

**Of Micromoments and Indelible Memories:  
The Experiences that Change Our Lives  
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Mr. Jerry Mannato was my sixth-grade teacher at P.S. 48 in Brooklyn, New York. I've often referred to him in my presentations for educators. If there were a Mt. Rushmore for teachers, Mr. Mannato would be on mine. I had many wonderful teachers as I went through the New York City Public School System, and he was one of the most influential. Little did I realize while I was attending his class that years later I would incorporate attributes he modeled in the strength-based, resilience approach I adopted.

A little background is in order. My fifth-grade teacher was the polar opposite of Mr. Mannato. She always seemed angry. Her classroom was punctuated by negativity. She focused on telling students what they did wrong rather than on applauding their strengths. I had the strong belief that she didn't like teaching nor was she fond of her students. On a few occasions as I was struggling to complete a task, rather than encouraging me she would exhort me to use my brains—certainly a very judgmental comment. In my presentations I half-jokingly (perhaps, not so jokingly) inform the audience that I won't say her name since I'm fearful if I do, she might appear!

Years ago I began to emphasize the ways in which [seemingly small gestures from others](#) what are referred to as “micromoments” can have a significant impact on the direction of our lives. Positive micromoments have been labeled “microaffirmations,” while negative ones have been referred to as “microaggressions.”

A fundamental message I convey is that we must never underestimate the ways in which brief interactions can become “indelible memories” in our life. I've encouraged people to think about the micromoments, both positive and negative, they've experienced, either as recipients or creators of the actions. Asking others to reflect on these questions has prompted me to consider those brief moments that have had such a significant impact on my values and behaviors. I wish to share a few in hopes that it will encourage you to consider the micromoments you would select.

**Indelible Memories from My Year with Mr. Mannato**

I have a number of microaffirmations associated with Mr. Mannato. I will describe two.

One occurred at the beginning of the school year. I loved to draw. Some of my favorite subjects were knights, cars, and cartoons. I don't remember the exact assignment, but it had to do with art. As Mr. Mannato walked around the room, he placed his hand on my shoulder and told me that I had artistic ability and that I would have many opportunities during the year to show this talent. I was exhilarated by his comment.

Shortly after, I walked home for lunch (since there were elementary schools located within four or five blocks from where any student lived, we all went home for lunch). My mother commented, "Bobby you're smiling." I guess she said that since my smile on that day was in sharp contrast to my lack of a smile during my fifth-grade year. I replied, "I think it's going to be a very good year." And it was. To think that the stage for such a good year was set in such a seemingly simple way: a hand on my shoulder and a brief comment about my strengths by Mr. Mannato. I believe that this experience may have planted the initial seeds for my highlighting years later the importance of identifying, reinforcing, and honoring each child's "islands of competence," moving from a "deficit" to a "strength-based" approach.

Another illustration with Mr. Mannato involved a prized student position. After the first month or so of school, several sixth graders from each class were chosen to be what I believe were called "safety monitors." The position entailed standing outside at the corners of the school and directing other students when it was safe to cross the street and when it was not. Safety monitors were given a badge and a belt that went across your waist as well as over your shoulder. Although the criteria used by teachers to appoint particular students as monitors were never identified, there was the general impression that those chosen were typically students who were doing very well in school.

One of Mr. Mannato's selections was Jon, a boy who probably would be diagnosed with ADHD today, but such a diagnosis did not exist at that time. Most of us were taken aback by this appointment given Jon's disruptive behavior. Later that day I was speaking with Mr. Mannato alone about an art project, and he said that he noticed I seemed surprised with his naming Jon as a monitor. I said I was, and I added something about Jon's disruptive behavior. I wish I had a recording of the exact words Mr. Mannato used, but basically he said, "Sometimes students may be having trouble in school and they never get asked to be a safety monitor or some other responsibility. I think it can help these students do better in school if they had a job like safety monitor."

I'm not certain I fully understood the point Mr. Mannato was making, but given his obvious respect and caring for students, I nodded politely. I have no idea of the behind-the-scenes interactions that Mr. Mannato may have had with Jon or Jon's parents. What I do know is that Jon was very responsible with his appointment and his behavior in class improved. I've often wondered that if I could locate Jon and ask him about significant experiences he remembered at P.S. 48 if he would immediately recount the moment when Mr. Mannato named him as a safety monitor.

Fast forward many years later. I was writing a book about school climate. In wishing to gather material for the book I requested adults to complete anonymously a one-page questionnaire about their school memories. The first question asked responders to briefly describe an interaction with a teacher when they were children or teens that boosted their motivation and self-worth. I was surprised by how many recalled a time when a teacher asked them to help, such as: "I remember when a teacher asked me to pass out the milk and straws" or "I remember when a high school teacher asked me to tutor another student who was having trouble with math."

As most of my readers or those who have heard me speak are aware, I believe that a key component of nurturing intrinsic motivation and resilience at any age is to be involved in what I call "contributory" or "charitable" activities. When I have recommended the inclusion of a contributory or charitable activity for some struggling students, I have, at times, been met with the statement, "Why should we let this student read to a younger student or help out in class if they haven't even done their own work." Perhaps it was my memories of Mr. Mannato and Jon that led me to reply, "I know it's not unusual for some teachers to feel that certain students haven't 'earned' the privilege of helping others since those students haven't met their own school responsibilities."

And then I add, "I believe the way many struggling students hear the message is that they must first prove they can be responsible before we allow them to do dignified things. The problem is that many of these students are already feeling disenfranchised from school and that the staff doesn't believe in or care about them. Thus, they feel the situation is hopeless and why bother to do their work. My approach is to first give students 'dignified' things to do without preconditions. It's been my experience that most students will rise to the occasion, especially with our help. As one high school student told me when he was asked to read to younger

children, ‘It’s the first time I’ve felt good in school. Like I’m doing something important.’”

Somewhere from the recesses of my mind, Mr. Mannato’s micromoment with Jon surfaced and pointed me in a much more positive direction.

### **A Lunch and a Note**

There were many more micromoments that played a significant role in both my personal and professional lives. One was with Dr. John Bauer, a psychology professor at CCNY. As an upper junior I had taken an introductory psychology class with him. I went to see him after the final exam and asked if he had a few minutes to talk with me. I told him I was considering changing my major to psychology, which would necessitate my staying in college an extra semester so that I could take all of the required psychology courses.

Dr. Bauer responded, “A few minutes? An important decision like changing majors requires more than a few minutes. Let’s talk about it over lunch.” He then took me out for lunch, which lasted two hours! As we were leaving, Dr. Bauer said, “Bob, I can’t tell you what to do, but it’s very obvious from class and from what we just spoke about that you really do love psychology.”

Shortly after that lunch I changed my major to psychology. I often wonder what would have happened if Dr. Bauer had not given me the two hours. Would I have still switched majors? I’ll never know for certain, but what I do know is that I’ve never regretted the switch in majors and career. In addition, I remember thinking at that time if I ever had an opportunity to do what Dr. Bauer had just done for me, what a privilege it would be.

Another microaffirmation involved Dr. Hersh Berkowitz, one of my supervisors when I was a postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Colorado Medical School. I had little experience in giving talks at that point of my professional life. I had only been at the Medical School for a month when I was asked to do a presentation about one of my patients at Grand Rounds. I was truly anxious, knowing more than 100 staff and trainees would be at Grand Rounds, people whom I would continue to see during my training at Colorado. I certainly didn’t want to make a negative first impression.

Dr. Berkowitz was very supportive and prepared me for the talk, which I thought went relatively well. Later that day when I returned to my office there was a little folded note from Dr. Berkowitz that probably took him five seconds to write. It read, “You did a great job today, Bob.” What an impact those words had on me. I regret not having laminated the note since after

years in my wallet (perhaps serving as a security blanket), it basically disintegrated. Similar to my thoughts after my lunch with Dr. Bauer, I recall thinking that if I ever had the opportunity to train future mental health and other professionals, I would attempt to create moments similar to those created by these two psychologists. Fortunately, many such opportunities occurred.

The examples I've given in this article about microaffirmations primarily pertain to my professional career, but, not surprisingly, they also impacted on my personal life. The concept of micromoments is relevant to all of the roles we assume—as a spouse, a friend, a parent, a colleague, a coach. The list can go on and on. A brief moment can have a lifelong impact whether we serve as the recipient or creator of such an experience. I would encourage you to reflect upon micromoments in your life.

### **A Request**

Over the years people at my presentations or those who have read some of my articles or book have written to me about their experiences with microaffirmations as well as microaggressions. If any of you would like to share your memories with me, please feel free to do so. I always learn a great deal from the experiences and insights of others.

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