

Different Mindsets, Different Perspectives

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

Many years ago, within a span of a couple of weeks, I conducted psychological evaluations of two 10-year-old boys. Both boys were referred to me because of learning difficulties at school. As part of the assessment I used projective instruments such as the Rorschach (the inkblot test), thematic cards (children are asked to create stories to pictures), and the Sentence Completion (children are asked to complete a sentence). I am aware that some psychologists question the validity of these kinds of subjective personality tests. While recognizing the limitation of these tests, I have found that they can provide valuable information about the inner world of the child.

I believe that a major goal of a psychological evaluation is to help us to understand the learning and emotional strengths and vulnerabilities of children, their self-image, their sense of competence, their worries, their perception of others, and their optimism or pessimism for the future. As we all know, children or adults looking at the same inkblot or for that matter the seemingly same event will “see” different things. What we see is based on many factors including our temperament, our personality, our values, and our life experiences.

A marked difference in perceptions was apparent in comparing the test responses of these two 10-year-old boys. For example, while both boys saw a butterfly on the first Rorschach card, one said it was “a damaged butterfly with holes in it” while the other observed it was “a young butterfly that was hurt while learning to fly.” When I asked the first boy to expand on his response he said, “The butterfly was born that way.” I wondered if anyone could help the butterfly even if it was born with holes (I should note that asking such questions is not the standardized format for administering the Rorschach, but I believe posing these questions can elicit answers that enrich our understanding of the child). The boy answered, “No, the butterfly is too damaged. No one can help.” I don’t think it is unrealistic to assume that while this boy was overtly describing the butterfly, he was actually conveying feelings about himself, feelings permeated by a feeling of defectiveness and a loss of hope.

In response to similar questions, the second boy said, “The butterfly was hurt while learning to fly but there is a doctor who can help it. The doctor can fix the butterfly’s wings and one day it will be able to fly.” Obviously, this boy entertained hope for a more benign future, a view in striking contrast to the pessimistic perspective of the first boy. Other test and interview data paralleled the differences found on the first Rorschach card.

I am not advocating the use of one response to make a diagnosis of a child’s functioning. That would represent a disservice to the many hours and test procedures that are necessary for a comprehensive, effective evaluation. My purpose in describing the responses of these two boys was to illustrate that we all possess what my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein and I refer to as “mindsets.” These mindsets are composed of assumptions we hold about ourselves and other people. Even if we are not aware of these assumptions, they influence our behavior. The more aware we are of their existence, the better equipped we will be to change those assumptions that are self-defeating.

I should like to illustrate this point with two examples. The first involves a presentation I gave about family relationships during which I described factors that nurtured family closeness and the resilience of each family member. At the conclusion of my talk, a woman who appeared to be in her mid-60s asked, “Is it ever too late?”

I wondered, “Too late for what?”

She replied, “If you’re in your 60s, is it too late to change your attitude or behavior or what you call your negative scripts?”

I responded that I tended to be optimistic and felt that there was no age limit to making changes in one’s life.

Upon hearing my answer she said, “I knew my husband should have been here tonight.”

The audience laughed since there was some humor in her comment. This woman smiled, but I couldn’t help but notice a look of sadness on her face. Afterwards she came up to speak with me privately. She said that her husband, who had retired a couple of years ago and was financially

comfortable and in good health, was very unhappy. “He should be enjoying himself, but instead he mopes around. He actually said to me that once you get old and retire, there’s nothing to look forward to anymore. You’re no longer useful. I wish he would get help with that kind of attitude but he won’t. He seems so stuck.”

Many of us know people who possess mindsets similar to this man. However, most likely we also know of others in their 60s, 70s, or even older who display a different, more positive outlook. This comparison may seem obvious, but it deserves to be emphasized. When we are burdened by negative assumptions it is often difficult to recognize that we have more control than we realize to challenge and alter these assumptions. The woman’s husband mentioned above could learn from the life led by Margaret “Peg” Phillips, who died recently at the age of 84. Although many people might not know her name, if they saw her photo they would recognize her as one of the stars of the TV series “Northern Exposure.” As I read her obituary in The Boston Globe, it illustrated the power of mindsets to determine our behavior.

In an interview she noted, “I never wanted to do anything but act. I wanted to go to the University of Washington drama school, but when I got out of high school, there was no money, it was 1935.” Given the reality of the Depression, she moved to California, worked as a bookkeeper and accountant, married and divorced twice, and raised four children mostly as a single mother. For almost 50 years she spent whatever spare moments life afforded her acting in community theaters. She retired in the early 1980s, but obviously if she were asked the question, “Is it ever too late?” she would probably laugh and offer a resounding, “No.”

After her so-called retirement, she returned to the Seattle area and enrolled at the age of 67 at the University of Washington, almost 50 years later than intended. The Boston Globe obituary reported, “She acquired an agent in her freshman year. She soon had so much work—radio and television commercials and bit parts in eight movies—that she never had time to finish her degree. She found her signature role in 1990 when she was cast as the gruff but kindly Ruth-Anne in ‘Northern Exposure.’ Envisioned as a minor recurring role, Ruth-Anne proved to be so popular that after 16 episodes she became a regular.”

In 1993, at the age of 75, she was nominated for an Emmy. Her attire at the Awards ceremony included blue jeans, a red and white checked blouse, suspenders, and sandals. She was asked who designed this outfit. She replied, “Me.”

What a wonderful, resilient mindset! What a contrast with the man described above! We must remember that mindsets are not cast in stone, but are subject to change.

The second example involves one of my favorite topics, parenting.

Recently, several magazines and newspapers published a story about a Wall Street analyst who reportedly pushed up the rating of a stock so that his boss would help him get his kids into a prestigious preschool. In an interview in Time Magazine, the analyst described the preschool admission process, noting, “For someone who grew up in a household making \$8,000 a year and attended public schools, I do find this process a bit strange, but there are no bounds for what you do for your children.”

Unfortunately, some parents have developed the mindset that being a good parent demands that your children go to the best nursery schools so that they have a better chance of going to the best elementary and high schools, which, of course, opens doors to Ivy League colleges. Too many have fallen into the trap of judging their parenting by where their children attend school or by their children’s school performance. I am not against children going to the best schools (public or independent) or attending excellent colleges. What I have difficulty accepting is the assumption that we can buy happiness for our children or that if we send them to the seemingly best schools, we are guaranteeing their success and happiness. Research certainly doesn’t support this belief. Also, what does it say about our values and our moral and ethical fiber when we resort to questionable means—as this Wall Street analyst apparently did—to secure entrance for our children into a preschool?

Counteracting stories of misplaced values are illustrations of people who I believe “get it.” Many of you may know that the Boston Red Sox recently named Theo Epstein as their general manager. Epstein is only 28 years old, the youngest general manager ever appointed to a professional baseball team. Epstein comes from a renowned family. His father Leslie

was a Rhodes scholar and currently is head of the creative writing department at Boston University. His sister Anya writes screenplays and TV scripts, and his grandfather, Phillip, and Phillip's twin brother, Julius, co-authored the Oscar-winning screenplay for "Casablanca."

Theo has a twin brother, Paul, who is a guidance counselor and social worker as well as the girls' soccer coach at Brookline High School, which is in a suburb of Boston. As I read The Boston Globe article about Theo and his family, as I thought about the position he had just assumed (a "dream job," especially for those of us who love sports), what impressed me the most was a comment offered by his father. As I read it, my only thought was, "If Theo is anything like his father, he is already a success in life."

Leslie Epstein said, "Paul is a beautiful person. Whatever Theo accomplishes, even if that includes winning the World Series, cannot equal what Paul already has accomplished. He has saved lives."

I would love Theo to bring a World Series championship to Boston (the last time the Red Sox accomplished that feat was in 1918). However, if truth be told, a world championship pales in comparison to his father's values. Just as we must help a child who feels damaged develop a resilient mindset in which hope replaces despair, just as a man in his 60s must question his retreat from life, and just as a parent must decide whether children are like trophies to be displayed or humans to be loved unconditionally, we must examine the assumptions that are housed within our mindset and recognize the ways in which these assumptions impact on the manner in which we live. If we fail to engage in this kind of self-examination, we leave ourselves vulnerable to acting in ways that are self-defeating. We also abdicate a sense of personal control, a vital feature of emotional and physical well-being.

As you reflect upon the assumptions that guide your life, you might wish to ponder the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson as he attempted to answer the question, "What is success?" Emerson wrote:

To laugh often and much;
To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children;
To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends;

To appreciate beauty, to find the best in others;
To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden
patch or a redeemed social condition;
To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived.
This is to have succeeded.

I believe that Emerson has captured the essence of a resilient mindset
and lifestyle. It may not be easy to achieve, but it is worth the effort if
our lives are to be filled with hope, compassion, and meaning.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>