A Day of Nostalgia and Reflection

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Most of us have experienced a day filled with nostalgia, a day that evokes memories of significant, positive moments from the past. Recently, I had such a day when I gave the keynote address at a conference sponsored by the Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law & Justice, an organization whose work I greatly respect. As they note on their website, "We dedicate ourselves to remedying social injustices for at-risk and underserved children, youth, and adults. Working with volunteer lawyers, community partners, and others, we identify and address gaps in services and opportunities in areas such as education, homelessness, and the court system."

This was the third time I spoke at an Appleseed conference, and as in the past my focus was on the theme of creating positive school climates and keeping students in school. I highlighted ideas and strategies that teachers and other professionals could implement for nurturing motivation, hope, and resilience in students. The composition of the audience was diverse: teachers, school administrators, lawyers, justices in the juvenile courts, probation officers, mental health professionals, and other community leaders. Regardless of their professional identities, what they all shared was a desire to provide services that would enrich the lives of children and their families.

The energy in the room was palpable, heightened by the large number in attendance. It is truly an exhilarating and meaningful experience to be among other professionals who share one's goals and passions. However, this particular conference was to elicit even more meaning for me and trigger nostalgic memories of my professional journey since it was held at Clark University in Worcester, MA, where I obtained my doctorate in clinical psychology. Although Clark is only about an hour's drive from where I live outside Boston, I had not been back on campus for many years.

Memories of the Early Years

I arrived early, in part to have an opportunity to take a short walk around the main parts of the campus. It was a walk filled with emotion. I saw the apartment house in which Marilyn and I lived for the first six months of our marriage before moving down the street where we spent the remainder of our five years in Worcester. Our older son

Rich was born while I was at Clark and was 15 months old when we moved to Denver where I was to complete a postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Colorado Medical School.

The not-unexpected thought, "How quickly the years have gone by!" emerged. I was flooded with memories of Rich's birth and bringing him home from the hospital to the apartment. What a joyful, exciting, rewarding, and rather hectic time. During Rich's first year of life I was busy teaching at the University of Massachusetts in Boston (I often felt I was keeping one lesson ahead of my students), writing my dissertation, which Marilyn typed—not an easy task in those pre-computer days—and enjoying time with Rich, observing his first smiles, his laugh, his tears when he managed to fall out of his crib (what a scary moment that was, but he was fine), his first steps, and so many other firsts.

I passed by Jonas Clark Hall in which the Department of Psychology is located and thought of the classes I had attended and of the impressive faculty that taught and challenged me to learn and ponder different psychological theories. I was reminded of my many interactions with the other graduate students as we navigated the path towards our doctorate and beyond. As I reflected upon my Clark days, I considered the personal and professional growth I experienced there and not as much the stress, pressure, and uncertainties that one faces during graduate school. Years removed from these seemingly negative emotions, it's easier to push them aside and concentrate on the positive achievements of graduate school.

It was with these nostalgic emotions that I began my keynote for the Appleseed Center. I introduce most of my presentations for professional audiences by discussing a point that Steven Jobs emphasized during his commencement speech at Stanford University in 2005 (my January, 2006 article describes the main points of Jobs' speech), namely, the importance of "connecting the dots backwards." My perspective of this image was that we may not appreciate at the time the kind of impact that certain people and events will have on our lives years later. However, as we connect the dots backwards we come to recognize the influence that a particular friend, mentor, colleague, or as in my situation, patient, had in directing us down an important path in our lives that otherwise might not have been taken.

I share with my audiences vignettes of several key people and the significant experiences they provided in my journey. I do so to emphasize to audience members that in their interactions with others, especially the youth in their lives, they are creating memorable moments that will hopefully be positive in nature—moments that in connecting the dots backwards will serve to reinforce satisfaction, purpose, hope, and resilience in others. I discuss the late psychologist Dr. Julius Segal's notion that resilience in children is rooted in having supportive adults in their lives whom he labeled "charismatic," defined as adults from whom "children gather strength." Of course, even as adults we need such people in our lives.

"I Was One of Those Kids"

Following my Appleseed presentation I had a short time to chat with audience members who came up to speak with me individually. They offered comments similar to ones I am always pleased to hear. "Your talk reminded me of significant people in my life." "I have vivid positive and negative memories of adults from my childhood. Some memories go back 35 to 40 years, but they seem as if they occurred yesterday. I have to keep in mind that kids I interact with today will have memories of things I say and do for many years." "You really got me to think when you asked, 'What do you want the memories kids have of you to be?'"

A brief discussion I had with a young man especially stood out. He thanked me for my presentation and said he had learned a great deal from the "journey" I had shared during the talk. I'm always interested in the messages people take away from any presentation I do. Thus, I asked him if he could think of one or two things that were especially useful. Without hesitation, he said, "I loved the idea that in all of our contact with children we could become charismatic adults in their lives, that while we should not minimize or deny their problems, we should focus on their 'islands of competence,' and we should begin with the belief that all children are capable of being more resilient."

I was impressed by how quickly and accurately he articulated several of the main points of my keynote. I smiled and said, "You were certainly listening very closely." He replied, "What you said was personally very relevant to me since I was one of those kids you were discussing and feel fortunate that I had several charismatic adults in my life that steered and encouraged me in the right direction. I'm now helping those kids."

Incredibly a moment later, a woman came up, shook my hand, and said almost the same thing, "Thank you for offering hope with realistic strategies. I know how important that is since you could have used me as an example of one of the at-risk kids you mentioned who became resilient."

I wish time would have permitted me to learn more from the participants at the conference, but they had breakout sessions to attend and I had scheduled a visit to Clark's Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Dr. Mary Jane Rein, Executive Director of the Center, was kind enough to spend several hours with me as she detailed the history and activities of the Center. They drew faculty members from different departments at Clark, allowing for both a comprehensive and nuanced perspective of truly horrific events in human history—events from which it is important to learn.

Dr. Rein also arranged for me to have lunch with two of the Center's doctoral students, Maayan and Simon. As these students described their doctoral research, I was immediately drawn to the passion they expressed in attempting to understand the mindset of both the Nazi perpetrators and their victims and the conditions that contributed to the Holocaust. I found the discussion to be thought-provoking. Similar to my experience after my Appleseed keynote, I wished I had more time to chat with Dr. Rein, Maayan, and Simon.

Nostalgia, Memories, Reflections: What Have I Learned?

Not surprisingly, my drive home was filled with memories and reflections. I continued to think about my days at Clark, of the professors who had been charismatic adults in my life, of the birth of Rich, of struggling to learn what it meant to be a husband, a father, a psychologist, a teacher, a therapist. I kept coming back to the young man who so accurately captured the main points of my talk because he "had been one of those kids" who was now helping "those kids." And the woman who had similar experiences.

I thought about what I had learned both personally and professionally since receiving my doctorate. I also reassured myself that my journey of learning was far from over as I continued in my quest to expand upon my knowledge and hopefully, to share my learning and insights in ways that would be helpful to others. It was during this drive home that I decided to devote this month's article not only to describe my memorable

one-day visit to Clark but also to identify several important beliefs and principles that developed over the years, rooted in my experiences at Clark, the University of Colorado Medical School, the Boston University School of Medicine, and McLean Hospital, the last where I spent most of my career. Also, very important in my journey were the patients of all ages whom I saw in my clinical practice and who permitted me to enter their lives and learn so much about what was involved in overcoming adversity and becoming more hopeful and resilient.

What follows are several key beliefs that guide my work and approach to life, each emerging and refined at different points of my career:

The relationship is paramount. In my career as a psychologist I have read about different theories of psychotherapy. In my consultations with educators I have learned about many different educational approaches and interventions. Sometimes we become so consumed by what is the "best" intervention that we forget that the effectiveness of any intervention is housed in the relationship we develop with our patients or students. As I often express during my workshops related to school climate, "Students don't care what you know until they first know you care." This observation applies to any setting, including relationships that exist in the workplace. As an increasing body of research has shown, our connection with others is a basic source of nourishment at any age. Charismatic adults are important to both children and other adults.

Let's subscribe to the "slice theory" of life. During my day of nostalgia I recalled that when I first began to give presentations about resilience I described the "slice theory" of life. Although my current presentations are filled with examples of this theory, for whatever reason I haven't used the words "slice theory" in years. When I first began to give presentations in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was little focus in my field about the concept of resilience. At some clinical and school meetings I attended the prevailing view appeared to be that children who faced cognitive, emotional, or behavioral challenges were destined to lead a life filled with hardship and dissatisfaction.

Based on my clinical work and the research that was emerging, I began to question this pessimistic perspective. Instead, I cautioned that if one considered just a slice of a child's life, one could not necessarily predict where that life was heading. In addition, the problem I witnessed was that if we assumed that the slice we examined was

a valid predictor of the outcome of the child's life, our expectations would lead us to relate to the child in ways that would confirm those predictions. If we expect success from children, we are more likely to promote success. However, if we expect continued weaknesses and failures, without even realizing it our actions were likely to contribute to our expectations.

In my clinical practice and workshops, a basic message I began to promote was that we must be careful not to "write off" any child, that it is important to realize that we will get what we expect—a viewpoint that was increasingly supported by research, including that conducted by psychologist Dr. Robert Rosenthal and described in the book he co-authored with Lenore Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom*.

Each child and adult possesses "islands of competence." In my role as a clinician, I initially focused my attention on the problems people brought to my office. It seemed the appropriate thing to do since the reason they contacted me was to help them or to help their child deal with certain problems. As an example, it was not unusual for me to spend my entire initial meeting with parents reviewing their child's vulnerabilities. As I gained more experience and insight I slowly came to appreciate that a focus on problems was counterproductive, often creating a negative atmosphere in my office or at a school meeting.

I began to wonder what would happen if during my first session with parents I asked them to describe their child's strengths or what I was to label "islands of competence." I discovered in doing so a more hopeful atmosphere emerged. Realistic optimism began to replace pessimism and despair. Many parents who contacted me believed that they had somehow failed as parents since their child had problems that required professional help. Consequently, I began to ask them what they saw as their own strengths. I posed the same kinds of questions with adults I saw in therapy (not as parents) and with my child and adolescent patients.

I did not ignore a discussion of problems, but I learned that I was more effective as a therapist when I spent time requesting my patients to identify and reinforce their strengths or the strengths of their children. With the emergence of the field of "positive psychology" a focus on strengths has become a staple of the work of many mental health professionals, but that was not always the case.

People must assume "personal control" of their lives. Many of my writings address the concept of "personal control." We can easily slip into a victim mentality and constantly ask, "Why me?" I emphasize that when faced with challenging situations people who are resilient don't blame the situation, they don't blame others, and they don't blame themselves; instead they ask, "What is it that I can do differently to change the situation?" While we may not have control over the occurrence of some adverse situations, what we have more control over than we may appreciate is our attitude and reaction towards these situations. For those of us who are parents, we should strive to develop this outlook not only in ourselves but in our children.

A number of my website articles as well as the book about resilience in adults that I co-authored with my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein, *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life,* highlight the importance of personal control in our lives. Personal control is tied to the belief that problems are there to be solved rather than overwhelmed by. This concept also found expression in my clinical activities. I became aware that therapy was more effective when I reinforced the notion with my patients of any age that they were partners in the therapeutic journey, that I would always share with them why I asked certain questions or pursued particular topics, and that their input and observations were essential components of the therapeutic process. My goal was to nurture ownership for therapy and all that they did in life.

Enriching the lives of others enriches our own lives and is a cornerstone of resilience. When I began my career as a psychologist this belief was not even within my scope of vision. However, as I gained more experience and knowledge it was to loom very large on my professional landscape. For instance, in research I conducted about school climate I discovered that one of the most positive memories people had of school when they were students was when they were asked to help. I also learned that one of the most effective ways to reinforce compassion and caring in children was to provide them with opportunities to enrich the lives of others. Another example of this dynamic was reported in my October, 2015 article. The impact of stressful events is mitigated by the act of helping others. Health psychologist Dr. Kelly McGonigal summarized the findings of a research study by observing, "Caring created resilience."

This belief found expression in my advocating in my clinical practice and workshops that we find avenues through which we can better the lives of others. I not only suggested that adults engage in what I called "contributory activities" to enhance their own lives, but if they were also parents or teachers that they find ways for their children or students to experience the benefits of helping others. As we practice acts of generosity and kindness, we will not only reinforce the well-being of others but our own resilience as well.

As is evident from this article, my recent day of nostalgia triggered many emotions and reflections about my personal and professional paths in life. I hope that each of you reading this article has experienced a similar kind of day, prompting you to consider the individuals and events that have had a significant impact on your journey as well as all that you have learned since you first set out on your path.

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