public and private things.

(Sound bite of music)

Ms. Tippet: You've written: "The journey toward resilience is the great moral quest of our age." Tell me about how you and this generation think about that term morality in this context of what we're learning about ourselves, as brains and bodies and societies and ...

Mr. Zolli: Well, I went to go speak at a high school recently. And the kids said, yeah, well we're trying to develop this literacy program in rural Africa. I said, you're in, aren't you in ninth grade? Well, what was I doing in ninth grade? I wasn't doing this in ninth grade. So there is a sense in which in some ways, first of all some of it's a fad. But I think much of it is very genuine. And I think there's a sense in which these are children and young people who've grown up in an era of information ubiquity.

Ms. Tippet: Yeah.

Mr. Zolli: A sense of real disruption and vulnerability. And yet they've maintained a kind of cheerful earnestness.

Ms. Tippet: I like that, a cheerful earnestness. Yes.

Mr. Zolli: Yeah, a desire to want to make impact. Now the challenge for many of them is that they're working on what we call wicked problems, which are big complex interdependent. And they've earned the moniker wicked for a reason. They're really hard. You pull one string and the giant hairball and six or seven other things happen. And it's, sometimes you're not making the situation better. Sometimes you can in trying make it better actually make it worse. But that said, I think there is a sense that there's a bias toward action. I think that there is a sense that this is in an age that is defined by challenges that are not as well understood by the older generation. And I think really importantly among people in their 20s and their 30s, they grew up in a world of normalized social networks in which they're sort of profligate networkers. They're constantly connecting to each other. And I think it's less a generation of superstars than super teens. There's a sense that they have to work together. And so I think that is incredibly exciting. And, you know, I'm warmed by their enthusiasm, even if sometimes what they're doing is naive. You have a sense that when this generation begins to really crack the code, they're going to have an enormous impact.