

## **A Grandfather's Message for Maya, Teddy, Sophie, and Lyla**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

I hope that all of you have had a relaxing, satisfying past few months. My summer was very pleasurable, especially enriched when I spent time with my grandchildren. My wife Marilyn and I are fortunate that Teddy and Lyla live just a mile down the road and Maya and Sophie a little less than a two-hour drive up to Maine. Thus, we see them frequently and they provide true joy to our lives.

In addition, the Brooks clan had a wonderful family get together during the summer. Relatives from Arizona, Florida, Massachusetts, Maine, and New York all converged on Los Angeles. It was gratifying to observe the ease and fun with which cousins of all ages interacted with each other. I think the ease of the relationship among the adult cousins was facilitated by the fact that most of them remain in regular contact via Facebook (okay, I still have not joined Facebook although I have received numerous invitations to do so—perhaps one of these days). I find it interesting that Marilyn and I often learn about family news through one of our sons or daughters-in-law who regularly keep in contact with their cousins via Facebook.

Although I attempt not to wear my psychologist's hat when in the presence of family, as I witnessed the animated, fun discussions and play in which family members were engaged I could not help thinking of my many writings pertaining to the importance of connectedness and ties to others. My close friend and colleague Sam Goldstein and I have emphasized in our books the significant role of connectedness in promoting emotional and physical well-being and resilience throughout our lives.

I was delighted to watch my grandchildren interact with each other and their cousins during our stay in Los Angeles. As I observed them I thought about the first time I held my oldest grandchild, Maya, seven years ago. It was a moment of indescribable delight and awe, not unlike the first time I held her father Rich. I'm not certain why, but as I cradled Maya in my arms when she was an infant I imagined writing a letter to her, which she would read years later, about my reflections of what is truly important in life—a way of passing down to my grandchildren lessons I had learned during my journey in life. I fully recognize that young people must choose and experience their own path and that we must be careful not to come across as “lecturing” to them. However, just as I

incorporated values from my parents via their words and even more so by their daily actions, I thought of what I might wish to share with Maya and with any grandchildren to follow. I believe that as the younger generation forges its own destiny, they can benefit from the wisdom of those who preceded them.

The years passed quickly as I reflected upon the insights I wanted to convey to Maya. Three more grandchildren arrived in the next 4 ½ years—Maya's sister Sophie and her cousins Teddy and Lyla. Obviously, some of the most important messages we wish to impart are not taught in a planned way. Educating children about values and priorities does not invite a prescribed curriculum since many of the most significant lessons are taught and learned in spontaneous moments. Each time we cuddle children, pay close attention to what they are saying, engage in fantasy play with them, comfort and reassure them in moments of distress, joke with them, tell them how much we love them, discipline them in a caring way, we help to establish foundations of love, trust, playfulness, and self-discipline. And these unplanned events provide opportunities to demonstrate those values that can guide them throughout their lives.

### **Memories of My Parents**

On the flight back from Los Angeles to Boston my reflections about my grandchildren continued. I was also filled with nostalgia, prompted by discussions I had in Los Angeles about childhood days spent growing up in Brooklyn. I thought about my parents and the unconditional love they displayed each and every day. I thought about a time when I was about five years old and accompanied my father as he went to pick up some merchandise for the small candy/cigar store he owned. I have a vivid memory of standing on the platform as this merchandise was being unloaded and then one of the men picking me up and throwing me in my father's arms a couple of feet below. I have always felt that the reason this image was so clear was because it captured the sense of security and support I felt in my father's presence. I knew he was always there to catch me. I thought of the warmth and comfort my mother displayed and the chocolate chip cookies and cinnamon swirl cookies she baked from scratch—comfort food at its best.

At any family gathering with my brothers Hank and Mike, I think of my brother, Irwin, an officer in the Air Force whose life was taken when a bomb was placed on his plane by a terrorist. I have written about Irwin in several of my past monthly articles, but

what I have not mentioned and what I discovered first-hand in my clinical practice is that when some parents experience the devastating loss of a child, whatever difficulties may have existed in the marital relationship are intensified. However, my parents gained strength from each other in their grief, their love for each other unwavering. What beautiful models they served for my brothers and me.

### **Messages for My Grandchildren**

Flooded by these memories of my youth I could not help thinking once again, “What are the values I wish to convey to my four grandchildren through my words and deeds, values that I hope influence their lives?” I am certain they are not very different from what other parents and grandparents hope to witness in the behaviors of the next generation of their family. As I begin to share these thoughts with my grandchildren, I would like to share them with my readers as well.

**The importance of cultivating relationships.** Earlier I emphasized the significance of connections in our lives. Paradoxically, we live in a world where in many ways technology has brought us closer together, but has also served, at times, as a barrier to closeness and intimacy. For instance, people working in offices next door to each other use e-mails to communicate rather than meeting face-to-face. As I mentioned earlier, sites such as Facebook inform us instantly of happenings in each other’s lives, which has its benefits but all-too-often can limit other forms of interactions. We must consciously make time for connecting with others, and not permit busy lives from depriving us of the joys of truly being together. On a trip to the west coast earlier this year I sat next to a man who was flying to attend the funeral of his brother who had died suddenly of a heart attack. When he inquired what I did and found out that I was a clinical psychologist, he plaintively told me that he hadn’t seen his brother in almost two years, adding, “We kept in touch primarily by e-mail. Isn’t it ironic that we couldn’t find time to see each other when he was alive, but somehow I find time to go to his funeral.”

**The need to enrich the lives of others.** We must take care of ourselves, but always find time to brighten and enrich the lives of others. As I write this article, we are mourning the loss of Senator Ted Kennedy, not just here in Massachusetts but nationally and internationally as well. Whatever one’s political beliefs or political party, I think one cannot help but be impressed with the first-hand accounts of Senator Kennedy’s

generosity that have emerged since his death. Numerous individuals reported, regardless of their “station” in life, that when they called Senator Kennedy’s office to seek assistance he spoke directly with them. When a teenage girl from Massachusetts, Molly Bish, was abducted, one of the first people to call her parents was Senator Kennedy. He called on the day that her remains were discovered three years after her disappearance and he called the hospital when Molly’s father had a stroke.

Many similar stories of graciousness and thoughtfulness were shared upon his death, too numerous for me to describe in this article. Few of these stories were publicized prior to his passing. I said to Marilyn that although we had lived in Massachusetts for years and knew of Senator Kennedy’s passion for improving the lives of others, I was not aware of the extent to which he was accessible and helpful to all of his constituents. I was very touched by a report indicating that in the aftermath of the horrors of 9/11 he wrote a personal note to the families of each person from Massachusetts who had been killed in the terrorist attacks (almost 200) and year after year he continued to keep in touch with them offering his support. He did so out of the view of the media. Those who are cynical about politicians, as many are in today’s world, might argue that such seeming acts of kindness are rooted in the motive to garner votes. I believe that Senator Kennedy engaged in these actions not to capture votes but because he knew that he was privileged to be in a position to better the lives of others. Given the well-documented tragedies that he suffered in his life, he was well aware of the importance of “being there” for people, reaching out to them especially in their darkest moments.

While most of us do not wield the influence that Ted Kennedy did, we all have the power on a daily basis to say and do small things that will have far-reaching positive consequences. I know from research I conducted about significant memories from one’s childhood that even seemingly small gestures of kindness can have a profound impact on the recipients of that kindness. Performing such gestures also infuses one’s own life with purpose and satisfaction. To my four grandchildren, I hope you all experience such satisfaction.

**Follow your passions and interests.** I have written about individuals I have seen in my clinical practice whose lives are bereft of joy. Many are involved in work-related

activities in which they feel trapped. When I inquire about what they enjoy doing, I have heard a wide spectrum of answers—painting, gardening, carpentry, exercise, playing games with their children. Yet sadly, I learn they spend little time in these activities. I recognize that almost all of us have some responsibilities about which we are not joyous, but if our life is dominated by unrewarding, unfulfilling responsibilities it is not surprising that sadness and emptiness rule, eclipsing feelings of contentment and excitement.

The theme of finding time to do what is joyful is closely intertwined with a topic I addressed in my last website article (June, 2009), namely, living life in concert with one's values. If we subscribe to such values as bettering the lives of others, discovering and following our passions, cultivating relationships, being gracious and forgiving, then our actions should follow from these values. We must constantly reflect upon the values and priorities that guide our behaviors and honestly ask if these behaviors are consonant with the values we espouse. I recall a hospital meeting I attended years ago in which major changes in the ownership and governance of the hospital were being considered, changes that many of us considered would compromise clinical care even while bringing in extra revenue. One of the staff members observed, "You only sell your reputation once. Once it is sold, it is gone." The same could be said of personal values that are not honored.

Maya, Teddy, Sophie, and Lyla, I hope that you discover and pursue your passions and that the actions you choose to take are in keeping with the guiding principles in your lives.

**Appreciate that setbacks are a natural part of one's journey in life.** Years ago when I first began to write about the concept of self-esteem, I emphasized a couple of points, especially in response to some well-intentioned people who possessed misguided thoughts that boosting the self-esteem of children involved protecting them from failure and placing them on a pedestal. First, I advanced the belief that genuine self-esteem is predicated on realistic accomplishment and the unconditional love displayed by significant others; I argued that children were wise enough to know when they were given false praise or when love was conditional. The second point I highlighted was that during our lives we all experience mistakes or hardships or setbacks, but what is most important is the ways in which we understand and cope with such events. Resilient

children are those who appreciate that setbacks can serve as a significant source of knowledge and strength for subsequent success, but only if one seeks to learn from the setback and consider alternative approaches in the future.

I have become increasingly concerned with the number of children who view setbacks as unalterable and who entertain little hope or optimism for future success. Believing they cannot learn from mistakes they recruit coping strategies that serve only to exacerbate the situation. They do not confront the challenge but instead they may quit or make excuses for their difficulties, sometimes casting the blame on others. Or, they may blame themselves as one of my teenage patients did when he described himself as having a “personality flaw.” The adults in the lives of children must insure that they model and convey the message that setbacks are to be expected and can serve as opportunities for emotional growth.

I thought of this message listening to the very eloquent, moving eulogy offered by Senator Kennedy’s oldest son, Ted Kennedy, Jr. who observed:

When I was 12 years old I was diagnosed with bone cancer, and a few months after I lost my leg there was a heavy snowfall over my childhood home outside of Washington, D.C. My father went to the garage to get the old Flexible Flyer and asked me if I wanted to go sledding down the steep driveway. . . . I slipped and fell on the ice and started to cry and I said, “I can’t do this.” I said, “I’ll never be able to climb that hill.” And he lifted me up in his strong, gentle arms and said something I’ll never forget. He said, “I know you can do it; there is nothing you can’t do. We’re going to climb that hill together, even if it takes all day.” As I climbed on his back and we flew down the hill that day, I knew he was right. I knew I was going to be okay. You see, my father taught me that even our most profound losses are survivable. And it is what we do with that loss, our ability to transform it into a positive event, that is one of my father’s greatest lessons.

What an incredible, life-transforming lesson Senator Kennedy taught his son, not only about overcoming obstacles but literally and figuratively drawing upon the strength of an adult to conquer one’s fears and doubts and establish a more hopeful, resilient outlook.

**A Concluding Thought for Now**

Maya, Teddy, Sophie, and Lyla, please understand there are many more thoughts I would like to share with you. I anticipate that I will do so in future articles. Until then, I look forward to all of our future interactions and to the joy you bring me. I hope that in our times together you experience the love I feel for you and the values that guide my life.

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