

Chance Meetings: Opportunities Gained or Lost

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I recently read a thought-provoking article by Rick Reilly in Sports Illustrated. Reilly, who has become one of my favorite sports writers because of his ability to capture stories of human interest that transcend athletics, devoted a column to professional football player Donald Driver of the Green Bay Packers.

Driver stole many cars during his youth in Houston. His nickname was Quickie. “I could drive pretty good. Anytime anybody in my family needed a car moved, I’d say, ‘I’ll do it.’ That’s how I learned to drive. I probably stole 20 or 30 cars and only had to jump out once.” As Reilly noted, that “once” was to alter Driver’s life forever. It occurred when he was starting the engine of a stolen car and heard police sirens. He sped away but crashed into a car driven by an elderly woman who was backing out of her driveway. Driver leaped from his car and began to run, well ahead of the police.

Although in all likelihood he would have escaped, something prompted him to turn around to check on the elderly woman. She was not injured, but by that point the police were turning the corner to her house. She looked at Driver and said, “Go sit on my porch.” Without knowing why, he trusted her. When the police approached, she said that the person who rammed her car had fled. They wondered who was the teenager sitting on her porch swing.

She answered, “Oh, that’s just my grandson.”

The police left. The woman yelled at Driver, “Get in this house. Why do you do this, young man? You could be doing so much more with your life!”

Reilly noted, “Her kindness that day changed Donald Driver. Not overnight, no. This isn’t a made-for-TV movie. He stole another car or two, took that money and bought drugs, which he says he never used, only sold for more money. But her little kindness grew in him.”

Shortly thereafter Driver’s mother sent him to live with his grandmother, who lived close by. He joined the drill team at his grandmother’s church and played three sports at the local high school, including organized football for the first time. The voice

of the elderly woman continued to echo, “You could be doing so much more with your life!”

After high school Driver attended Alcorn State where he starred in football and track and obtained his accounting degree. He noted, “I always wanted a job where you wear a suit.” He took a detour from a career in accounting when he was drafted by the Green Bay Packers in the last round of the 1999 professional football draft, the 213th player chosen. What an unexpected prize for the Packers!

Driver pushed himself, honing his talents to the point that he has become a star in the National Football League. His salary reflects his dedication and impressive skills (this past year he signed a five-year contract extension worth \$11.5 million). However, in my estimation his stardom as a football player is overshadowed by his activities off the field. He is reported to do more community appearances than any of his teammates. Reilly reported that Cathy Dworak, the team’s manager of community relations, observed, “He’s a wonderful man. He’s always smiling, fun, positive. He calls me up and asks if there are any appearances I need done. Can you imagine?” Driver has done more than 300, and any honorarium he receives is deposited in the Donald Driver Foundation, which assists people in need.

Reilly added that Driver’s mother and grandmother are doing fine as are his siblings, one of whom became a minister. “Oh, and so is the old lady with the porch swing—the one he calls Grandma Johnson. Quickie usually calls or visits her whenever he goes back to Houston, just to say thanks one more time for saving his life.

“You run into the nicest people, don’t you? So the car thief has become a redeemed and joyful man, who never takes a single day in the NFL for granted. Or in life, for that matter.”

Most of us know or are aware of people who have been able to re-direct the trajectory of their lives, moving from a path of negativity and self-defeating behaviors to a path filled with compassion, love, success, hope, and resilience. My interest in the theme of resilience has existed for more than two decades, resulting during the past few years in an exciting collaboration with my close friend and colleague, Dr. Sam Goldstein. I am frequently asked what triggered this interest. The simple answer is that I met people both in my clinical practice as well as outside my activities as a therapist who defied the

odds against them. They displayed the strength, some even as children, to overcome formidable obstacles and adversity. They did not remain trapped on a road paved with sorrow, anger, and self-destruction. I was intrigued by what forces allowed them to demonstrate such strength.

I do not know Donald Driver other than having witnessed his grace as a football player on television. My only knowledge of his journey in life is derived from Reilly's article. I have always been careful not to extract a psychological profile from limited information. Thus, the observations that follow are offered not as a psychological assessment but rather as general thoughts triggered when I read about a fateful day when a teenager decided to turn around and check on the health of an elderly woman whose car he had smashed.

Let me begin by emphasizing that my admiration for Driver's current behavior should not be interpreted to condone the life he led as a youth. Based on Reilly's accounts, I would guess that Driver would not offer an excuse for what he did as a teenager.

As I read about Driver's encounter with Grandma Johnson, I thought about the research that indicates a major factor in helping youngsters to become resilient is the presence in their lives of at least one adult who believes in and cares about them. The late psychologist Dr. Julius Segal referred to that person as a "charismatic" adult, a person from whom children gather strength. I should note that even as adults we need "charismatic" adults in our lives who provide us with support and strength.

I have found that one can become a charismatic adult in someone else's life even in a brief period of time. In a chance meeting occasioned by a stolen car and a crash, Grandma Johnson quickly assumed the role of one of Donald Driver's charismatic adults. Some might argue that in doing so, she lied to the police. Although she did, I believe she was motivated by sensing a quality of goodness in Driver that could be harnessed—a goodness captured in his act of returning to check on her health.

This dimension of the story prompted me to reflect upon another important ingredient of their encounter. Grandma Johnson could never have been cast in her role as a charismatic adult for Driver had he not made the decision to turn around and check on her well-being after the crash. I kept thinking, "He made the decision to stop running.

He chose at that moment to turn around.” Words such as “made the decision” and “chose” are significant since they are intimately linked to one of the hallmarks of resilience, namely, “personal control.” Resilient people are those who focus on and act upon what they have control over, expending little time or energy over factors that are beyond their control (please see my June, 1999 and January, 2000 articles for more information about the concept of “personal control”). Driver abandoned the negative script he was leading, and took on, at least temporarily, a new, more positive script (while more positive, it was one that had the possibility of resulting in his arrest) that eventually became more permanent.

The story of Donald Driver and Grandma Johnson reinforces several of my basic beliefs about a resilient lifestyle. One of the most important is that during our lives we will be presented with numerous opportunities to serve as a “charismatic” adult. Obviously, this occurs on a daily basis for those involved in raising and/or teaching children. However, opportunities arise in many different ways and, fortunately, most are not nearly as dramatic as Grandma Johnson’s car being rammed by the car stolen by Driver. Think about your life and ask, “For whom am I serving as a charismatic adult?” Simple acts of volunteering such as tutoring a child, delivering food for the elderly, working in a soup kitchen, coaching in a youth sports league, being a Big Brother or Big Sister are just a few examples of placing oneself in a position from which others gather strength. Being available to one’s children, writing a note of appreciation to a friend or relative, preparing a meal for a sick neighbor are other examples.

As I have written in numerous articles, there is ample research to demonstrate that when one engages in these acts of giving, one’s own emotional and physical health are enhanced. To be a charismatic adult benefits not only those we are assisting but ourselves as well.

We must also remember that we cannot wait passively for good things to come our way. We must become active participants in our life journey, recognizing that a resilient lifestyle is only possible when we focus on what is within our control to change. We can continue on a path of counterproductive, unsatisfying behavior or we can ask, “What is it that I can modify to lead a more meaningful life?” I believe that when Driver returned to see how Grandma Johnson was doing, he did not have the time to engage in

an inner dialogue about the merits of his action. But I believe that he intuitively sensed that he had the choice to turn around and he did so.

Obviously, the parameters of “personal control” expand from childhood into adulthood. To assist children to achieve this advancement, we must teach them how to solve problems and make decisions, to appreciate both their strengths and vulnerabilities, and to become more hopeful. In a chance meeting, Driver called upon an inner reservoir of compassion and strength, enabling him to be receptive to the words, “You could be doing so much more with your life!”

We must not give up on those who are not yet ready to hear such words. Their inner reservoir of compassion and strength may be far less accessible than that of Donald Driver. In subscribing to the importance of being a charismatic adult and a master of one’s own destiny, we must consider what realistic options we still have available to reach those who appear unreachable, to touch their minds and hearts, to influence their life course.

In ending this article about chance meetings, compassion, and personal choice, I should like to offer the words of Dr. Victor Frankl, a renowned psychiatrist who survived the horrors of a concentration camp. He poignantly captures the significance of caring and personal control when he writes:

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

As we begin a New Year, may the words of Victor Frankl resonate within each of us. May we perceive seemingly chance meetings as invaluable opportunities for growth for ourselves and for others. May we recognize the power of “choosing one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.” And may we become more influential in determining the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

My best wishes for a year of compassion, good health, and peace.