

The background of the cover is a vibrant, high-angle photograph of a tropical jungle. A stream flows through the center, its surface reflecting the sunlight and the surrounding greenery. Numerous long, thin, brown vines hang down from the top of the frame, creating a dense, textured canopy. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

ELENA AGUILAR

Author of *The Art of Coaching*

Onward

*Cultivating
Emotional Resilience
in Educators*

JOSSEY-BASS®

“*Onward* reveals Elena Aguilar’s wisdom and humanity in helping educators find the power within themselves to realize their aspirations, despite the pervasive challenges. It is truly an amazing book, full of brilliant strategies and advice and rooted in her own vulnerable, honest, beautiful experience and stories. Anyone who makes the time to read and sit with this incredible resource will be stronger, happier, and better for it, and, I predict, forever grateful.”

—*Wendy Kopp, founder, Teach For America; CEO, Teach For All*

“*Onward* will change your life! Elena Aguilar provides a thoughtful, moving, and timely framework for how to increase the resilience of the adults who serve our students. It provides a clear path using science, research, and the compelling experiences of one who has been down this path herself. This book is a gift to every teacher, from novice to veteran, and should be required reading for anyone in school leadership.”

—*Ron Severson, superintendent of the Roseville (CA)
Joint Union High School District*

“Elena Aguilar offers a hopeful message to stressed-out educators—resilience is something that you *can* cultivate through your habits and dispositions. There is no magic wand to sweep away all stress and weariness, but this book offers good guidance for fostering a sustainable approach to the meaningful but arduous work of educating the young minds entrusted to our care.”

—*Megan Tschannen-Moran, professor of educational policy, planning, and leadership, William & Mary School of Education*

“Elena Aguilar’s writing is the antidote every teacher needs to fight burnout and meet challenging students with fresh set of eyes. *Onward* is empowering, specific, and makes it seem possible to bring your best self to the classroom every day. When you feel the need to hit the reset button, pick up this book!”

—*Celine Coggins, lecturer and entrepreneur-in-residence, Harvard Graduate School of Education*

“I invite every educator to keep a copy of this book by your nightstand. Each month a new chapter provides you new opportunities for exploring how you will build your resilience and commitment to great teaching.”

—*Stephanie Hirsh, executive director, Learning Forward*

“*Onward* is not a feel-good, theoretical guide to enhancing resilience. It’s a tough, look-in-the-mirror-and-do-it set of practical strategies for all educators to be their personal and professional best in this inherently stressful profession.”

—*Colin Seale, founder and CEO, thinkLaw*

“Leaders, in schools big and small, will use this book every year! *Onward* guides you through the best strategies to bring out the leaders in your staff and students. It acknowledges the ebbs and flows of a school year and how to keep your organization and you moving forward!”

—*Michelle Carpenter, principal, Berney Elementary, Walla Walla, WA*

“We educators owe it to ourselves and our students to cultivate resilience so we can continue to inspire, teach, and lead. Read this book. Grow your resiliency. Stay in this work to transform education.”

—*Christine Carlson, instructional coach, KIPP Northeast Denver Middle School*

“*Onward* opens up the real conversation about *how* to support teachers and leaders. Each page addresses essential, but often overlooked, ways we can all thrive as educators. Every new teacher and administrator needs this book.”

—*Cheryl Lana Agrawal, San Mateo (CA) County Office of Education*

“We know that for teachers, symbolic violence within this work is a natural reaction to being silenced, but *Onward* helps us to create a world where there isn’t such a heavy weight behind us while at the same time cultivating the resistance needed for the freedoms within ourselves to be felt by the nature of our very own existence and relationship to resilience.”

—*Mario Benabe, STEM educator*



Onward

Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators

Elena Aguilar

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Many of the names of the educators that I reference throughout this book are indeed their real names. To the very best of my abilities, I've depicted them and shared their words with as much accuracy as possible. When appropriate, I've used pseudonyms. To protect privacy, I've also changed identity markers and some aspects of the narrative with the hopes that the people about whom I write will be unidentifiable.

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PREFACE

You're on a rugged trek in an arid land. Thirsty and dusty, you concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. The heat makes your head pound, and you wonder whether you're lost. Just as you reach your limit, you come to a clearing. Hummingbirds appear, darting back and forth, dipping into and then emerging from what you see is a huge hole in the ground.

Stepping to the rim, you peer into a deep cave, at the bottom of which lies a pool of sublime turquoise water. Here, the foliage is lush and green, refreshing and inviting. An old wooden ladder beckons you, and you descend tentatively toward the pool.

Your apprehension begins to dissipate. The air is cool. You hear only water dripping off the ends of stalactites as your eyes adjust to the light. You drink from an underground stream that flows into the pool.

You wade in, submerge your body, and allow the translucent water to envelop you. As you float on your back, the layers of dust, exhaustion, and fear wash away.

Cradled by these blue-green spring waters, you know you can do anything. You will continue the trek, and, even though you'll face thirst and fatigue again, you'll be able to go on. You know now. You remember the way.



In Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, as well as in other parts of the world, just meters below ground lie *cenotes*, water holes formed millions of years ago by the collapse of limestone. That's the image on the cover of this book. These natural springs, filled by underground rivers and rainwater, have been a resource for people for thousands of years. The ancient Mayans built villages around these pools and believed them to be a portal to speak with the gods—*cenote* means “sacred well.”

Today, Mayans continue to care for these places and enjoy the relief of the waters in the long, hot days of summer.

When you float in a cenote, you feel—I can assure you—that anything is possible.

The cenote offers a beautiful metaphor for resilience. Within you and outside you is a wellspring of life-giving energy that you can access and cultivate. The cenote provides relief on a scorching day. It already exists. Our task is to find our way back to it, understand what it offers, care for it, and then float. Resilience is within us. Let's start the journey.

*In memory of my grandparents, Lil and Frank, who personified resilience,
fought the good fight, and loved me fiercely*

With our lives we make our answers all the time, to
this ravenous, beautiful, mutilated, gorgeous world.

VICTORIA SAFFORD

Resilience

Perseverance

CELEBRATE + APPRECIATE

Trust

KNOW YOURSELF

Purposefulness

RIDE THE WAVES OF CHANGE

Courage

UNDERSTAND EMOTIONS

Acceptance

PLAY + CREATE

TELL EMPOWERING STORIES

Curiosity

Optimism

BE A LEARNER

BUILD COMMUNITY

Perspective

Empathy

CULTIVATE COMPASSION

BE HERE NOW

Humor

Empowerment

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Positive
Self-Perception

FOCUS ON THE BRIGHT SPOTS

Onward!





INTRODUCTION

Imagine it's the end of a rainy Friday when kids didn't get time outside and you had to supervise indoor recess. You had only 10 minutes for lunch, during which you inhaled a bag of chips and a soda; and during the final few minutes of cleanup, a student who often pushes your buttons says something disrespectful to you. You had only asked the student to pick up a piece of trash. Other kids giggle and watch to see what you'll do.

Freeze this scene.

This moment between something that happens and how we respond is what this book is about. This is the moment when we cultivate resilience. This is the moment that is referenced in this quote (erroneously attributed to Viktor Frankl but actually of unknown origin): "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

Educators encounter hundreds of moments like these every day. We are challenged over and over and over by things that students do, or the unplanned fire drill, or the announcement of a mandatory meeting on Wednesday afternoon, or an upset parent showing up at our door five minutes before school starts, or the broken copy machine, or a request that we cover someone else's class during our prep because their sub didn't show, or any number of other things. Alone, these are minor inconveniences, but the sum total of these moments feels exhausting, depletes our resilience, and contributes to burnout. There is no moment more important for educators to attend to than this one between stimulus and response. If we slow down and examine these moments, if we cultivate new responses, we might just transform our schools into places where we all thrive.

Change is the only thing we can count on. It will rain when we wish it wouldn't, kids will say obnoxious things when we're exhausted, leaders will come