

**700 Sundays: One Family's Portrait,
One Universal Message**

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

I started to write my monthly article a week ago. The theme I began to address will have to wait. This past week my wife and I attended Billy Crystal's play *700 Sundays*. As the Playbill describes, "Billy Crystal has created one of the most versatile and prolific careers in the entertainment industry, finding success in front of the camera, as a performer in film and television and behind the scenes as a writer, director, and producer." As most would agree, Billy is one of the best-known, respected individuals in the entertainment field (since Billy is so well-known and comes across in such a friendly manner, I will refer to him by his first name throughout this article).

Billy wrote *700 Sundays*, an autobiographical sketch, and is the only performer. The title derives from Billy's relationship with his beloved father, Jack, who died suddenly of a heart attack when Billy was 15 years old. His father worked two jobs six days a week, and the one full day he could spend with his wife and three sons was Sunday. Billy estimated that from the time he was born in 1948 until his father's death 15 years later, the two shared 700 Sundays. Billy poignantly and humorously recounts the experiences he had with his father, mother, and other key adults in his life—adults who shaped his goals, vision, and values. The only scenery on stage was a replica of the outside of the house in which he grew up, located on Long Island in New York. Photos and movies from his childhood were projected on the windows of the house.

From the moment Billy appeared on stage describing the new car his father had purchased, he invited the audience to accompany him on a very personal journey. While the journey was of his family, the story was universal, generating many laughs, many tears, and much reflection. His narrative was captivating, warm, and genuine. *700 Sundays* was one of the most memorable plays I have ever attended. I wish everyone could see it.

As we were leaving the theater, my wife suggested, "You should write about this play for your next monthly article." I hadn't thought about doing so and asked her why.

She said, “It reflects many of the ideas that are so important to you.” I responded that I would think about it. Since my monthly articles are not intended as reviews of movies or plays, I did not want the article to have the flavor of a review with a certain number of stars appended to it. However, the more I thought about my wife’s suggestion, the more I wanted to write about this play. I realized that while I would enthusiastically recommend *700 Sundays* and extol the brilliance of Billy Crystal, what I most wanted to highlight were the powerful messages housed within the play. Those who are very aware of my interest in the themes of resilience and family relationships will not be surprised to discover that these are the themes I found so captivating in the play.

The power of “charismatic adults” and unconditional love. In past articles and in the books about resilience I have co-authored with Dr. Sam Goldstein, I have noted that one of the most important factors in helping children to be more optimistic and resilient is the presence in their lives of adults who believe in them. The late Julius Segal labeled such people “charismatic adults,” defining them as adults from whom a child “gathers strength.” Billy vividly captures the influence of such adults on his life. The unconditional love and support of his parents is apparent throughout the play.

However, one also learns that a simple comment or gesture can immediately cast someone in the role of “charismatic adult” even if that person doesn’t realize it. Billy became very depressed when his father died. His two older brothers were off at college, and his mother went to work to support the family. Billy could not concentrate on school as he became preoccupied with his father’s death. Given his love of sports he tried out for the school’s basketball team but was distracted by the sadness that pervaded his life. His play during tryouts was compromised and he was certain he would not make the team. His coach asked him to come to his office.

Billy anticipated that the coach was going to inform him he did not make the team. Instead the coach asked a simple question, “Billy, how are you doing?” The question served as an invitation for Billy to express the sadness he was experiencing, his difficulty concentrating, his wish that he could take away some of his mother’s pain. The coach listened and then informed Billy that he had made the team. Billy told the audience that it was one of the nicest things anyone could have done.

I sensed that when Billy used the words “nicest thing” not only was he referring to making the team, but, as importantly, to the coach’s sensitivity in asking him how he was doing. Most likely, the coach was not even aware of the lifelong impact this exchange had on Billy (or that someday his words would appear in a play). In my workshops I have often emphasized that most of us do not realize when we have donned the clothing of a charismatic adult, but we have the opportunity to do so on many occasions.

We are models for our children. Billy’s descriptions of his parents as well as events in his childhood reinforce how diligently children observe the behavior of their elders. He told of the warmth, love, and affection his parents displayed towards each other as well as towards him and his brothers. Like Billy, I was also very fortunate to have parents whose love for each other and their family was apparent. In contrast, I thought of an adolescent girl I saw in therapy who sadly told me that she could not think of one occasion when she saw her parents holding hands or being affectionate.

Billy’s father was involved in producing concerts with great jazz performers including Billie Holiday (Billy reported that Billie Holiday took him to his first movie, *Shane*, and he sat on her lap for most of the movie). He proudly told the audience that the concerts his father produced were truly integrated at a time when many venues still had bands separated by skin color. Lectures about equality would never be as powerful as what Billy witnessed in his father’s concerts.

Billy’s had an uncle who was a renowned producer of music recordings. During one of the many poignant moments in *700 Sundays*, Billy described another story about Billie Holiday. She wanted to record the song “Strange Fruit” by Lewis Allen, which pertains to the horrors of blacks being lynched. The lyrics are haunting, as is evident from the first few lines:

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

If you have heard Ms. Holiday’s rendition of this song, you know it is unforgettable, the pain in her voice paralleling the pain of the words “strange fruit

hanging from the poplar trees.” Yet, no one wanted to produce this song, believing it was too controversial. She told Billy’s uncle about it and he asked her to sing it. Billy reported that when she had finished singing, his uncle was in tears. He told Ms. Holiday that he didn’t care if only one person bought her recording, it was too important a song not to be recorded. Many of us in the audience were also in tears as he told this story and all applauded his uncle’s courage.

I thought, “What a wonderful legacy of decency, kindness, and courage this uncle left his nephew.” I also thought of the exercise I conduct at my workshops about empathy, namely, asking people to write down the words they hope their children will use to describe them and the words they would actually use and how close these descriptions are to each other.

Forgiveness, acceptance, and healing. It seems evident that *700 Sundays* has been an opportunity for Billy to resolve some of the guilt he experienced at his father’s death. Billy and his father were very close. On the evening his father died, they had an argument and Billy yelled at his father. His father asked that he not speak to him in that way again. Billy’s parents then left to go bowling and Billy told the audience that he ran outside to tell his father he was sorry, but the car had already gone. Just an hour or so later, his father had a heart attack at the bowling alley and died. Understandably, Billy wondered if the argument had contributed to his father’s death. Such a question is not an easy burden with which to deal, but I sensed that by sharing the story with thousands of people and conveying the love he and his father felt for each other was part of a healing process.

Similarly, Billy recounted the experience of an aunt and uncle who had one daughter. This uncle dreamed of the day his daughter would get married and he would dance with her to the song “Sunrise, Sunset” from the play *Fiddler on the Roof*. As an adult, the daughter revealed she was a lesbian. The news greatly strained her relationship with her father. Several years later the daughter announced she was marrying the woman she loved. Her parents attended the wedding, but her father did so with reservation. Billy described the wedding and once again evoked both tears and laughter as he told of the father coming over to the daughter and telling her that he always wanted to dance with her at her wedding to “Sunrise, Sunset” and he was not going to miss the

opportunity. What a lovely gesture to convey one's acceptance of one's daughter. Billy said the rest of the wedding was joyous.

The memories and legacy we create. In my work as a therapist I have collected many stories from children and adults about their lives and the people who have been significant to them. I have been fascinated by the memories each of us takes from our childhood and the impact of these memories on our adult lives. At the conclusion of the play, as Billy stood in front of the replica of his childhood home, he said that this home was with him wherever he went. He noted that while other people lived in it now, it was still his home, a place filled with memories that he could take with him wherever he went.

I thought about the importance of these childhood homes. For some people childhood homes contain memories of happiness and affection while unfortunately, for others the memories are unpleasant and painful. Hopefully, the homes each of us helps to create for our family will result in memories that are filled with laughter, compassion, and love.

Concluding Remarks

The day after seeing *700 Sundays*, I received the latest copy of "The Positive Aging Newsletter" via e-mail. The first article reported a study conducted by Elizabeth Hunter and Graham Rowles titled, "Leaving a legacy: Toward a typology." These investigators examined the meaning of legacy through an in-depth study of 14 individuals between the ages of 31 to 94. They found three forms of legacy were important to people. As Ken and Mary Gergen, the authors of the newsletter, noted, "Two of these were scarcely surprising. There is the Biological Legacy, which primarily includes the creation of the next generation. There is also the Material Legacy, the leaving of money, property, heirlooms, and the like."

The article continued, "Most interesting, however, was the fact that almost all of the participants felt that the most important legacy was neither biological nor material but one of Values. They believed that their greatest gift for the future could be in the transmission of values such as kindness, helping others, education, and religious beliefs. This legacy could be transmitted in many ways, but one of the most important was through acting as a model."

In reading the findings of this study, I could not help thinking of *700 Sundays* and the legacy left by Billy Crystal's parents and other relatives to Billy and his two brothers. I could not help reflecting upon the legacy I hope I leave my sons.

In ending, I want to thank my wife for suggesting I write about *700 Sundays* and I want to thank Billy Crystal for sharing his life with us in such a meaningful way. As Billy received a standing ovation I thought of his famous character, Fernando, on Saturday Night Live and I wanted to shout, "Billy, you did a mahvelous job! Your parents would be very proud."