

To Consider the Eulogy that Will Be Spoken at Our Funeral

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In previous articles I have advocated that reflecting upon the manner in which we conduct our lives should be an ongoing activity not confined to a particular time or season of the year. However, I recognize that the end of one year and beginning of another, an event soon to occur, often invites a heightened level of introspection about our past, present, and future behaviors. It is little wonder that “resolutions” for self-improvement are most evident at the time of the New Year, although as we all know, well-intentioned resolutions are often abandoned within a few weeks of their pronouncement (just think about exercise equipment that gathers dust or diets that are not followed).

One way in which to reflect upon the life we lead is an approach advanced by a number of people, namely, to consider how we would like to be described at our funeral. Stephen Covey in his bestselling book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* has suggested we do so. Joe Ehrmann, former professional football player, high school coach, humanitarian, and the subject of Jeffrey Marx’s inspiring book *Season of Life*, requests that prior to their last game each senior on the team address his teammates with an essay the senior has written titled, “How I Want to Be Remembered When I Die.” Through authoring their own eulogy Ehrmann encourages his players even at a relatively young age to recognize that they will be remembered, in great part, by whether they live life in concert with meaningful, compassionate values and goals.

When I read the exercise that Ehrmann requires of his players, I was flooded by thoughts that touched both my personal and professional life, involving my roles as a husband, father, grandfather, brother, and friend, and as a psychologist who has been privileged to influence as well as learn from the lives of so many by conducting therapy sessions and workshops. When I have raised the question at some of my presentations about the words of the eulogy we would like read at our funeral, it triggers many questions, including:

“What kind of life do I currently lead each and every day?”

“Are there situations that I would like to change or rectify?”

“What activities would I like to add to my current lifestyle to be true to my values and goals?”

“What are realistic, practical steps I can take to add such activities to my daily existence?”

The Place of Altruism and Generosity in One’s Life

Many of my writings, especially those in collaboration with my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein, pertain to the questions raised above. Our description of a resilient lifestyle in *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life* invites all of us to engage in practices that add meaning and purpose to our lives. We identify various features of a resilient mindset and lifestyle, including: assuming “personal control” or responsibility for that which transpires in our lives, becoming skilled problem solvers, viewing mistakes as experiences from which to learn rather than feel defeated by, connecting with other people, and displaying self-discipline and thoughtfulness.

There is another feature about which I have written extensively. It is a topic that continues to draw my interest and energy. It deserves to be highlighted as a guideline for leading a purposeful, resilient life. I am referring to the importance of engaging in behaviors that display altruism and generosity and enrich the lives of others. My keen interest in this theme is constantly reinforced by clinical observations and new research findings, including those focusing on the workings of the brain.

Several days ago an article appeared in *The Boston Globe* titled “How to Help (Yourself)” by Karen Weintraub. The story began: “A German researcher recently identified a gene that appears to promote generosity. American scientists are finding that being big-hearted may trigger the brain’s pleasure centers. And Jeff Bell and Jared Douglas Kant are convinced that helping others cope with obsessive-compulsive behaviors made the difference in their own treatment for the disorder.” Opening comments such as these quickly piqued my interest.

The article quoted Dr. Helen Reiss, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. In discussing altruism Reiss notes, “I think it’s a very human phenomenon. Evolution has wired the human brain to promote helpfulness, something like ‘survival of the nicest.’” Reiss reports that the brain responds to altruistic behavior

by “releasing the feel-good chemical dopamine. Helping someone else improve—or even just watching an improvement—makes us, as empathic beings, feel better. Doing good for others—I think most people don’t do it because it’s going to come back to do good for them, but that’s usually how it works.”

Reiss’ comments reminded me of an article that I read many years ago that described the existence of a “helper’s high.” It was a high that was experienced when people were involved in activities that nurtured the well-being of others.

After reporting Reiss’ view that the human brain is wired to promote helpfulness, Weintraub describes the fascinating findings of Martin Reuter, a professor at the University of Bonn. Reuter published a paper in the journal *Social Cognition & Affective Neuroscience* in which he identifies a gene that he contends can help to distinguish altruistic people from those who are not. Weintraub writes, “Those who are most charitable generally have a positive outlook on the world as well as two copies of a particular gene variant called COMT-Val. Those with one copy of a related gene variant, COMT-Met, are less likely to donate money to a needy child in a developing country, and more likely to have a negative view of the world.”

I have not reviewed Reuter’s study. Since I am not a neuroscientist I do not feel I am in the best position to judge the quality or interpretation of the research. However, I must admit that I still harbor skepticism about identifying a particular gene that is linked to a complex behavior. In addition, I am concerned if someone interprets such findings to infer, “I lack this gene and thus I cannot change my behavior.” Sam Goldstein and I have often spoken about “biology not being destiny,” that people have an incredible ability to rise above inborn temperamental and biological characteristics.

Thus, I smiled when I read Weintraub’s next statement, “Genes aren’t exactly destiny, though, notes Reuter, who, with two copies of COMT-Met says he is the exception proving the rule.” While Reuter may have said this partially in jest, I do believe that almost all individuals are capable of experiencing a “helper’s high.”

The accounts of Bell and Kant, both of whom suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorder, are vivid illustrations of the healing power of helping others. It is a phenomenon I have experienced with a number of both my child and adult patients. Weintraub writes, “Kant, a graduate student in the Simmons School of Social Work in

Boston, said he used to be completely paralyzed by his anxieties, suffering two hospitalizations and barely finishing high school. Twice, he received the highest possible score on a scale measuring obsessive-compulsive behaviors and thoughts. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy made a big difference for Kant. Volunteering, he says, keeps him from backsliding. Kant donates time to the speaker's bureau of the International Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Foundation, regularly supporting people who are still grappling with their disability.”

Bell, an afternoon host on KCBS radio in San Francisco, has also experienced the benefits of contributing to the welfare of others. He did so by sharing with others an account of his struggles with OCD. Also, he is in the process of developing a website titled “Choosing Greater Good Project” with the goal of providing resources for people who desire to assist others with similar problems.

Dr. Michael Jenike, a psychiatrist with Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital and a well-known expert in the area of obsessive-compulsive disorders, emphasizes the therapeutic benefits of helping others. “I’ve seen so many people really kick OCD back by helping others.”

Weintraub ended her article by referring to Dr. Dachar Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California-Berkeley who advocates that “doctors prescribe altruism” to treat problems such as depression, schizophrenia, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorders. Keltner, author of *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*, notes, “When you give you’re getting dopamine. . . and the vagus nerve is firing. These are all fundamental systems in the body that we need to attend to for helping people in need. And ourselves.”

Taking Action to Enrich One’s Life

In *The Power of Resilience*, Sam and I discuss the importance of taking realistic, achievable steps to honor our values and reach our goals. We caution against attempts to make radical changes in our lifestyle that are beyond our capacity to meet or sustain. In thinking about the ways in which we can enrich and add purpose to our lives, I believe that one possible starting point would be to engage as individuals or families in “charitable activities.” I am not certain whether there is an altruistic gene that will someday be identified. There seems to be more evidence of a “helper’s high” fueled by

dopamine. Whatever the physiological or biological mechanisms involved, setting aside even a brief amount of time on a regular basis in the service of others will be of benefit to all parties. Participating in these altruistic activities will create a legacy about which we can be proud, a legacy filled with generosity and compassion.

My best wishes for a happy and satisfying holiday season.

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