

A Father's Gift
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How quickly another year has gone by! It seems like such a short time ago that I wrote my June, 2017 article and noted as I do now that this will be my last website column until September. As I have expressed each June, I remain very appreciative of the feedback, questions, and insights received from my readers. My main goal in writing these articles continues to be to convey information and ideas that might serve as a catalyst for self-reflection and self-change.

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I am writing this on Father's Day. Perhaps because it is Father's Day, it heightens my awareness of how fortunate I was to have had such a loving, supportive father in my life as well as an equally loving, supportive mother. In my presentations for parents I often describe an experience with my dad that involves the last words he said to me before he died. I will share these words later in this column, but first I want to explain why they have recently taken on even more meaning for me.

This past month has been very busy and exciting professionally. I conducted a week-long "resilience across the lifespan" seminar in Galway, Ireland—the same seminar I do each summer on Cape Cod. I also provided a day-long seminar at the University of Miami about nurturing resilience in our clients and ourselves, and spent another day speaking with school administrators in Piscataway, NJ about school climate, motivation, and resilience. In all of these presentations I emphasized the importance of being compassionate and finding meaning and purpose in our lives as a basic foundation for resilience.

Human Flourishing and Virtues

I also gave a three-day workshop geared for professionals in the field of education sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing, an academic center at the University of Oklahoma-Norman. The workshop was arranged under the auspices of Learning & the Brain.

The Institute was officially opened on September 1, 2015 and Dr. Nancy Snow, formerly Professor of Philosophy at Marquette University in Milwaukee, assumed the

role of Director. As is described on their website, the Institute focuses on the concepts of flourishing and virtues. “To flourish means to live well, to thrive. The Institute is founded on the belief that humans flourish when they develop to their fullest potential as rational and moral creatures living in healthy communities.” In implementing its mission the Institute is involved with schools, parents, businesses, and civic and community organizations.

The Institute has identified virtues or “character traits humans need in order to flourish individually and as members of a community.” The virtues are divided into three main categories and each includes three components. They are Intellectual Virtues, (love of learning, intellectual humility, and open-mindedness), Executive Virtues, (self-regulation, perseverance, and honesty), and Civic Virtues (civility, compassion, and fairness). It is beyond the scope of this article to articulate these virtues in detail. To learn more about the Institute and the virtues governing its work please go to the following link: www.ou.edu/flourish

In planning my workshop for the Institute with Dr. Snow and Dr. Max Parish, I was asked to relate my ideas and strategies to the nine virtues, selecting three to be part of an evaluation form. I found the task to be challenging, meaningful, and thought-provoking. While all nine could be included under the topics I addressed during the workshop, I selected love of learning, perseverance, and compassion for the evaluation summary.

Much of my work embraces the themes of compassion, altruism, “contributory activities” and leading a purposeful, resilient life. For example, my recent April article was largely devoted to the activities of Dr. Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I reported that his research indicates that parts of the brain involved with well-being are activated when one is engaged in altruistic behavior. Based on these findings, Dr. Davidson and his colleagues developed a “kindness curriculum” for preschoolers to enhance positive behaviors—a curriculum that may be understood as nurturing several of the virtues identified by the Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing.

I have emphasized for many years that “seemingly small gestures” on the part of one individual towards another can have lifelong effects. In discussing “small gestures” I

have cited the work of Dr. Sigal Barsade of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and Dr. Olivia O'Neill at George Mason School of Business. They have examined the emotional culture of organizations and highlighted the significance of "micromoments," noting that "little acts of kindness and support can add up to an emotional culture characterized by caring and compassion."

A File and a Father's Last Words

Back to my father's last words for me. As I thought about him on Father's Day, images of my visit to Oklahoma and ideas about flourishing, virtues, compassion, and micromoments emerged. Those who have heard my presentation for parents know that I typically end with an account of my father's last words. As you read the story below, it is my hope that it will encourage you to consider similar kinds of moments that you have created or will create for your children, or other family, or students, or colleagues, or friends.

My parents, Dave and Eva, kept a "file" about me and my brothers from the time we were born. I explain to audiences, "Everything went into the files. Birthday cards, report cards, even my drawings. I know it may sound a little offbeat, but as I was growing up I felt the files were an example of my parents' love. I had no idea if anyone else in my neighborhood in Brooklyn had files, but I knew I did as did my brothers. So many significant parts of my life were housed in those files and I always felt that my parents enjoyed adding to them."

My mother died at a relatively young age 38 years ago. After she died, my father told us, "I know that the files were very important to your mom, but it's just as important to me. So if it's okay, I would like to keep the files going in her memory." Upon hearing those words, I teared up. Here was this 76-year-old man saying to his sons that they were still important to him and he wanted to keep the files going. What a wonderful gesture to help us feel so important in his life!

One day apart from the tenth anniversary of my mother's death, my father died. My wife and I had just visited him in Florida. There was no indication that his death was imminent. He seemed fine during our visit. When it came time for Marilyn and me to return to Boston, my father, as he always did, gave me a warm hug and kiss good-bye;

then he said something that created a powerful micromoment, so powerful in fact that on the flight back to Boston I kept thinking about how fortunate I was that he was my dad.

As events unfolded, I never experienced another hug, kiss, or conversation with him. A couple of days after I returned from Florida, my father suddenly became seriously ill. When I flew back to Florida he was already comatose and had been moved to a hospice; he was not expected to live through the night. My brothers and I each went into his room individually and said our farewells. The next morning my father died peacefully.

What were the last words that my dad said to me as I was leaving just a few days earlier to return to Boston? It's important to emphasize that he did not know these were going to be his last words to me. My father had a philosophy—one that he did not preach but rather modeled—namely, there are many opportunities throughout our lives to enrich the well-being of others and we should not let these opportunities go by.

His final words: "Now Bob, remember, when you get back to Boston if you have anything you can send me for the file, please do. I always enjoy receiving things from you and hearing from you. You are so special, I love you dearly."

What an unforgettable micromoment! My hope is that my sons as well as others have experienced such a micromoment with me. As you reflect upon the virtues identified by the Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing, consider what seemingly small gestures you might provide for others that will enrich their lives and the communities that bind us together.

In ending, I want to express my appreciation to Nancy Snow and Max Parish for acquainting me with the virtues framework of their Institute. To my readers, I hope that during the next couple of months you take time to relax and also to “live” those virtues that permit us to thrive.

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