

# How Light Enters You: The 3 As of Resilience

“ *The wound is the place where the light enters you.*  
- Rumi

As the day is rounded with a night, light melting in a horizon of mellowed crimson that slowly turns to violet haze then fades away through shades of twilight, I'm poetically reminded of a truth: between what we consider opposing ends of a seemingly binary reality (day and night, light and dark, negative and positive) there is a spectrum of hues, nuances, and possibilities. When it's dark, the subtle colour changes remind us that a new day can and will soon come to be. That the wound can still welcome the light.

Excuse my literary zigzagging, the poet in me seized the moment. But now the moment seizes me and bounces in time, back and forth, like a tennis ball at Wimbledon.

The ball flies to the past. It hits the racket of a warm August evening in 2020. I am in my living room in Beirut, about to deliver an online public speaking workshop for the contestants of the MIT Lebanon Challenge, when the floor starts shuddering. A few minutes later, another wave, stronger still, shakes the building. I stand under an arch, between a door that almost gets knocked out of its hinges and a window overlooking a thick dark smoke wrapped in a mushroom cloud. That smoke, I later discover, comes from an abandoned cargo of ammonium nitrate at the Beirut Port. The cargo exploded with a power reaching up to 1 kiloton of TNT. Later that night, I walk through the rubble, between the wounded and those searching for their loved ones, clumsily trying to help.

The tennis game has begun.

*Pak.* A few days earlier. I almost lost my father to a heart attack for the second time.

*Pop.* A couple of days following the explosion. I'm in Martyr's Square being tear gassed alongside fellow protesters, outraged by the politicians' compounded negligence and corruption.

*Pak.* It's 2019. The financial system crashes.

*Pop.* End of 2021. As the Lebanese pound has now lost 95% of its value, my savings amount to... nothing.

*Pak.* I've been waiting for hours in the heat to fill my car's gas tank as the fuel shortage worsens.

*Pop.* I'm working on my half-charged ThinkPad in the dark, uncertain when the power will be back.

*Pak. Pop.* The tennis ball keeps flying back and forth. I am playing against myself across timelines. If I lose, does that mean that I also win?

For months, I relied on anti-fragile systems and failsafe mechanisms to keep functioning. Despite everything, I managed to collaborate with 103 organisations and individuals from more than 40 countries, impacting the lives of thousands around the world: entrepreneurs, youth, facilitators, managers, women, refugees, software engineers, and others.

I lost. But I also won.

A nuanced approach to setbacks made me understand this: there can be light in the dark.

How, though?

## One: Alignment

“Successful careers are not “planned”. They are the careers of people who are prepared for the opportunity because they know their strengths, the way they work and their values.

- Peter Drucker

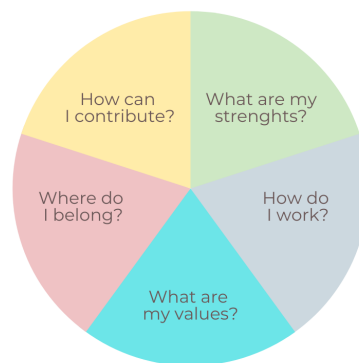
For Sun Tzu, one has to know one's self to know the other. This “know thyself” also appears on the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi in Greece. If you explore the works of Peter Drucker, you find it again, a cornerstone of powerful self-management and, subsequently, effective team management. *“The effective executive makes strength productive.*

*He knows that one cannot build on weakness*”, says Drucker<sup>1</sup>. When we spend our precious time just trying to hide or treat our weaknesses instead of working in alignment with our strengths, we neglect what makes us great and hinder our progress.

In recent years, people from around the world found appeal in the concept of the Ikigai, a Japanese word meaning “reason for being”. Andres Zuzanaga built on that concept the purpose venn diagram, re-modelling this reason for meaning as the nexus of passions, skills, opportunities, and world needs.<sup>2</sup> These ideas are not dissimilar to Drucker’s five key questions: “*What are my strengths? How do I work? What are my values? Where do I belong? How can I contribute?*”<sup>3</sup> By answering these five questions, we unlock parts of ourselves that can define our lives. Drucker takes it a step further: to figure out our contribution to and place in the world, we should understand what the situation requires from us, how our strengths and ways can offer the best help and what difference the results can make. By situating our idiosyncrasies in a dynamic context, we are already building a bridge towards aligned action.<sup>4</sup> At the core of each of these concepts, models, and questions is the same message: find alignment.



PURPOSE VENN DIAGRAM



SELF MANAGEMENT QUESTIONS

When I finally built a life around that sense of alignment, everything changed: my productivity spiked, my energy skyrocketed, my impact multiplied. Before this, my life felt like an overtaking and constant push

<sup>1</sup>Drucker, Peter. 2012. *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*. Routledge.

<sup>2</sup>“How the Andrés Zuzanaga Venn Diagram Became Ikigai.” n.d. *Ikigai Tribe*. <https://ikigaitribe.com/ikigai/podcast07/>

<sup>3</sup>Drucker, P. F. 1999. “Managing Oneself.” *Harvard Business Review* 77 (2): 64–74, 185. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/10387772>

<sup>4</sup>Drucker, Peter. 2012. *Op. cit.*

and pull in all directions. And after trial and error, I was no longer merely reacting, I was proactively seeking. And what I sought was to enact this alignment in everything I do, an approach that brought to me this peaceful but enthused energy that allowed me to bounce back and move forward.

## Two: Allies

“ Most people work with other people and are effective through other people.  
- Peter Drucker

Drucker teaches us that success (and successful management) is ultimately about humans and the social context in which they operate. Human connection is essential to survive and succeed, to face uncertainty head on and thrive. King and Kay affirm that “eusocial species are highly productive, able to undertake complex tasks, and build elaborate artefacts.”<sup>5</sup> In his book, *Tribes*, Seth Godin highlights the importance of communities: “Human beings can’t help it: we need to belong. One of the most powerful of our survival mechanisms is to be part of a tribe, to contribute to (and take from) a group of like-minded people.”<sup>6</sup> In the words of Nassim Nicholas Taleb, I would say those connections make us “anti-fragile”.

In the end, perhaps Bukwoski’s isolation in his famous “Go all the way” poem may not always be a gift. Perhaps, it can be the opposite. The nexus, this beautiful space where people and ideas intersect, is rich with potential and innovation. Let’s take Da Vinci as an example, the epitome of the Renaissance polymath. He was not a recluse weaving his life’s work in solitude. He collaborated with others, with fellow apprentices and maestro Verrochio early in his career, then with his own apprentices later on. He constantly mingled with other people in the courts that welcomed him. He likely convinced Ludovico Sforza to bring the mathematician Fra Luca Pacioli to Milan, opening the door to a lifelong collaboration.<sup>7</sup> From crossdisciplinary exchanges and exposure to different perspectives, ideas

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<sup>5</sup>Kay, John, and Mervyn King. 2020. *Radical Uncertainty: Decision-Making beyond the Numbers*. W. Norton & Company.

<sup>6</sup>Godin, Seth. 2008. *Tribes : We Need You to Lead Us*. New York: Portfolio.

<sup>7</sup>Isaacson, Walter. 2017. *Leonardo Da Vinci*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

emerge to break boundaries and catalyse creative solutions: that's the Medici Effect.<sup>8</sup>

How to get there? In my opinion, there is more to the interdependence that Drucker refers to in his management theory<sup>9</sup> in light of the ethics of interdependence described by Confucius<sup>10</sup>. Interdependence is the bedrock of problem solving, innovation, and wellbeing. And for Steven Covey, it is built on three principles: seek to understand before asking to be understood, think win-win and synergise<sup>11</sup>. Synergistic connections that binds us together and link us to our environment are essential to resilience. They protect us from self-absorbed siloed thinking that further disconnects us from the possibilities that surround us, from the joys of collaboration and from the people we care about and who care about us.

In those interdependent human connections, multidisciplinary talks and multinational collaborations, I found anchor, energy, creativity, strength, solace. Whether they knew it or not, the people I spoke to, surrounded myself with, exchanged thoughts with via regular masterminds, and collaborated with on impactful projects... those people were my allies as I was - correction: as WE were - facing some of the worst odds on the backdrop of a global pandemic.

### Three: Action

“ *In every area of effectiveness within an organization, one feeds the opportunities and starves the problems.*  
- Peter Drucker

It's much harder to start something than to keep doing it. That's the difference between activation energy and momentum conservation. In life, as in chemistry and physics, a small push is welcome, before the action gains a life of its own. But how to give ourselves that gentle yet powerful push? In Peter Drucker's words: "feed the opportunity" and "starve the problem".<sup>12</sup> And how can we do that?

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<sup>8</sup>Johansson, Frans, and Teresa Amabile. 2017. *The Medici Effect What Elephants and Epidemics Can Teach Us about Innovation : With a New Preface and Discussion Guide*. Boston, Massachusetts Harvard Business Review Press.

<sup>9</sup>Turriago-Hoyos, Alvaro, Ulf Thoene, and Surendra Arjoon. 2016. "Knowledge Workers and Virtues in Peter Drucker's Management Theory." *SAGE Open* 6 (1): 215824401663963. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016639631>.

<sup>10</sup>Drucker, Peter. 1981. "What is "Business Ethics"?", *The Public Interest*, No. 63, 18-36.

<sup>11</sup>Covey, Stephen R. (1989) 2013. *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Simon & Schuster Ltd

<sup>12</sup>Drucker, Peter. 2012. *Op. Cit.*

First, we need to rewrite the narrative. The way we tell the stories of our lives holds a power over them. The psychologist Dan McAdams distinguishes the narrative of victimhood from the narrative of redemption.<sup>13</sup> In the former, even the most positive experiences morph into a spiral of negativity. In the latter, we grow from the negative experiences, extract lessons, acknowledge sacrifices, and recover from setbacks. Pain becomes power. That process requires self-belief, an irremovable certainty that no matter how uncertain or grim the world around us is, we have what it takes to make it. This was the conclusion that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi came to when studying the profiles of highly resilient individuals from mountain climbers to concentration camp survivors.<sup>14</sup> In the past, I had to rewrite my narrative over and over again to transform grief, hardship, chaos, and uncertainty into a space where meaning grows and distils itself into rewarding action, a space of opportunity.

Second, if the biggest barrier to effective change and resilient comeback is the starting point, then we would be remiss if we didn't make the beginning as easy and accessible as possible. How? By starting with one thing. For Drucker, the concentration of time and energy is essential to success.<sup>15</sup> As a divergent thinker myself, that was one of my biggest challenges (still is). But the only way I managed to bounce back, move forward, and run as many projects and collaborations in a short time frame is that I did so one step at a time.

Third, comes the momentum. Life is not a closed and frictionless system, so we always end up losing momentum. How to maintain it despite continuous hardships? The more impact I saw as a result of my aligned and allied action, the more aligned and allied action I wanted to make. My brain's reward system became attuned to this cycle, as it released dopamine in the expectation of another rewarding experience, based on the result of previous ones.<sup>16</sup> In a way, this process brings back to the system the energy that was lost. And then action leads on to more action, making resilience not just about bouncing back but also about rising higher than ever.

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<sup>13</sup>McAdams, Dan P., and Kate C. McLean. 2013. "Narrative Identity." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22 (3): 233–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622>

<sup>14</sup>Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 2009. *Flow*. HarperCollins.

<sup>15</sup>Drucker, Peter. 2012. *Op. Cit.*

<sup>16</sup>Arias-Carrión, Oscar, Maria Stamelou, Eric Murillo-Rodríguez, Manuel Menéndez-González, and Ernst Pöppel. 2010. "Dopaminergic Reward System: A Short Integrative Review." *International Archives of Medicine* 3 (1): 24. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1755-7682-3-24>

Last but not least, meaning is always front and centre. The action needs to be meaningful to feed the positive and drain the negative. Drucker considers social impact and responsibility as one of the key tasks of management: “*Every one is an organ of society and exists for the sake of society.*”<sup>17</sup> Is that also the case in times of great difficulty? Viktor Frankl’s approach to meaning stems from “dereflection” or the process of redirecting a person’s attention away from destructive self-absorption towards others.<sup>18</sup> By investing myself in meaningful work that improved the lives of others, I improved my own life, helped myself stay focused on the opportunity rather than dwell on the problems.

## Conclusion

There has never been a time in history without change. If there’s one thing we can be certain about is that things will not be the same. And as we seem to be on an accelerated track of transformation, resilience becomes unavoidable. It may appear to some that resilience is forcing one’s self through a path, bending the world to one’s will, knocking out the door and entering the future with violence. But healthy resilience, to me, is not brute force, it’s more surgical. It’s like picking a lock in the dark. One must find the lock, utilise the right tools, embrace trials and errors, listen very carefully to the environment and feel the inner mechanisms of the lock. Only when the tool and the bolt align perfectly can one open the door and move forward. The 3 A model is this lockpicking tool that we need to open the door to the future, to bounce back and move forward, to step into the land of opportunity despite the worst odds. The subtle changes that the 3 As instigate can have massive ripples, much like the waves of twilight as the night turns to day and light finally enters the wound.

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<sup>17</sup>Drucker, Peter F. 1973. *Management : Tasks, Responsibilities, Practises*. New York: Harper Business.

<sup>18</sup>Frankl, Viktor E. 2006. *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.

# Resources

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