

## **Stories about Charismatic Adults: Relationships that Change Lives**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

In my October, 2012 article I focused on one of my favorite topics, that of a “charismatic adult.” As I have often noted, it was a description introduced by the late psychologist Julius Segal. He emphasized that children who overcome adversity and become resilient do so in great part because of the presence in their lives of a charismatic adult, that is, a person from whom “a child or adolescent gathers strength.” I was immediately drawn to this definition while reading an article authored by Segal in 1988. I found the image of “gathering strength” to be very powerful and in concert with a major finding in the resilience research literature. When individuals who had persevered in spite of challenging childhoods were asked to reflect upon what factors contributed to their success and optimism, 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 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.

I ended the October article by inviting readers to send me examples of individuals who had served as charismatic adults during either their childhood or adult lives. My goal in collecting these accounts was to share them with my readers and to have us reflect on the following two 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?”

A number of people sent me poignant illustrations of supportive people in their lives. Still others shared their stories in person at my presentations. Several individuals offered a comment I have frequently heard, namely, that too often we neglect to express our appreciation to the charismatic adults in their lives. As an example, a teacher at one

of my workshops observed, “It would be gratifying to receive notes from former students letting us know about the impact we had on their lives. Not that our motive for being supportive and encouraging should be to receive such notes, but it would still be nice to feel appreciated.” Upon saying this, he paused for a brief moment before adding, “Actually I feel regret that I never thanked a couple of very important charismatic adults in my life, both of whom were teachers of mine.”

### **The Voices of Appreciation of Students**

My intent was to write an article sometime this spring about the responses I had received about charismatic adults. However, I decided to move the article up to this month after receiving an e-mail from Gilda Ross, the School and Community Projects Coordinator at Glenbard Township High School District 87 in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. I have had the pleasure of working with Gilda on a number of occasions and have always been impressed by her energy and her devotion to working with educators and parents to improve the lives of children.

Gilda sent me a video clip that was prepared by the Students for Students Club (SFS) at Glenbard West High school. As Gilda explained, “The mission of the Club is to help build a community of care.” In keeping with this mission, the SFS group proposed creating a brief video in which they would identify specific behaviors displayed by teachers that help students to feel welcomed and respected. The words of the students highlighted the seemingly small actions that teachers could take to become charismatic adults in the lives of the students. Although specific teacher names were not mentioned, the students recorded perceptive comments as a thank you to the charismatic adults in the school. The following is a link to the SFS YouTube: <http://youtu.be/tgwhkFzHe6I>

Viewing the SFS video prompted me to share now some of the vignettes I received in response to the invitation in my October article. People gave me permission to use their actual names. I hope as you view the SFS video and then read the following firsthand accounts you think about the people in your life from whom you have gathered strength and also consider the actions you have taken and will continue to take to improve the lives of others. I hope to share more stories I have received in a future article.

### **You Choose Your Attitude**

Rachelle Mack, R.N., M.S. from Portland, Maine sent me a moving description of one of her charismatic adults. The words of Rachelle's significant adult capture key features of a resilient outlook, including my belief that while we may not have control over certain events in our lives, we have more control than we may realize in how we respond to these events. Rachelle wrote:

“Many years ago it was a mentor, Dr. Aldo Llorente, a psychiatrist, who has since passed. As I began my career he often counseled me with intuitive wisdom, helping me to build, recognize, and trust my own intuition and instinct. He also challenged me to be real, to keep it simple, and to remain in the moment. So many of his expressions remain part of my ongoing vernacular. How often he would tell people to move beyond their perceived injustices in the way only a pre-revolution Cuban immigrant (that was his ancestry) could say and get away with, ‘Yeah, OK your grandma spit in your crib, everyone’s did, but not everyone makes the choice to continue to lie in it.’ He became ill with renal failure and was seeing patients on the opposite days of dialysis. Often colleagues asked me why he continued to be active in his work in psychiatry. I would answer knowingly, remembering his words to me, ‘The work is not what you do, it is part of who you are.’”

Truly perceptive comments!

### **Someone Who Perceives and Reinforces Our Strengths**

Carrie McCullough-Fisher, a teacher in the Garland Independent School District in Texas, listed three charismatic adults in her life and also indicated how honored she was to be chosen as such an adult by one of her students. The three significant people she described were:

“My mom, Nancy McCullough. My mother has been by my side through all of my accomplishments and all of my bone-headed mistakes I made growing up. I know I can go to her about anything and she will still love me unconditionally even if she doesn't quite agree or understand.

“Skip McCambridge, my first assistant principal. Skip saw something in me and invited me to become a teacher. My first year of teaching was rough. With Skip's help and encouragement, I have grown in my profession. Fourteen years later, I still keep him updated on my growth and successes.

“Jennifer Porter, a principal. Dr. Porter came into my life at a time when I wasn’t sure if I wanted to continue in the education world. Like Skip, she saw something in me and provided me with opportunities to grow and become a leader. She put me in positions to learn and help others.

“I have also been blessed to be acknowledged as a charismatic adult in a student’s life. Last year a student I had taught when she was in fourth grade chose me to be by her side during a banquet honoring seniors finishing in the top ten spots of their class. The students were asked to choose the teacher who had the most influence on their education. I was so honored to be there with her.”

The circle of giving continues in Carrie’s life.

### **Observations Offered at Workshops**

A man at one of my workshops told me about his charismatic adult, a teacher when he was in fifth grade. He recounted that his mother died of cancer and his teacher came to the wake and was very supportive throughout that very difficult year. He said, “It was such a meaningful moment to see my teacher come into the funeral home and offer his condolences. He also wrote a very thoughtful note to me and my family and let me know that he would be available to provide whatever support he could. His actions taught me that simple expressions of caring were far reaching and longlasting. I try to remember that as a parent today.”

A woman attending a workshop I gave for staff at a small corporation eagerly came up afterwards to tell me about two of her charismatic adults. She briefly described the insecurities she felt growing up and how “critical and harsh” her parents had been. “I had little, if any, self-confidence. I decided to take a writing class at a local community college and the professor actually gave me positive feedback about my ability to express myself. She took the time to carefully review my papers, always indicating the strong points of my writing as well as areas for improvement. It was obvious she believed in me and was very encouraging. What a wonderful feeling given my past experiences.”

She continued, “Another charismatic adult was my boss when I started working part-time at where I work now while I was attending college. He went out of his way to compliment me and to encourage me to continue my education. He helped me advance professionally and while I no longer report to him, I know that I can turn to him with any

questions or concerns. He serves as my model for how I treat new staff at our company. I hope that they see me in the same way I see him.”

### **A Description of an Influential Person**

Susan Farkas, a social worker from New York, wrote about an interview she had with a principal for a teaching position in 1976. “The principal asked a series of typical questions and then he asked, ‘Describe the personality of the person who most influenced you in your life.’ I had never contemplated such a question before, but within a few moments I answered, ‘He had a zest for life, he was excited, and enthusiastic.’ I sounded sure, proud, and sincere. The principal asked who that was. I answered, ‘My father.’ I think he was touched by my answer. I got the job and always thought my answer made the difference.”

Susan went on to obtain an M.S.W. and has worked as a social worker ever since. She recounted the ways in which her father provided opportunities for her to feel vibrant, such as taking her to the movies, skating, and museums. “My Dad’s ways have enriched and influenced me always!”

### **Aunt Bea and a Crumbled Dollar Bill**

Marsha Kolich, an educator in Phoenix, Arizona wrote to say that she heard me speak at Phoenix Country Day School several years ago and when I introduced the theme of a charismatic adult, she immediately thought of her Aunt Bea. “Bea was my mother’s sister who married late in life and who never bore children. She was smart, sophisticated, and kind. Bea gave me unconditional love and offered me experiences in a world I never would have received exposure to in ordinary circumstances. She expanded relationship dimensions that have helped me relate to a diverse population of people throughout my life. In turn, I feel I have been able to form a close bond with each of my four granddaughters because of the legacy of my relationship with Bea. Hopefully years from now, they will recount these special times to their loved ones. It would be the best legacy I could hope for, all inspired by my ‘charismatic adult.’”

Marsha sent me a follow-up note in which she said, “After Bea died in 1975, I was going through some of her important papers and discovered a small yellowing envelope postmarked 1947, a few days before her birthday in August. Inside was a crumbled dollar bill attached to a piece of lined paper with a birthday note written by me

when I was six years old. I had all but forgotten that I earned that dollar to send to my aunt. This has served as a touching reminder to me about the importance of the little gestures and kindnesses we offer without any expectations or understanding of their importance to the recipient.”

A significant reminder for all of us.

### **“We Were Really Present for Each Other”**

Tracy Marchetti from Massachusetts wrote movingly about her grandmother and also observed that while charismatic adults might be very different from each other, they possessed important common features. “My impression of a ‘charismatic’ person would be someone larger-than-life with high energy and much personal power. But the person in my life who was truly someone from whom I gathered strength and comfort was my grandmother, Bertha. She was not a high-energy person or someone who commanded a room or was otherwise powerful in the standard sense. She was quiet and fun and funny. There was a sense of independence and a carefree spirit about her although I know that she worried about things. My guess is that charismatic adults may have many, many differing characteristics, but I think they all must be able to listen well, ‘see’ the people that surround them, and respond to people in a personal and specific way.”

In describing her grandmother Bertha more specifically, Tracy wrote, “She ‘saw’ me and was never critical or looking to change who I was. Rather, she supported me, mainly by listening and wanting to spend time with me. The recipe for success was not overly considered or philosophical—we just were in each other’s company and were really present for each other. Who would have known that this comforting relationship, such a safe harbor in the turbulence of adolescence, would have such life-long affirming power. I’m very grateful to her and strive to parent in the way that she grandparented. And I do have the feeling that she is still with me even though she is no longer here.”

I believe that each time Tracy strives to parent in the way that Bertha interacted with her, she keeps the image and presence of her grandmother alive. Tracy has found a wonderful way of appreciating and honoring her charismatic adult—and Bertha has left a significant legacy of love.

### **What Is a Good Relationship?**

Judy Aronson wrote about the power of relationships. “Lately I have been wondering how teachers can make the best use of diminishing face-to-face time. From your article, it should certainly include mentoring and validating. My life has been full of such moments, but one that stands out is when I asked my mentor, ‘What is a good relationship?’ Her ten-word answer has stayed with me in my personal and professional life. It was, ‘A good relationship brings out the best in both people.’ She passed her resilient wisdom on to me and I am ever grateful to Esther Karten for changing my life.”

### **This Holiday Season**

I have emphasized in previous writings that acts of kindness and charity or resolutions for change should not be confined to the holiday season or during the ending of one year and the beginning of another. However, I also recognize that these behaviors are more prominent during this time of year. As we reflect on this past year and the beginning of 2013, I would suggest we consider those people who have enriched both our personal and professional lives in 2012 as well as in past years. As we think of these people we should also contemplate what we have done and what we will do in the future to earn the label of charismatic adult. It is indeed a worthy label to have, one that adds purpose and meaning to our lives.

My thanks to those who have shared their stories of charismatic adults with me and my best wishes to all who are reading this article for a happy, meaningful, and peaceful holiday season.

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