

Twenty-Five Years: Words of Reminiscence and Appreciation

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As I've noted in my previous June articles, this will be my last column until September. I want to express my gratitude for the many comments, questions, and insights provided by my readers. Your feedback is always welcome and has served as a resource for the topics I have selected for future articles.

I posted my first website article 25 years ago in 1999, I believe within a year of my website going on-line. At that time, the web was basically in its beginning stages and most of my mental health colleagues did not have a website. That situation was certainly to change!

My decision to launch a website was greatly influenced by my older son Rich who had founded a website development agency in 1997. His company, [flyte new media](#), is based in Portland, ME with clients throughout the U.S. and beyond. The company has grown considerably since those early years. Their expansion, including the increased number of staff they have, clients they serve, and services they offer as a “full service digital marketing and web design + development agency,” reflects the exponential growth of the internet since 1997 and how it has become an integral part of our lives.

Why a Website?

I remember when Rich first approached me about having a website. My initial thought was, “Why would I or anyone need a website?” (You can see what a great prognosticator I was!). Rich informed me of how important he thought the web would become in all walks of our lives. Since I wanted to support my son's first entrepreneurship venture, I agreed to his building the site. And as they say, “The rest is history.” Nowadays if a professional in solo practice or a business or organization does not have a website and is not on at least one social media platform, we question why not.

As a proud father I should add that flyte's impressive growth parallels Rich's engagement in many activities related to his role as President of the agency. He has his own podcast and has recorded approximately 540 episodes, he organizes an annual social media conference in Portland bringing in experts from around the country to speak, he appears regularly as the “tech guru” on the NBC-TV affiliate in Portland, and has published a book about digital marketing. He certainly understood the promises of the internet back in 1997, and I'm pleased he convinced me

to be a small part of that future. One additional point. My wife Marilyn, who is a mystery novel aficionado, has written a [weekly blog since 2010 in which she reviews a mystery book](#). The blog is handled by flyte. I guess we keep things in the family.

How Quickly 25 Years Go By!

As I was writing this article commemorating my 25th anniversary of posting monthly columns, I decided to glance at the titles of the approximately 250 columns I have written. In many ways the articles chronicled my journey as a psychologist, a journey in which I became increasingly focused on adopting a strength-based approach and articulating such concepts as stress and resilience, “islands of competence,” personal control, intrinsic motivation, leadership qualities, the emotional culture of organizations, and the need for our lives to be guided by purpose and meaning.

I thought about all of the changes in my personal life since authoring my first article. Marilyn and I have been blessed with the birth of four wonderful grandchildren, Maya, Teddy, Sophie, and Lyla and the addition to our family of Suzanne and Gigi. It has been a joy to observe our sons Rich and Doug as they became fathers and advanced in their careers. Although it is often perceived as a cliché, I marvel at how quickly the years have gone by. Maya graduated from college a few weeks ago. Sophie and Teddy are both in college and Lyla will be entering her senior year of high school. It seems like yesterday when I first held them!

Side by side with these happy events, [I have also experienced the passing of my twin brother Michael in 2013](#) to a rare disease, amyloidosis, and [the recent death of my brother Henry](#). Shortly after their passings, I devoted an article to each. I did so not only as an appreciation of their lives but also to share with my readers the ways in which their lives and deaths captured important lessons for all of us to reflect upon. In giving the eulogy at Michael’s funeral service, I observed that while I have written a great deal about stress, loss, and resilience, Michael exemplified how to maintain a resilient outlook and behaviors in the face of a devastating illness. In discussing Henry’s death, I highlighted the importance of having a “community of caring,” especially as we deal with loss.

In several writings I have observed how blessed I was to have the parents I did. I described my parents David and Eva and their journeys in life and the ways in which they always served as “charismatic adults” for me—providing support and encouragement. One such article for which I received many comments described my father [coming alone to America from Eastern](#)

[Europe](#) when he was 16 years old and my mother emigrating from Eastern Europe with her parents as a 15-year-old two years later. My father's father was killed in World War I. As the oldest son in the family, my father traveled to America at a time of notable uncertainty but with a sense of hope for a better life for himself and his family.

In addition to these family accounts, my 25 years of articles detailed events that had a major impact in the U.S. and/or worldwide. Two years after posting my first article in 1999, I sadly wrote about coping with the terrorist attacks of 9/11, sharing experiences from the death of my brother Irwin who was an Air Force officer when a terrorist (I'm not certain they were even called terrorists when Irwin was killed) placed a bomb on his cargo plane, killing him and all of the crew.

Natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina prompted me to share thoughts of ways to cope during such devastating times. I gained even more insights about the challenges of coping when I was invited by clergy to speak in New Orleans several months after Katrina. While there, I also gave presentations for mental health professionals, teachers, and parents and listened to harrowing accounts of loss, survival, and resilience. Viewing in person the destruction caused by Katrina on a city and the people of that city was an experience that will forever be seared in my memory.

In March, 2020 the pandemic arrived. Little could I or most others have predicted when Covid first emerged how long it would persist, how many people would become seriously ill or die around the globe, how disruptive it would prove to be in all areas of our lives. And little could we have anticipated the level of divisiveness and polarization that would erupt. Rather than Covid bringing people together against a "common" enemy, it opened up lesions between groups that were difficult to bridge—lesions magnified, sometimes encouraged, and rendered intractable by political and other leaders.

My interest in leadership qualities has been present for many years. This interest was heightened while observing the ways in which leaders handled the ramifications of Covid. I advocated that those in positions of leadership adopt the characteristics of a "servant leader," displaying empathy and kindness, inviting and respecting the viewpoints of others, recognizing their contributions, and having the courage to acknowledge mistakes they themselves have made as leaders and what they have learned from these setbacks. An effective leader is someone who is supportive and encouraging, never promoting fear or compliance but rather trust and respect.

Another favorite topic about which I have written centered on factors that contribute to a positive “emotional culture” in our work environments whether that be in schools, mental health organizations, hospitals, businesses, law firms, or other groups. I also emphasized that brief moments, often referred to as “micromoments,” could play a substantial role in determining whether the emotional culture is dominated by anger or fear or joy or compassion.

Three Fundamental Themes

Several fundamental themes that I highlighted in my early articles continued to find a prominent space in my recent columns. The following are three of the most prominent, all of which are essential components of the positive psychology approach I have adopted (I have included a link to an article I wrote about each):

[Positive relationships are an essential foundation for satisfaction, hope, and resilience in our lives.](#) I first highlighted this point more than 40 years ago as I began to review the emerging research about resilience. Segal’s notion of a “charismatic adult,” an adult from whom children “gather strength,” captured the impact of supportive relationships on your emotional and physical well-being. As I have observed, if we are to lead a resilient life, the significance and presence of charismatic adults does not end in childhood but rather we require such supportive people throughout our lifespan.

[An outlook of “personal control” is a critical ingredient of resilience and helps to avoid a “victim mentality.”](#) As a therapist and consultant, I frequently witnessed that a major obstacle to adopting a resilient lifestyle occurred when people focused their time and energy on situations over which they had little, if any, influence. It manifested in very interesting comments I’ve heard such as: “I would be a good teacher if I didn’t have such difficult students” or “I’d be in a good marriage if I wasn’t married to him” or “I was born with ADHD and that’s why I haven’t been able to be successful.” All of these statements may possess a kernel of truth, but if we’re basing our happiness on having someone else change first or lamenting that we were born with challenges such as ADHD, it’s difficult for us to move forward.

As psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl wrote in his remarkable book *Man’s Search for Meaning* (a book I always highly recommend and have probably read six or seven times), what we have more control over than we may realize is our attitude and response to situations. A major question I have frequently asked patients as a therapist and clients as a consultant is, “Do you have control/influence about changing this situation? If not, consider how

you can change your attitude and response to cope more effectively.” A seemingly straightforward message but not always easy to incorporate as part of one’s mindset and behavior.

Living with a sense of meaning and purpose, especially by enriching the lives of others, nourishes our resilience and well-being. Another burgeoning body of research demonstrates that when we are involved in what I have called “contributory” or “charitable” activities, these actions are beneficial not only to the recipients but also to the providers. Small gestures of compassion have been found to lessen one’s own stress. Based on my research and experience one of the interventions I always recommend that to help students become increasingly comfortable and motivated in schools we must provide them with an opportunity to make a positive difference in the school setting. A similar principle applies when individuals who have dealt successfully with adverse events use their experience to help others who are facing a similar challenge. As my colleague Sam Goldstein and I have posited in a number of our books, we believe there is an inborn need to help others, a need that requires opportunities to flourish.

In identifying these three themes as well as other prominent ones in my work, I always encourage people to consider how they might apply the lessons housed in these messages in their personal and professional lives. While it is not always easy to incorporate the information we have learned from studies of resilience in our everyday lives, if we can persist in doing so the results will be worth the struggles we have encountered.

Words of Appreciation

In this silver anniversary piece, I also want to express appreciation to several important people who have played a meaningful role in my life, some earlier than 1999. I have treasured my collaboration with friend and colleague Sam Goldstein. Given Sam’s incredible achievements in many areas beyond psychology, I have often told him that I believe he has been cloned since one person could never accomplish all that he has. We have co-authored and co-edited many books together, and I continue to benefit from his wisdom. I also wish to thank Glenn Wilkerson, David Richman, and David Crenshaw for joining with me during the past 25 years in writing/editing other books, including two geared for financial/business advisors and the other about mortality and living a meaningful life.

Marilyn and I have been blessed to have many dear friends who have been sources of strength for us. I especially want to note two couples, Kal and Ellen Heller and Ethan and Brenda

Pollack. I have known Kal and Ethan, who are also clinical psychologists, for more than 55 years. Our families have shared good times and challenging times. We have traveled and vacationed together and celebrated New Year's Eve and other occasions for many years. And I must note, our friendships have endured even though Kal and Ethan are New York Yankee fans; as many of my readers know I am a passionate Red Sox fan, even writing about the psychological impact of their [World Series victory in 2004 that broke an 86-year-old curse](#). We sometimes have to overlook the faults of even close friends.

In bringing up sports, how can I end this article without mentioning the Boston Celtics and their very recent championship. As many sportscasters and sportswriters have noted, the Celtics came to embody a "selfless" team, with star players willing to forgo individual statistics to win as a team. They were a pleasure to watch the entire season, and the victory parade through the streets of Boston on the well-known duck boats was very impressive. We in Boston and the New England area have witnessed 13 such parades for the four major sports teams in the past 22 years! This was the first for the Celtics in 16 years, and fans were getting impatient. Some outside of New England have voiced the opinion that perhaps fans in this area have gotten "spoiled" and expect too much from their teams. Perhaps, but how sweet it is when your favorite team wins a championship. It brings an entire city and region together as was evidenced by the more than one million people who attended this past Friday's parade.

I hope that during the next couple of months, you have an opportunity for relaxation and engagement in activities that nurture your emotional and physical well-being.

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