

Reflections on Connections

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I believe that we should constantly reflect upon our lives, including our goals, our expectations, and the quality of our relationships. However, for many people this kind of reflection seems to occur most frequently at significant transition points such as the beginning of a new year. It is little wonder that the word "resolutions" has become linked to the words "New Year." While I mentioned in my January, 2000 newsletter that many New Year's resolutions are doomed to fail since they involve unrealistic goals and poorly defined plans of action, the start of a new year does seem like a natural time to assess what has occurred the previous year and to consider one's hopes and goals for the next year.

In last January's newsletter I discussed the importance of altering "negative scripts" in our lives, that is, behaviors we constantly repeat even though they are self-defeating and counterproductive. I outlined what I considered to be realistic steps that could be taken to make even small changes in our day-to-day behaviors so that negative scripts might be replaced by more satisfying, positive scripts.

In response to that newsletter as well as to other articles I have written about the characteristics of successful people, I received a number of e-mails from individuals who found that making even one or two seemingly small changes in their usual script had a major impact on their personal or professional lives.

For example, one father wrote to me about establishing a "special time" with his four-year-old daughter every evening. During this time either he played a game with her or read her a story. As I had suggested in one of my newsletters, this father told his daughter, "This is such a special time when we are together that even if the phone rings I won't answer it." The father wrote that as he followed through on this promise he felt more relaxed with and closer to his daughter. He said that previously he would often answer the phone while reading to her and it "ruined the atmosphere for her and for me."

A middle school teacher wrote to say that she realized how critical she had become in school, often exhorting students who were struggling to "try harder." She observed, "I kept saying it even though it didn't help. Talk about being trapped in a 'negative script.' I promised I would not say 'try harder' but instead assume that all students wanted to do well and if they seemed like they weren't trying it might be a sign that they were feeling defeated and needed supportive comments, not judgmental ones. I've been pleasantly surprised by the positive changes in my classroom and the closer relationship I feel with my students."

This teacher continued, "I used to feel the students should change first, that they should become responsible. I finally realized that if my class were to change, I had to take the first steps. The students have responded."

As I thought about what to write in this first newsletter of 2001, I reflected upon the many messages I have received in 2000 as well as the situations that have taken place in my life this past year. I knew that in this article I wanted to reinforce some ideas that I have expressed in previous newsletters and share some new ones. I especially wanted to highlight the importance of spending more time and energy on strengthening relationships and finding activities that bring meaning to our life.

In great part what I wanted to convey was prompted by two events that transpired in my life this year. The first was my older son Richard's marriage this past June to Cybele. My wife and I considered ourselves and Richard very fortunate that he had met such a lovely woman from such a warm family. The moment we met Cybele and her parents and sister, we felt as if we had known them for years.

During this past Thanksgiving, which we spent at Rich and Cybele's house, I was watching a videotape of their wedding. Viewing the wedding was very emotional for me, especially one scene that occurred immediately after the ceremony, in which Rich and I hugged and both of us began to cry openly, expressing tears of love and affection. I also laughed and was moved by my younger son Douglas' unforgettable toast (or should I say "roast") to his brother, which ended in their warm embrace.

As I watched the tape and re-experienced the joy of the wedding and the obvious closeness of the participants, I said to myself, "I feel very blessed, this is what life is about--the crucial importance of connections to one's family and friends."

The other event, which actually occurred throughout the year, involved co-authoring a book and doing a documentary and videotape with my friend and colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein. As many of you know, the theme of the book, documentary, and videotape is "Raising Resilient Children." Sam and I spent countless hours sharing our thoughts and experiences about what is truly important in raising and educating children who will be better prepared to meet the many challenges that life offers. We emphasized that a basic foundation for children developing emotional and physical well-being was the close ties they had to parents and other adults. The late psychologist Dr. Julius Segal said that for children to be resilient they must have the presence of "charismatic adults" in their lives, adults from whom they "gather strength."

As I began to write this newsletter about the importance of maintaining connection to our family and friends, a tragedy occurred the day after Christmas only a few miles from where I live. This tragedy reinforced my wish to write about the theme of connectedness and to advocate that we resolve not to lose any opportunities to convey kindness, love, and appreciation to others. Seven employees at a firm called Edgewater Technology were murdered by a co-worker. Obviously lengthy stories could be written about each of the seven people who lost their lives as well as the many other victims of this tragedy. A few vignettes especially stood out.

There was the story of a young mother with an infant daughter who had just returned from maternity leave. She lost her life and in the slaughter her infant daughter lost a mother, and her husband lost a wife. A distraught woman was interviewed. She worked at Edgewater Technology but had just begun her maternity leave so she was not at work when the shootings took place. I thought how uncertain and unpredictable life is. One woman is murdered having just returned from maternity leave, the other perhaps spared because she had just begun maternity leave.

I thought further of the young mother who was killed. Images of her kissing her infant daughter and husband and sharing in Christmas

festivities the day before her life ended flashed through my mind--and now her husband and child will no longer see her, feel her, or hear her. One split second and lives were changed forever.

And then a television reporter interviewed a man seated with one of his sons. Another son was a murder victim at Edgewater Technology. The pain of their loss was etched on their faces. The son had his hand on his father's knee as they sought comfort from each other. As I watched, tears welled up in my eyes. I knew all too well what they were experiencing, having suddenly lost a brother many years before.

When I was entering my senior year of high school, we received word that one of my brothers, an officer in the Air Force, had been killed in a plane crash in the Pacific Ocean off Guam. He flew a cargo plane and all of the crewmen lost their lives. Sabotage was suspected. After the initial shock and feeling of numbness subsided, I remember thinking I would never again be able to hug him, speak with him, tell him "I love you. It's great to have you as a brother." But I could comfort myself by thinking of the many, many letters we had written to each other, of the times we spent together when he was home, of the love we felt for each other.

One never knows what might happen to us or to those closest to us, how we might anticipate a lifetime of friendship and love that is erased in one brief moment. I am not suggesting that our desire to be more considerate and loving should be rooted in the fear of possibly losing another person. Rather it should be based upon the recognition that each moment is precious, that each moment represents an opportunity to express feelings of appreciation and love. As we reflect on the past year and the year ahead, as we think about possible changes we wish to make in our lives, I believe we must focus on strengthening our connections with others. As I discussed in earlier newsletters (September and October, 1999) we must strive to overcome "praise deficits" and act in ways to enrich the lives of others.

Thus, as you think about 2001 it might be helpful to spend at least a few moments to reflect on the quality of the relationships in your life. Think about a colleague at work whom you might surprise with a brief note saying how much you enjoy working with her or him. If you are married or if you have children, think about the "special times" you spend with each of them, of your words and actions that convey their importance to you.

If you are a teacher, think about the significant role you play in the lives of your students and how the smallest gestures of kindness can last a lifetime, how they can keep a student from dropping out of school or engaging in violent behavior. Consider a special way of letting those friends who always seem to be there for you know the place you hold for them in your heart.

Some people may question the impact of these "seemingly small gestures" of appreciation. Yet, in research I conducted in which I requested people to think about some of the most significant events in their childhood, I was impressed by how many recalled small gestures. I have been fortunate to receive many letters, cards, and e-mails after a speaking engagement or after someone has read something I have written. Someone once asked me, "Do you get used to receiving these messages? Do they continue to have the same importance to you?" My answer was, "They are all important to me, especially when I realize that someone took the time and energy to write those words to me."

No one person can change the whole world but as I am certain you have heard before, we can each make a difference in our immediate world. I am convinced that if we commit ourselves to touching the hearts of even two or three people, we will leave a legacy of far greater significance than we may ever realize. I know the joy I have experienced when people have touched me in this way. My joy is enhanced when I am able to return their kindness.

I want to wish all of you a very satisfying 2001 and to thank you for the interest you have shown in my work. Your thoughtfulness has added much meaning to my endeavors. I would also like to thank my family for helping me to appreciate and enjoy the truly important priorities of life and not to lose precious moments on activities that pale in comparison.

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