

**Timely Words, Small Gestures:
Life Changing Moments**

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

Our sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, and other relatives were at our home for Thanksgiving. It was a little hectic with three young children (three years, 19 months, and 16 months old) roaming around, but the joy they brought to the household was indescribable. When my oldest grandchild Maya simply uttered the words, “Grandpa Bob,” I was ready to give her the world. And when our 19-month-old grandson Teddy said, “Bob” (the word Bob is a very easy word for young children to pronounce) and came over for a hug, I was also prepared to grant him any wish he wanted. I can’t wait until our youngest grandchild Sophia says my name. As Thanksgiving ended, I thought about the impact that just a few words could have, in this instance voiced by very young children. The next day I was to be reminded once again of the power of a few well-chosen words to alter the course of a person’s life.

On the day after Thanksgiving my older son Rich was reading the latest issue of *Business Week*, which featured a cover story about Peter Drucker. The article, written by John Byrne, was titled, “The Man Who Invented Management.” Drucker had died just a few weeks earlier at age 95, a week shy of his 96th birthday. He was the author of 38 books including such bestsellers as *The Practice of Management* and *The Effective Executive*.

Byrne wrote, “Whether it’s recognized or not, the organization and practice of management today is derived largely from the thinking of Peter Drucker. His teachings form a blueprint for every thinking leader. In a world of quick fixes and glib explanations, a world of fads and simplistic PowerPoint lessons, he understood that the job of leading people and institutions is filled with complexity. He taught generations of managers the importance of picking the best people, of focusing on opportunities and not problems, of getting on the same side of the desk as your customer, of the need to understand your competitive advantages, and to continue to refine them. He believed that talented people were the essential ingredient of every successful enterprise.”

The article contained reflections by well-known business leaders about the influence that Drucker had on them. Drucker was known for the thought-provoking questions he raised. As Byrne reported, “It was never his style to bring CEOs clear, concise answers to their problems but rather to frame the questions that could uncover the larger issues standing in the way of performance.” Drucker told clients, “My job is to ask questions. It’s your job to provide answers.” In the article, Dan Lufkin, a co-founder of an investment banking firm, observed, “He would never give you an answer. That was frustrating for a while. But while it required a little more brain power, it was enormously helpful to us.”

I happened to walk into the room as Rich was reading the article about Drucker. Rich was impressed by an account of how two questions posed by Drucker to Jack Welch after the latter became CEO of General Electric in 1981 changed Welch’s business practices and the direction of GE. Drucker asked Welch, “If you weren’t already in a business, would you enter it today?” and “If the answer is no, what are you going to do about it?” The article resumed, “Those questions led Welch to his first big transformative idea: that every business under the GE umbrella had to be either No. 1 or No. 2 in its class. If not, Welch decreed that the business would have to be fixed, sold, or closed. It was the core strategy that helped Welch remake GE into one of the most successful American corporations of the past 25 years.”

Given the impact Drucker’s questions had on his management style, it is little wonder that Welch noted after Drucker’s death, “The world knows he was the greatest management thinker of the last century.”

In a similar fashion, Jim Collins, author of the bestseller *Good to Great*, described Drucker as someone who “had a remarkable ability not just to give the right answers, but more important, to ask the right questions—questions that would shift our entire frame of reference.”

As Rich read aloud Drucker’s questions to Welch, I thought about how a few well-chosen words dramatically altered Welch’s mindset and perspective. Although the simple words of a young child and the thought-provoking questions of a business leader may seem miles apart, they confirmed a belief I have held and expressed for years,

namely, that even brief comments or actions expressed by others can have a profound influence on our lives just as each of us can have a similar influence on others.

I thought about an individual who forever changed the path I took in life. His name was John Bauer, a psychology professor at the City College of New York, the college at which I obtained my bachelor's degree. As many of my readers know who have attended my presentations, psychology was my third major in college. My second major was economics. As an upper junior I needed to take a course in the social sciences. I had heard from friends that Dr. Bauer's introductory psychology class was excellent, featuring lively discussions that touched both the hearts and minds of students. I enrolled in his course and was immediately impressed by his love of the subject, his ability to challenge students in a nonjudgmental manner, his obvious enjoyment of teaching, and his accessibility to students. He made the subject matter exciting and relevant. Throughout the semester I looked forward to the readings he assigned and to participating in his class.

At the end of the semester I questioned whether I wanted to remain an economics major or change to psychology. Such a shift would require me to remain in college beyond my original graduation date in order to take all of my psychology requirements. In addition, I wasn't certain if my seeming attraction to psychology was based primarily on John's (after I graduated and called John by his last name, he insisted that I refer to him by his first name; I will do so in the rest of this article) teaching style and/or the content of psychology. Since John always made himself available to students, I went to see him. I shared my thoughts about possibly changing majors, but added that I was trying to sort out if I was drawn to psychology because of the subject matter and/or the way in which he taught the course.

There were some professors who would not have taken the time to do what John did. In reflecting upon my questions he said, "I'm not certain what is drawing you to psychology so why don't we talk about it. If you have time now, we can go out for lunch." I eagerly responded that I had the time and John took me to a restaurant near the college. We sat and talked for more than two hours. Although I must admit that there was a part of me that wanted John to make the decision for me, similar to what Drucker did with Welch, he asked questions—questions that I have not forgotten 40 years later.

John asked me to place myself in the future and envision being either an economist or a psychologist and what seemed most appealing to me. Although we joked about my being uncertain of the activities of an economist (even though I had taken 24 credits of economics courses) and even less certain of all that a psychologist did after having only one course, I told him that based on his description of the various activities in which he was engaged (teaching, consulting, therapy), I was drawn more to psychology than economics.

I told him that I was concerned about changing majors this late in my college life and remaining in college beyond my original graduation date. He asked how much difference one year would make if it meant finding something about which I was passionate. We discussed being willing to take risks. John talked about individuals he had seen in therapy who felt trapped, having gone into careers that brought them little satisfaction, but were afraid to take new paths in life.

Even before we left the restaurant I knew that I was going to switch my major to psychology. I told John what I planned to do. He smiled and said, “Bob, I think you will be a wonderful psychologist and enjoy being one.” I thanked him. I did not realize at that moment the ways in which our two-hour lunch had transformed my life.

I remained close friends with John for years. He invited me to speak at my first national conference as a panel member of a workshop he had planned. He died of cancer a number of years ago. I have loved my career as a psychologist. When I think of John I often wonder what might have happened had he not invited a somewhat anxious undergraduate student to join him for lunch and to ask questions that made it clear what path that student should take. Because of John I have always attempted to make myself available to others.

When I tell others about John, many recount similar kinds of stories—of individuals who spent a little extra time with them and in the process had a major impact on their life. Also, when I was gathering information about positive memories we have of school, the most frequent theme was being asked by an adult to help out in some manner. However, the other often-cited memory was similar to what I experienced with John, namely, when someone took a few minutes to say or do something that boosted our sense of belonging, dignity, purpose, and hope.

The words of Jim Collins as he reflected upon the life of Drucker in another article in *Business Week* are very meaningful. “Drucker never forgot his own teaching: Ask not what you can achieve but what you can contribute. . . . His most important lessons cannot be found in any text or lecture but in the example of his life. . . . In 1994 seeking wisdom from the greatest management thinker of our age, I came away feeling that I’d met a compassionate and generous human being who—almost as a side benefit—was a prolific genius. We have lost not a guru on a pedestal but a beloved professor who welcomed students into his modest home for warm and stimulating conversation. Peter Drucker was driven not by desire to say something but by the desire to learn something from every student he met—and that is why he became one of the most influential teachers most of us have ever known.”

In my writings about the theme of resilience I have often cited the late Julius Segal’s concept of a “charismatic adult,” an adult from whom one “gathers strength” (as I have discovered from my grandchildren, such a person need not always be an adult). Each of us is afforded countless opportunities to touch another person’s life forever. While our interactions may not have the magnitude of strengthening a large corporation such as GE, if we take a little extra time to demonstrate caring and compassion, the impact we have on an individual can be just as great as that on a corporation. We must remember that we all have people such as John Bauer in our lives and, as importantly, we can all be a John Bauer to others, leaving a memorable legacy through the expression of timely words and small gestures that have far-reaching results.

My best wishes for a happy holiday season in which our actions parallel those of Peter Drucker, John Bauer, and the countless others who by simple gestures add immeasurable love and meaning to the lives of others—and in the process to their own lives.