There are many versions of the bird's death, but in each, it rises the same way -- out of its own ashes and into the sun. The myth of the phoenix, that symbol of endurance, began in Arabian and Egyptian folklore and was brought to the West by Herodotus 2,500 years ago.

We have an ancient attraction to stories of resilience, but recently, the word itself has achieved a more prosaic popularity. Deriving from the Latin for "to jump again," "resilience" has sprung into new life as a catchword in international development and Silicon Valley and among parenting pundits and TED-heads. Hundreds of books have been published on the topic this year, mostly with a focus on toughening up your investment portfolio or your toddler. We've seen encomiums to the resilience of Paris and Beirut after terrorist attacks -- but also to Justin Bieber, after his weepy comeback performance at the MTV Video Music Awards. It's a word that is somehow so conveniently vacant that it manages to be profound and profoundly hollow.

Almost any organization you can think of has squeezed "resilience" into its mission statement: The United States Agency for International Development has an explicit "Resilience Agenda"; the Department of Homeland Security lists two of its core goals as enhancing "the security and resilience of the nation's critical infrastructure." The word has started swallowing up creakier competitors in jargon's version of the survival of the fittest, supplanting "security" and "sustainability." At an event in March called "Uniting Nations, People and Action for Resilience," Ban Ki-moon, the United Nations secretary general, explained that "we cannot stop disasters, but we can anticipate the risks and reduce them."

Resilience is fleet, adaptive, pragmatic -- and it has become an obsession among middle-class parents who want to prepare their children to withstand a world that won't always go their way. "Grit," a close cousin of "resilience," has emerged as education's magic mantra -- a corrective to decades of helicopter parenting. Best-selling books like "How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character," by Paul Tough, and "The Triple Package," by Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld, argue that children need to encounter difficulties, to learn how to push past their own frustration.

But where "resilience" can suggest new avenues for civic infrastructure -- admitting that disaster can't always be diverted and shifting the focus to survival strategies -- it is indistinguishable from classic American bootstrap logic when it is applied to individuals, placing all the burden of success and failure on a person's character. "It's pretty much the same message that's drummed into us by Aesop's fables, Benjamin Franklin's aphorisms, Christian denunciations of sloth and the 19th-century chant invented to make children do their homework: 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again,' " the social scientist Alfie Kohn argued in an op-ed article in The Washington Post. "The more we focus on whether people have or lack persistence (or self-discipline more generally), the less likely we'll be to question larger policies."

This usage of "resilience" has flared up amid the continuing protests on college campuses. The
psychologist Peter Gray used the phrase "declining student resilience" in Psychology Today to describe what he sees as a troubling helplessness among students. At one major university he studied, "emergency calls to counseling had more than doubled over the past five years," he wrote. "Students are increasingly seeking help for, and apparently having emotional crises over, problems of everyday life."

As the protests against racism at colleges have gathered momentum, from the University of Missouri to Yale, Princeton, Claremont McKenna College, Ithaca College and beyond, they have been cast as just the latest attempt -- after trigger warnings and safe spaces -- to transform universities into what James Kirchick called in Tablet "cosseting nurseries." On the left and right, students have attracted intense contempt, been labeled "crybullies" and "little Robespierres." Charles Murray, the conservative co-author of "The Bell Curve," tweeted, "These kids have no grit & the resilience of champagne flutes." Conor Friedersdorf, writing in The Atlantic, argued that students "are being robbed of resilience and disempowered by mistaken ideological assumptions."

It's not that circumstances are so insufferable, the logic goes, it's just that these young people are terribly touchy nowadays. Articles and editorials in The Atlantic, The Wall Street Journal and Tablet have largely minimized the extent and impact of racism on campus and have depicted students as fragile and irrational, looking for administrations to serve in loco parentis. In The Atlantic, Friedersdorf suggested that the protests at Yale stemmed from an "email that hurt their feelings," referring to a note sent by Erika Christakis, the associate master of Yale's Silliman College, dismissing a request from the school's Intercultural Affairs Committee that students show consideration to one another's cultures when dressing up for Halloween.

Journalists have breathlessly reported on Yale's luxurious student amenities ("These are young people who live in safe, heated buildings with two Steinway grand pianos, an indoor basketball court") or the students' financial circumstances, assuming that an atmosphere of wealth should inoculate you from experiencing racism.

In 2015, the Department of Education reported 146 cases of racial harassment on campuses, although studies suggest that only 13 percent of racial incidents are reported. By playing down the racism that the students have faced, it's easier to frame the protests as tantrums, products of brittle spirits, on a continuum with grade grubbing. Somehow, demands for resilience have become a cleverly coded way to shame those speaking out against injustices.

In Tablet, James Kirchick wrote, "When I hear, in 2015, students complain about feeling 'marginalized' at Yale due to their racial, ethnic, religious, sexual or any other identity ... I can't help but think of James Meredith." In 1962, flanked by federal marshals, Meredith became the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi. "When I see photographs of Meredith and other black students of the civil rights era," Kirchick wrote, "I don't see people pleading for dean's excuses so they can huddle in a 'safe space' to recover from 'traumatic racial events.' I see unbelievably courageous young men and women."

Of course, it's one thing to look at a photograph of James Meredith and concoct a fantasy of his bravery and resilience -- a photograph is silent; it cannot clarify or correct. To listen to James Meredith
is a different thing entirely. "Ole Miss kicked my butt, and they're still celebrating," he said in an interview with Esquire in 2012. "Because every black that's gone there since me has been insulted, humiliated, and they can't even tell their story. Everybody has to tell James Meredith's story -- which is a lie. The powers that be in Mississippi understand this very clearly." He continued, "They're gonna keep on doin' it because it makes it impossible for the blacks there now to say anything about what's happened to them."

But the students are saying what's happened to them now, insisting upon it. And in doing so, they are reframing resilience. It's not just the strength to stay the course but to question it and propose others, not just to survive but to thrive. In the last month, portraits of black faculty members have been defaced at Harvard Law School, and at least four campuses have received death threats against black students. But at Yale, more than 1,000 students gathered in a March of Resilience. They carried signs saying: "We out here. We've been here. We ain't leaving. We are loved." Why rise from the ashes without asking why you had to burn?