

**The Vagaries of Fate: The Importance of Living Life in
Concert with One's Values and Priorities**

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

This is my last website article until September. As I have expressed in previous June articles, I truly appreciate the numerous e-mail messages my readers have sent in response to my monthly columns. I always welcome your feedback, comments, and insight as well as suggestions for future topics.

I hope the next few months prove relaxing and satisfying for you. I also hope that my current column prompts you to reflect upon your values and lifestyle.

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On Saturday, May 30 my wife Marilyn and I returned home from a wonderful two-week vacation in Greece. Our dear friends and neighbors, Jan and John Pararas, had been encouraging us for several years to accompany them on one of their regular trips to John's birthplace. Finally, we were able to coordinate all of our schedules and the trip was planned. John is extremely knowledgeable about the history of his native land and thus we felt fortunate to have our own personal and personable tour guide and driver. In addition, John's brother, sister-in-law, and niece live in the Athens area and we also spent time with them. The sites we visited, the knowledge we gained, and the delicious meals we consumed will long be remembered. Marilyn and I even grew accustomed to beginning dinner at 10:00 p.m., something we had done in other European countries but seemingly with greater ease and fewer hunger pangs in Greece.

In planning this trip Marilyn reminded me that this was a *vacation*, which meant my laptop remained at home. Okay, I must admit that I brought my BlackBerry to keep in touch with our family, and answered a few e-mails (primarily family), but almost all responses waited until I returned home. However, perhaps because of karma, I did engage briefly in what might be seen as a work-related activity, but it was an opportunity that was difficult to turn down. This past February I gave one of the keynotes at the National Association of School Psychologists Convention that was held in Boston. After my presentation, a charming woman came up to chat with me and said she would love to have me speak at her university. I asked, "What university?" and she answered, "The

University of Athens.” To verify I had heard correctly, I asked, “Athens, Greece?” which drew a quick, “Yes.” It turned out that she was Dr. Chryse “Sissy” Hatzichristou, Professor of School Psychology and Director of the Center for Research and Practice of School Psychology at the University of Athens.

Much to her surprise I said that I planned to be in Athens for a couple of days in May. I told Sissy that I would e-mail her the dates of my visit and she could let me know if any were feasible for me to speak. Keeping in mind that this was a vacation I added that I would need to know at what hour she could schedule my lecture to insure it did not interfere with sightseeing or any other events. Marilyn, Jan, and John all felt it would be very special if I could speak with school psychologists and educators at the University of Athens.

Sissy was able to arrange the presentation from 6:00-8:00 p.m., typically the time Marilyn and I eat dinner at home (closer to 6:00 p.m.), but early for the planned dinner we had that night with several of John’s childhood friends. I thoroughly enjoyed meeting Sissy’s colleagues and speaking with such a warm and receptive group of psychologists and educators. Everyone made me feel very comfortable and right at home. I was also impressed with the work in which Sissy and her colleagues were engaged to enrich the lives of children and teachers in Greece.

The only glitch in the vacation occurred when our flight from Athens to JFK Airport in New York was delayed by three hours. As a result we missed our original connecting flight to Boston and spent five hours at JFK waiting for the next available flight. It was an exhausting 24 hours from the time we woke up in Athens to the time we arrived home. How little the inconvenience of the delayed flight and five-hour layover was compared to the tragedy that awaited the lives of many other travelers the following day. We must truly learn to keep things in perspective.

Upon returning home we immediately went to bed. We arose Sunday morning on a veritable high from the trip even as we resumed more mundane activities such as food shopping, doing the wash, and mowing the overgrown lawn. During the day we spoke with family and friends about the wonders of the past two weeks. We also spent time with Teddy and Lyla, our two grandchildren who live a mile from us. What a joy! In addition, I downloaded our photos from the trip and looked forward to sharing them with

Jan and John who were spending a couple of extra days in Greece with family and returning to Boston on Monday.

Tragedy and the Vagaries of Fate

On Sunday night May 30, a day after we returned home, Air France Flight 447 departed from Rio de Janeiro to Paris. On Monday morning's news we heard that the plane had abruptly "disappeared" over the Atlantic Ocean. As up-dates were received, it became increasingly evident that the plane had crashed with little, if any, hope of survivors among the 228 passengers and crew.

The news was disturbing and chilling, rendered even more so by the fact we had also flown on a transatlantic flight just the day before the Air France Flight left for its journey above the Atlantic and John and Jan were flying home that day. Marilyn and I are not afraid of flying. Given the many workshops I provide nationally and internationally, I fly frequently and I consider planes a very safe means of travel. However, we both had the same thought when we heard the news of Flight 447, namely, how our flight had crossed the Atlantic without incident while the next day another flight had crashed taking 228 lives and causing an indescribable pain among their family and friends. As often occurs in the wake of such tragedies, there were stories in the media of others who were scheduled to be on Flight 447 but were not, either catching an earlier flight or arriving late for 447. The vagaries of fate were never so clear and haunting as one read stories about those who perished on the plane and those who missed the flight! The vagaries of fate evoked numerous thoughts and feelings within me.

Reflections of a Lost Brother

Many of my readers are aware from several previous articles I have written that I lost a brother, Irwin, many years ago when his plane exploded over the Pacific Ocean. He was an officer in the Air Force and in an act of terror someone planted a bomb on his plane that resulted in his death and the death of the rest of the crew. He was a loving sibling who had married nine months before his untimely death. I think of Irwin often, even more so on his birthday, wedding anniversary, anniversary of his death, or events such as 9/11 or a plane crash. At those times I especially pause to reflect about the kind of life he might have experienced had a terrorist's act not cut his life so short. I think

about the children he might have had, of my nieces and/or nephews who were never born, and of cousins who would never have a presence in the lives of my sons Rich and Doug.

I know that others who have lost a loved one at a young age have entertained similar thoughts. While such thoughts are to be expected and are likely to emerge from time to time, I recognize that it is important not to dwell on the “what ifs” since we can never know the destiny of journeys not taken. Rather, I believe that to honor the memories of loved ones requires us to think about the lives they led before their death and challenges us to reflect upon the lives we are leading after they are gone. I should like to share a few thoughts about the latter.

A Resilient Life in Concert with One’s Values

In our writings my colleague Sam Goldstein and I encourage all of us to devote time and energy to adopt what we call a “resilient mindset” that finds expression in a lifestyle filled with purpose and meaning and characterized by compassion, caring, and strong connections to others. After 9/11 I emphasized that a resilient outlook is essential if we are to deal effectively with the uncertainties, challenges, and, unfortunately, violence of our modern world. However, I also cautioned that the main catalyst or goal for fostering resilience in our children and ourselves should not be to prepare for the possibility of future terrorist attacks. Such a goal is rooted in fear rather than in hope. Instead, our quest to be resilient should be based on the recognition that the qualities associated with resilience are essential for realizing a more satisfying, purposeful life.

Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatte have advanced a similar position in their book *The Resilience Factor*. They contend, “. . . resilience is the capacity to respond in healthy and productive ways when faced with adversity and trauma; it is essential for managing the daily stress of life. But we have come to realize that the same skills of resilience are important to broadening and enriching one’s life as they are to recovering from setbacks.”

Relatedly, I am not suggesting that our motivation to engage in positive, compassionate behaviors be predicated on the possibility that at any moment our lives may be lost. That too is motivation generated by fear. Instead, the resilient behaviors in which we choose to engage and the ways in which we demonstrate respect for ourselves and others should follow from a value system that is not dominated by fears of harm or

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violence or even death but rather by a recognition that living life in concert with one's values is what brings meaning and satisfaction to one's daily existence.

In our book *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*, Sam and I observe, "When people are not authentic, when their actions do not reflect their values, they are likely to experience increased stress and pressure. Many, caught up in the day-to-day hassles of everyday life, are not even aware of the discrepancies among their goals, values, and behavior. Yet these discrepancies serve as major obstacles to feeling a sense of integrity and leading a fulfilling life."

An exercise we recommend, which I hope you will do, is to make a list of five things that are most important to you and to consider why these things are important. It is not unusual that one's health and relationships find a prominent place on this list. We then request that you review each item on the list and reflect on how much time and energy you expend to achieve what you have listed. We have discovered that many people are surprised to observe a significant discrepancy between the list they have created and their actual behavior. For example, there are those who cite as high priorities and values the quality of their marriage, their role as a parent, their health, their religion, or being charitable towards others; yet they are so consumed by other demands such as job responsibilities that they devote little time to their spouse or their children, or helping others, or attending their place of worship, of adhering to a healthy diet or exercise.

For the past 30 years I have advanced the notion that we are the "authors of our own lives," that if we are following a script that is not in keeping with our values, we must take the initiative to re-write the script. This may prove to be a difficult task, but the alternative is to wake up one day and realize that we have not been true to ourselves and that certain values were pushed to the background, eclipsed by behaviors that added little benefit to our lives or the lives of others. I have worked with many men and women who regret time that was not spent with family and friends, of precious moments and events with children that were missed, of opportunities to engage in favored hobbies that were lost.

While fate as represented by the crash of Flight 447 is an unknown variable in our lives, we must focus our energy on what we do have control over. We must strive to lead

a life that resonates with our values and ideals, not out of fear but rather in harmony with these stated values. As I wrote above, I hope you take time to make a list of what is most important to you and then honestly evaluate your current lifestyle in relation to the items on your list. Acceptance of oneself involves living a life that reflects and honors one's values. In ending, I think it is well to remember Shakespeare's often quoted words in *Hamlet* in which Polonius asserts:

*This above all: to thine ownself be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not be false to any man.*

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