

**The Search for Islands of Competence: A  
Metaphor of Hope and Strength  
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This is my last article until September. I hope the next few months prove relaxing and satisfying for you. I also hope that you will set aside time to reflect upon the theme of this article, namely, the importance of identifying and reinforcing the strengths and beauty in each child and adolescent as well as in ourselves.

As many of my readers are aware, more than 20 years ago I introduced the metaphor “islands of competence” in my workshops and writings, a metaphor that my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein and I continue to emphasize in our books about resilience. I conceived of this metaphor while listening to the words of youngsters in my clinical practice, many of whom were struggling with learning problems and had experienced a great deal of frustration and failure in their lives. Some of their comments were riveting, capturing a profound sense of helplessness and hopelessness. A sample of their statements includes:

“I was born with half a brain. Do you know how to fill in the other half?”

“I feel stupid. I feel I will never learn.”

“I think I’m not smart enough to ever get a job.”

“I can’t think of anything that I am good at.”

My adult patients also harbored strong beliefs of inadequacy. One seemingly successful woman reported, “I feel that what I have achieved is like a façade. One of my greatest fears is that one day people will discover that there is nothing behind my façade and I will be revealed as a fraud.”

A man noted, “I feel my life is like a house of cards and at any moment even the smallest wind can knock it down.” He added, “There is nothing strong inside me to hold it up.”

While reflecting upon such negative comments, I thought, “Many of these children and adults seem to be drowning in an ocean of self-perceived inadequacy.” This image remained with me for a few moments, but was soon replaced by another, namely, “If there is an ocean of inadequacy, then there must be islands of competence—areas that

have been or have the potential to be sources of pride and accomplishment.” Continuing with this metaphor, I recall thinking with some excitement, “We must help children and adults to identify and reinforce these islands so that at some point they become more dominant than the ocean of inadequacy.”

I believe that the excitement I experienced when I first conceived of this metaphor was prompted by the clarity with which it captured the strength-based approach that I had adopted in my work. I had previously published articles extolling the power of images and metaphors to convey ideas that would be remembered. Thus, it was my wish that when I referred to “islands of competence,” it would immediately evoke an image in others of the importance of shifting one’s focus from weaknesses to strengths, from pessimism to optimism.

As I have stated in earlier writings, my use of the metaphor “islands of competence” was not intended simply as a fanciful image but rather as a symbol of hope and respect, a reminder that all individuals have unique strengths and courage. If we can find and reinforce these areas of strength, we can create a powerful “ripple effect” in which children and adults may be more willing to venture forth and confront situations that have been problematic.

This metaphor influenced the questions I posed and the strategies I initiated in my clinical practice. For example, whenever I meet with parents, teachers, or other professionals to discuss children who are burdened with problems, I ask them to describe the child’s islands of competence. Next, I ask how we might strengthen these islands and display them for others to see. I have witnessed the ways in which these questions can alter the mindset of adults as they shift their energy from “fixing deficits” to “identifying and reinforcing strengths.”

I also question youngsters about what they perceive their strengths to be. While some will readily describe their strengths, others respond, “I don’t know.” When I hear the latter I say, “That’s okay, it can take a few weeks for kids to realize what they are good at doing.” I want to convey the message that we all possess strengths, but it may take time to determine the nature of our positive qualities.

Relatedly, when I meet with adults who are encountering problems, I ask them to consider their strengths. I find this exercise not only initiates a process of identifying the

areas in which we are proficient but in addition prompts us to consider whether in our daily lives we engage in those activities that are associated with satisfaction and accomplishment.

My initial goal that the metaphor “islands of competence” would be embraced and applied by others was realized. Parents, whether in my clinical practice or at my presentations, communicated that they were now actively involved in defining and reinforcing their children’s islands of competence. One of my favorite remarks offered by a parent was, “I feel like an explorer, looking for qualities in my children I had not thought about in the past.” He added with obvious contentment, “It’s a very exciting, gratifying journey.” When I returned to a school at which I had previously given a workshop, a teacher greeted me with the remark, “The first question we raise at our team meetings and IEPs (individual educational plans) is, ‘What are this student’s islands of competence and how are we using these islands to help the student to learn and to feel more dignified?’”

Recently, one of my patients observed, “Whenever I begin to feel anxious and less confident, I remind myself that I do have islands of competence and that I must not lose sight that they exist.” She continued, “When I think about these islands, I don’t ignore my problems, but rather it gives me strength to meet these problems in a more effective way.”

A number of years ago a mother communicated with me about her son who was struggling with learning problems and depression. She had attended one of my presentations and in hearing the words “islands of competence” she recognized that she had been “punishing him for school failure” by taking away after-school activities that he enjoyed. In reading her remarks I thought of how often our strategies to motivate youngsters unintentionally result in our punishing suffering children rather than helping them develop a sense of self-worth and dignity. Wisely, this mother not only ceased her practice of removing after-school activities, but she added activities that were especially enjoyable to him such as skiing.

She reports the outcome of her shift in mindset and behavior. “This resulted in a five year position on National Ski Patrol, which led to an interest in EMT and paramedic training. It further provided other ways for him to feel success. He is now a third year

nursing student and has wonderful self-esteem! School is still very challenging, but the life skills he has learned gave him experience to carry over into goals and to persevere. This is the experience and information I enjoy sharing with other parents and teachers.”

Less than a week ago, I received the e-mail that actually prompted me to write this month’s article. It was sent by Patty Reeves about her son Patrick. I was very touched by her words. Patty was kind enough to provide permission for me to share her experience since I thought her reflections might offer a ray of realistic hope for those who are feeling despair.

Patty writes, “It was my pleasure to hear you speak here in Florida around 1997. At that time I was just beginning to cope with my son’s learning disability. Not only was he ADHD, he was color blind, left-handed, and spoke as if he had a mouth full of marbles trying to get everything out all at once. I sat in your audience as a participant from the school district I worked for at the time. You had me. You had me at ‘islands of competence.’ I left that seminar and went home with a different attitude, a fresh attitude about what my son could possibly achieve vs. what I was being told the likelihood of success for him would be—incidentally, that at most he would be at a fourth grade level academically.”

Patty noted that after my presentation she wondered, “If what you are doing is not having a positive effect, why continue to do it? The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. We must think outside the box. The first thing I changed was my outlook. I began focusing on my son’s abilities rather than his disability. Rather than yielding to his frustrations, I concurred with him and encouraged him to expect to be frustrated but to do the best he could. In time the ready-to-quit attitude was replaced by a deep, stern, nose into the wind.”

Patty described her journey to think outside the box and to obtain the services Patrick required. I wish all parents could experience what she has with her son. “I write to you now the mother of a man. He is beautiful, awesome, handsome, and talented. There is a compassionate side to his personality that I don’t believe would be there had he not struggled and succeeded with his own unique learning differences. I write to you this evening thanking you for having a positive impact on my parenting. My son graduated from high school. He is also the recipient of the President’s (Bush) Academic Award for

achieving A's in his senior year. He is going on to college too!"

While it was thoughtful of Patty to thank me and I appreciate her doing so, she and Patrick truly deserve the credit for his success. I may have encouraged the audience to search for each child's islands of competence, but she had the insight and perseverance to change her mindset and approach her son from a strength-based perspective. I believe that as Patty shifted the spotlight from Pat's disability to his abilities, she created an environment that contributed to the positive changes that have occurred in Patrick's life since 1997.

As I have noted in previous articles this past year, the emergence of the field of positive psychology reflects a growing recognition among mental health professionals that individuals must not be narrowly defined by psychiatric labels and pathological traits but instead by their assets, skills, and strengths. Psychiatrist Michael Rutter and psychologist Mark Katz, both of whom have written extensively about resilience, offer some perceptive comments about strengths and the experience of success.

Rutter, describing research about resilient individuals, notes, "Experience of success in one arena of life led to enhanced self-esteem and a feeling of self-efficacy, enabling them to cope more successfully with the subsequent life challenges and adaptations." Similarly, Katz writes, "Being able to showcase our talents, and to have them valued by important people in our lives, helps us to define our identities around that which we do best."

I know that the task of identifying and reinforcing islands of competence in children and in ourselves presents many challenges and in some instances is not easily achieved. However, the search for islands of competence is well worth the effort given the possible rewards that await us and our children, namely, a life filled with increased satisfaction, joy, and accomplishment.

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