

The People from Whom We Gather Strength

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In my writings and presentations about the theme of resilience I always highlight the notion of a “charismatic adult,” a term introduced by the late psychologist Julius Segal. I cited him in last month’s article. Segal, in his discussion of the journeys of children who triumphed over adversity, defined such an adult as one from whom “a child or adolescent gathers strength.” I was immediately drawn to this definition when I first read it in an article written by Segal in 1988. I found the image of “gathering strength” not only to be very powerful but in concert with a major finding in the resilience research literature. When adults who had overcome challenging childhoods were asked to reflect upon what factors contributed to their perseverance and hope, an almost universal response was that there was at least one adult in their lives who steadfastly believed in and supported them. Their resilience was rooted in great part in their interaction with this charismatic adult.

My long-time friend and colleague Sam Goldstein and I expanded upon the age range in which charismatic adults have influence. We emphasized that not only youngsters but adults as well need the presence of such figures in their lives. The development and maintenance of emotional and physical well-being at any age are best accomplished when we have charismatic adults by our side, individuals who provide encouragement and support within a safe and secure relationship. In light of this belief, I frequently ask people attending my workshops to think about whom they would list as their charismatic adults, both when they were children and now as adults. I also ask who would list them as their charismatic adults since I believe that in order to lead a more purposeful, resilient life, we not only require interactions with people from whom we gather strength, but we must also serve in this capacity for others.

I continue to be impressed by which ideas in my presentations elicit the most reflection and discussion, whether I am speaking to a group of parents, teachers, mental health professionals, executive coaches, or financial and business leaders. Invariably, the concept of a charismatic adult is right at the top of the list. Many parents have said, “I want to be a charismatic adult in the lives of my children,” while teachers have uttered a

similar comment about their students. When consulting with therapists and executive coaches, they too voice the hope that they might serve as charismatic adults in the lives of their clients.

Charismatic Adults in the Financial World

As an illustration, the idea for the book I co-authored with David Richman, *The Charismatic Advisor: Becoming a Source of Strength in the Lives of Your Clients*, was borne out of David attending a presentation I gave about nurturing resilience in children. David is the National Director of an Advisor Institute for a major investment company and has consulted with scores of financial advisors and teams. After hearing me speak David observed that any financial advisor would love to be perceived by clients as a person from whom they gathered strength. This insight prompted David to arrange for us to conduct workshops together for financial advisors, interview advisors, and apply Segal's notion to the business/financial world. In our book we provide many case examples of strategies that can be used by advisors to assume the role of charismatic adults. It was evident from the feedback we received from advisors that they embraced the image of being a source of strength to their clients.

I have frequently posited that serving as a charismatic adult as well as having such adults in our lives is a basic dimension of leading a resilient lifestyle. Although I was not originally planning to devote this month's column to the theme of charismatic adults, several events in the past couple of weeks have prompted me to do so.

A Writer's Appreciation for His Teacher

My wife Marilyn, who writes an excellent blog about mystery books (www.marilynsreads.com), alerted me to an article penned by bestselling mystery as well as nonfiction author Brad Meltzer. The article titled "World's Greatest Teacher" appeared in the September 30, 2012 issue of *Parade Magazine* and captures the impact that one person can have on the course of a youngster's life. Meltzer notes that in the ninth grade his family moved from Brooklyn to Florida and that "most of my teachers at Highland Oaks Junior High seemed to look past me; I was one more student among hundreds. Ms. (Shelia) Spicer, however, took a special interest."

Ms. Spicer told him, "You can write." While scheduling conflicts did not permit him to transfer into her honors English class, she challenged him with honors work. Ten

years later, after his first novel was published, he returned to Ms. Spicer's classroom and handed her his first novel and said, "And I wrote this for you."

Meltzer reports, "Ms. Spicer began to cry. She'd been considering early retirement, she said, because she felt she wasn't having enough of an impact on her students. I didn't know how to make Ms. Spicer understand what she'd done for me. Thanks to her, I fell in love with Shakespeare. (In fact, she once forced me to read the part of Romeo while a girl I had a crush on read Juliet.) I learned how to compose an essay. It was her belief in me that gave me the confidence to become a writer. I owed her."

Ms. Spicer did not retire for another 13 years. Meltzer attended her retirement party. After being given a crystal vase as a gift, Ms. Spicer told those at her party, "For those of you complaining that kids have changed, and that it's harder to teach these days, *you're* getting old. *You're* getting lazy. These kids haven't changed. *You* have. Do not give up on these kids!"

Meltzer went up to thank Ms. Spicer for "changing my life all those years ago. I realized that night that I was still, and would forever be, her student. Oh, and my crush who read the part of Juliet? I married her. I owe Ms. Spicer for that, too."

Often we don't realize the extent to which we have served as a charismatic adult for others.

All Students Will Achieve

Related to Meltzer's experience with Ms. Spicer is a book I just finished reading, *The Daggett System for Effective Instruction* by Dr. Bill Daggett, the Chairman and Founder of the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) located in Rexford, New York. I feel fortunate that during the past few years I have had the opportunity to meet and interact with Bill and his colleagues and to speak at ICLE's "Model Schools" conference as well as at different schools and schools districts in which Bill and ICLE staff consult. I am very impressed with Bill's insights pertaining to the concepts of rigor, relevance, and relationships in educational practice.

Bill captures the lifelong influence of teachers when he described research that ICLE has conducted. In reviewing the characteristics of schools in high poverty areas in which students excelled, Bill observes, "There was—and remains—in all of the schools

we studied a shared belief in and commitment to the concept that all students will achieve. Note that this belief was typically and purposely phrased not as can achieve but rather as will achieve.”

The students at these high poverty and high-achieving schools were interviewed to obtain their perspective. Bill writes, “We asked them when they first realized they were smart. Most said sometime between third and fifth grade. When asked how they knew, they said it was a teacher who told them and that message gave them a new sense of confidence that they would be successful in school. The students also told us what kinds of teachers were the best at helping them learn. Most important to every student was this: The teacher cares about me and knows something personal about me. Also, the teacher has rules, but is fair, knows the subject matter, uses a variety of learning activities, and makes learning interesting and fun.”

The description of these educators provided by their students epitomizes the characteristics of charismatic adults.

A Community Focusing on Resilience

Last week I gave two presentations in Ridgefield, Connecticut, one in the afternoon for professionals in the fields of education and mental health and the other in the evening for parents and community members. I was invited to Ridgefield by Dr. Carol Mahlstedt, a psychologist who was instrumental in helping to found Project Resilience (for more information about this impressive program please visit their Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/ProjectResilience>). Carol and her colleagues continue to strive to involve the entire town in seeking ways to nurture the social and emotional growth and resilience of children and adolescents in Ridgefield. Judging by the very large turnout for my evening talk they have been successful in engaging many members of Ridgefield in this project.

Following both presentations I spoke with a number of people and also received follow-up e-mails. Not surprisingly, many of the comments pertained to the importance of becoming charismatic adults not only to one’s own children but to all children in the community. One person noted, “It truly takes a village to raise a child.” Another said, “It would be wonderful if a town were filled with charismatic adults. Both the kids and adults would benefit in such an environment.”

Charismatic Adults in the World of Business and Healthcare

At another recent event, I spoke for the second consecutive year at the Coaching in Leadership and Healthcare: Theory, Practice, & Results Conference sponsored by the two institutions at which I have an appointment, McLean Hospital and Harvard Medical School. The conference is geared for mental health professionals, executive coaches, and coaches in healthcare. My presentation centered on three key concepts: mindsets, intrinsic motivation, and resilience. I attempted to identify the characteristics of the mindset and actions of a charismatic professional.

Prior to my presentation, several attendees who heard me at last year's conference stopped to tell me that my talk and writings prompted them to consider the influence of charismatic adults in their personal and professional lives. An executive coach reported that immediately after the 2011 conference he wrote to one of his mentors to thank him for the role he played in his professional development. Another participant, drawing on questions that I encourage be posed in our coaching or clinical practices, said that she now routinely asks executives with whom she consults to identify someone who served as a charismatic mentor when they were beginning their careers. She then asks them to describe specifically what that person said or did to be so identified and what they (the executives with whom she works) are doing so that people in their organization will describe them in similar positive terms. This coach also informed me that she applies the same questions to herself, examining the ways in which her interactions and strategies contribute to her being seen as a charismatic person to her clients.

Following my presentation at this year's coaching conference, I had the opportunity to chat with participants for about 40 minutes. Similar to what occurred in Ridgefield, many of the conversations involved the theme of charismatic adults. One regular subscriber to my monthly website articles who has also read several books I co-authored with Sam Goldstein said that he especially enjoyed accounts of charismatic adults.

He elaborated, "In the case material you describe in your talks as well as in your writings, you give examples of actions we can take to become charismatic adults. It's obvious from your clinical and consultation work you have plenty of examples. Have

you ever thought of asking people who read your monthly newsletter or people who attend your presentations to send you examples of charismatic adults from their lives?”

I replied that I had not formally invited people to do so but that even without making such a request people have sent me illustrations of charismatic individuals who enriched their lives either as children or adults.

This man responded, “In last month’s article you described some examples of how a clinical and school psychologist (Steve Baron) applied the concept of islands of competence in his work. I found the examples very helpful and applicable to my own work. Even though some people have taken the initiative to send you stories about their charismatic adults it might be interesting to invite people to send you examples of charismatic adults that you can then share with others.”

An Invitation

I told him that I liked his suggestion. The more I thought about his suggestion, the more appealing it became. Thus, I would welcome receiving any vignettes that people would like to share about charismatic adults from their child or adult lives. What did they say or do that led you to gather strength from them? How old were you at the time? I would also enjoy reading any illustrations of when you served as a charismatic adult to others. If you do send me a vignette, please let me know if I have permission to use it in any future writings and, if so, would you like me to use your name or prefer the source remain anonymous?

I think we can all benefit from learning about the experiences of others, especially if these experiences prompt us to reflect upon the questions:

“What have others said or done that have added strength to my life?”

“What might I say or do so that others will gather strength from me?”

I do hope to hear from some of you.

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