

**Life's Transitions: Times of Joy, Times of  
Sadness, Times for Reflection**

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This is my last website article until September. As I have written in previous June articles, I truly appreciate the many thoughtful e-mail messages I have received from my readers in response to my monthly columns. I always welcome your feedback, comments, and insights as well as suggestions for future topics. Your responses are very meaningful to me. One of my main goals in writing these articles is not only to share information and ideas but to have the information and ideas serve as a catalyst for self-reflection and self-change. I hope that this goal is realized in this month's article.

**The Power of Relationships**

I have written and lectured extensively about the significance of nurturing relationships with family and friends, of living life in concert with our values, and of cherishing those moments that touch our hearts, minds, and spirit. Events in my family's life during the past few weeks have vividly reinforced the importance of these themes.

A few weeks ago my son Rich and daughter-in-law Cybele celebrated their 10<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary by taking a one-week vacation in Aruba. They called upon their trusted (and inexpensive) babysitters, my wife Marilyn and me, to spend a week in Maine watching our granddaughters Maya and Sophie. We arrived on the Friday of the Memorial Day weekend, and Rich and Cybele left for Aruba on Saturday. During the weekend we were invited to three barbecues hosted by their friends. We knew many of their friends from past visits, all of whom were very welcoming and delighted to have Marilyn and me attend their festivities with Maya and Sophie.

I very much enjoyed the chats I had at the barbecues. After this busy weekend Marilyn and I reflected upon what a wonderful community of friends Rich, Cybele, Maya and Sophie had. Also, during the weekend our younger son Doug and daughter-in-law Suzanne were having a cookout for about 20 people at their home, a mile from where we live in Needham; the cookout included a number of children with whom our grandchildren Teddy and Lyla would play. As a parent and grandparent, it was

comforting to witness the meaningful relationships that existed in the lives of my sons and their families.

### **A Death in the Family**

On the next to our last day in Maine we received word that my mother-in-law, Grace, who resided in an assisted living facility near our home, had died. She had been ill for a short time and made it clear that she did not want any extraordinary measures taken to prolong her life, including being admitted to the hospital. She died less than three weeks prior to her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and in her long life she had stayed overnight in a hospital on only two occasions, to give birth to her two daughters. We respected her wishes not to go to a hospital and arranged for hospice to come to her apartment. The hospice care provided via the Visiting Nurses Association was very caring and comforting to Grace and to us.

When Marilyn and I left for Maine we were informed that it was likely that Grace would die within a couple of weeks, but given the uncertainty of when this might occur we proceeded with our plans to babysit so that Rich and Cybele could go to Aruba. We knew that when we visited Grace the evening before we drove to Maine, it might be the last time we would see her. We basically said our good-byes at that time. Later that evening Doug visited her and by the next day, Grace had lapsed into unconsciousness. Marilyn's sister Barbara Ann and her husband Ed visited each day as did the hospice nurse; in addition, an aide was present throughout the day.

Upon being informed of Grace's death we departed Maine a day earlier than planned and left Maya and Sophie with close friends of Rich and Cybele's who were very eager to help in whatever ways they might. Marilyn and I returned to Needham. The next morning we drove to Westchester County in New York where Grace was to be buried next to her husband Larry, who died three years earlier. It was an exhausting day, but I was touched by the graveside ceremony. It was officiated by a rabbi from a local temple. He had never met Grace, but had gathered information about her life from Barbara Ann. He began the service by emphasizing that since he had not known her, it was more important for those who had to share their remembrances of her.

Barbara Ann began by describing Grace as a wonderful mother. She recalled special moments with Grace, including times Grace would take her to a department store

and then they would have lunch. Barbara Ann said these experiences might seem simple, but they meant so much to her. As I listened to Barbara Ann's account, I could not help thinking about interviews I had conducted in which I asked adults to tell me about their favorite experiences with their mothers and fathers when they were children and adolescents; frequently, they recalled a time when they were alone with a parent. I often recommend to parents that as much as possible they create these "special times" with their children since they provide memories that last a lifetime. Barbara Ann's words confirmed what others had told me.

Marilyn echoed her sister's description of Grace as a wonderful, loving mother who would be greatly missed. I described the first time I met Grace, which was during my first date with Marilyn. Not only was Grace a lovely person, but as so many people who knew her commented, she was a strikingly beautiful woman. I emphasized the fun I had teasing Grace about different topics and how even in her later years when she was experiencing dementia, she would meet my teasing remarks with some funny lines of her own.

When Doug spoke he said that he was representing Grace's grandchildren and great grandchildren. He recalled a time when he was seven years old and Marilyn and I took our first extended vacation since Rich and Doug were born. We spent two weeks in England. While we were overseas Rich was in his first year at overnight camp and Doug was in Florida with Grace and Larry. Doug described the fun he had with his grandmother.

Following these recollections, the rabbi provided several observations. He said he was very moved by the comments he had just heard, especially those voiced by Barbara Ann and Marilyn as they described Grace as a wonderful mother. He noted that sadly he doesn't always hear such heartfelt, lovely words at funeral services and it was a testimony to the kind of life Grace had led.

As the rabbi expressed these thoughts, my mind drifted to an activity recommended by Stephen Covey in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. He encouraged readers to imagine how they hoped people would remember them at their funeral. In answering this question, one would also have to consider several follow-up questions, including:

“Do I behave in ways that would lead others to describe me as I hope they would describe me?”

“On a daily basis do I live life in concert with my values?”

“Do I treasure and honor my relationship with family, friends, colleagues?”

After the funeral we went to a Chinese restaurant where my in-laws had eaten several times. Grace loved Chinese food and at the beginning of the meal we toasted her and the life she had led. We then drove back to Needham. Many friends visited the next day to offer their condolences. The importance of community for support and comfort was very evident.

### **A Commencement Speech**

I thought a great deal about the events that had transpired in the previous week—Rich and Cybele celebrating their 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, spending time with our two grandchildren in Maine, attending Grace’s funeral, and the presence of many friends—as I prepared for a very important talk the Saturday following the funeral. I had been invited to be the commencement speaker at Nova Southeastern University’s graduation honoring students receiving their masters or doctorate degrees from different departments. There were approximately 1,100 graduates with 9,000 family members and friends in attendance. The ceremonies were held in a large arena to avoid placing restrictions on how many guests a graduate could invite. It was obvious by the loud cheers that accompanied their receiving their diplomas that many graduates had a sizable entourage in attendance.

When I was invited to give the commencement speech I was asked to address the theme of resilience, a topic of great interest especially in these troubling times when many of the graduates might not have jobs. I was also informed I would have about 20 minutes to share my thoughts with the more than 10,000 people at the graduation. I pondered what words of wisdom might I offer in such a relatively brief time. I selected three main points.

The first is one about which I have written extensively, namely, that we are the authors of our own lives and we must learn to focus our time and energy on those factors over which we have some control. We must avoid assuming a victim mentality when situations are difficult and not constantly ask, “Why me?” Instead, I emphasized that as

authors of our own lives we have more control than we may realize in terms of the attitudes we adopt and the ways in which we cope with life's challenges.

I told the graduates that a second point is one that is mentioned by many commencement speakers, but it deserves the emphasis it is afforded, namely, to engage as much as possible in those activities that bring you joy, passion, and purpose. I told them of the many adult patients I have seen in therapy who dislike their work and other aspects of their life but feel paralyzed to make changes. They hesitate to leave their so-called "comfort zone" even though this zone is really not very comforting. They rarely find time for those activities that would add happiness to their lives.

The final point I articulated was based on research that indicated in order for children to be more hopeful and resilient they required the presence of at least one adult in their lives who believed in them. The late psychologist Julius Segal referred to that person as a "charismatic adult," defining this individual as "someone from whom a child gathers strength." I stressed that even as adults we need charismatic adults in our daily lives. I asked the graduates on this very special day to think about and appreciate the family, friends, and professors who were in attendance who had encouraged and supported them in their pursuit of graduate degrees.

I continued, "As much as possible throughout your lives surround yourself with people from whom you gather strength and, as importantly, make certain that you serve as a charismatic adult in the lives of others." I shared that serving in this capacity added purpose and meaning to one's life and contributed to our being resilient.

A couple of days prior to my commencement speech, when I had decided on the three main points I wished to convey, I wondered how to end my presentation. I immediately thought of Grace's funeral and the lovely words of remembrance and gratitude offered by Marilyn, Barbara Ann, and others. Their memories of Grace directed me to one of my favorite quotes written by Ralph Waldo Emerson. I decided I would share his words with the graduates. Emerson, grappling with the question of what comprises a successful life, wrote:

To laugh often and much;

To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children;

To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends;

To appreciate beauty, to find the best in others;

To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition;

To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived;

This is to have succeeded.

Considering Emerson's perspective of success, Grace was indeed a successful person, having enriched the lives of many. She left behind a legacy for people who loved her. I told the graduates that we can all strive to craft our lives to meet Emerson's conditions for success. To do so is a gift not only to others but to ourselves as well.

During the past few weeks our family has experienced times of joy and sorrow. They are also times in which we learn to appreciate what is truly important and valuable in our lives.

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