

Generativity: Helping Others and Ourselves to Thrive

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

Last month I wrote about forgiveness, sharing my experiences with Sam and Betty, neighbors from my childhood who were Holocaust survivors. In addition, I cited a chapter from the book *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* written by Dr. Stephen Post and Jill Neimark. Before proceeding I wish to correct a detail. I noted that Post was Professor of Bioethics and Family Medicine in the School of Medicine at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. I was informed by one of my readers that Post recently assumed the position of Director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care, and Bioethics at Stony Brook University in New York.

Each chapter of Post and Neimark's book is devoted to an attribute that contributes to a sense of happiness and physical and emotional well-being. In my November article I drew from their chapter "The Way of Forgiveness: Set Yourself Free" and described the journey of Samuel Oliner whose entire family was exterminated by the Nazis. As a child he narrowly escaped the same fate, but was haunted well into his adult life by these atrocities from his childhood. He came to the United States and earned a doctorate in Sociology but remained by his own accounts an angry man beset by nightmares. At the age of 48 he was finally able to relinquish his anger and bitterness when he began to conduct research about non-Jews who risked their lives to save and shelter Jews, some of whom were strangers to them. Oliner reflects, "The project made me feel much better. I'm grateful for the people who cared. It's because of these people that I'm here."

I received many poignant, thought-provoking e-mails in response to the article, several authored by the children of Holocaust survivors. I was appreciative of readers sharing their thoughts and feelings about such an important topic with me. The response prompted me to devote this month's article to another chapter in Post and Neimark's book, one about which I have written extensively, but which I believe deserves ongoing attention, namely, the psychological and physical benefits of giving or contributing to the well-being of others. While this theme transcends all seasons, some might contend that it

holds special meaning during this holiday season, especially to counter the commercialism that often dominates this time of year.

A Lesson Learned in 1973

Perhaps the most challenging position I have held in my professional career occurred 35 years ago when I assumed the role of principal of the school in a locked door unit of the child and adolescent program at McLean Hospital, a private psychiatric hospital. Although McLean is one of the oldest psychiatric hospitals in the country, having been founded in 1811, services for children and young adolescents were first introduced in 1973. As I have noted in many of my workshops, the initial months as head of this school were very stressful, prompting feelings of doubt and burnout. In reflecting upon that period of my life, I think that at times I became as angry as the angriest youth attending the school, perhaps feeling as helpless as they did. I also discovered that the more out-of-control the students became, the more controlling and punitive the staff became. These inpatient youth responded to our misguided disciplinary techniques not by cooperation or compliance but rather with a greater resolve to disobey.

I will never forget the day when one student, who continuously found his way to the “quiet room,” defiantly said to me, “You don’t get it, do you Dr. Brooks?”

“Get what?” I responded.

“We are going to outlast you.”

Comments such as these prompted the realization that if we continued to use the same punitive measures, we would actually continue to encourage the behaviors we wished to stop. By necessity we began to make changes, adopting a more strength-based approach in which we initiated strategies that at the time I was unaware were to become the roots of my interest in nurturing hope and resilience in youth. This is another example of “connecting the dots backwards” (please see my October, 2008 website article for an explanation of this concept).

There were a number of strategies we introduced. Given the focus of this article, I want to highlight one that was especially effective. I began to ask students to assist the staff, specifically using comments such as, “We need your help.” For example, to counter an ongoing problem with vandalism, we requested students to join staff as members of a “space committee” whose responsibility it was to notify me of any graffiti

or damage and offer suggestions for a cleaner physical plant. While initially a few staff questioned whether the inclusion of students on the “space committee” would lead to more vandalism—for instance, one predicted, “The kids will do more damage so they can make a longer list of repairs”—this did not turn out to be the case. Vandalism was reduced significantly. One student said to me, reflecting an increased sense of ownership and responsibility, “It’s our space and we have to help keep it clean.”

I was to discover that enlisting children to help others was a more effective disciplinary technique than placing them in quiet rooms, especially if one kept in mind that the word discipline represents a teaching process. Several years later, the renowned British psychiatrist, Dr. Michael Rutter, in a review of effective schools, noted in his book *Fifteen Thousand Hours* that engaging students in contributing in some manner to their schools was associated with improved academic performance and behavior.

Indelible Memories of School

The positive impact of what I was to eventually label “contributory activities” received further validation when I was preparing material for my book *The Self-Esteem Teacher*. I requested approximately 1,500 adults to complete an anonymous questionnaire. The first question asked them to report on a positive memory of school when they were students, something an educator said or did that boosted their self-esteem and motivation. The next question asked for a negative memory of school. My intent in posing these questions was twofold: one, were there certain prominent, indelible themes that emerged, and two, did we use our own experiences of school when we were students to guide what we did with our students today?

I was not expecting the theme that emerged most frequently in response to the first question. The most cited positive memories pertained to being asked to help out in some fashion. The following are a few examples:

“I remember when a teacher asked me to pass out the milk and straws.”

“I felt so good when a teacher asked me to tutor a younger child.”

“I remember when a teacher told me I was a good artist and asked me to draw some signs as part of an anti-litter campaign.”

When I share these memories at my workshops for educators, many smile and nod in agreement, recalling their own experiences.

Resilience through the Lifespan

In my writings about resilience with my close friend and colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein, we advanced the notion in *Raising Resilient Children* that there appears to be an inborn wish in children to help. We observed that preschool children will eagerly approach their parents while mowing the lawn and ask if they can help. They want to help us cook, take care of younger siblings, rake leaves, build things with our tools, and sweep the kitchen.

However, the positive impact of benefiting others is not restricted to children. In gathering information for our book about resilience in adults, *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*, we were to become familiar with research indicating that elderly people who were involved in contributory activities were more likely to lead longer lives even when controlling for other factors such as diet or smoking. The therapeutic outcome of bettering the lives of others was stronger than I had anticipated when I first subscribed to a strength-based approach.

Generativity

Post and Neimark add further support to the main premise of this article in their chapter “The Way of Generativity: Help Others Grow.” In defining generativity they quote the words of psychiatrist Dr. George Valliant who observes, “Winter comes to every one of us sooner or later. And every spring, just like clockwork, the garden is reborn. By the time we die, the real question is, ‘What have we done to leave our garden better prepared for spring—someone else’s spring?’”

Post and Neimark expand, “In essence, generativity is the act of preparing another’s garden for spring. It’s power in the service of love. It’s an act of giving that enables another person to manifest his or her own strengths and gifts through love. . . . Generativity protects our mental and physical health across an entire lifespan. When we nurture others, we nurture ourselves.”

They then quote one of my favorite books, *Man’s Search for Meaning* by psychiatrist Dr. Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor. Frankl, reflecting on his experiences in the concentration camps that took the lives of family and friends, including his wife, writes, “Being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more

one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself.”

Many research findings are offered by Post and Neimark to support the power of generativity. I would like to share a few. In doing so my intention is to prompt us to reflect upon our own lives and the extent to which we are involved in acts of generativity and steps we might take to increase this involvement.

These authors cite several studies demonstrating that the condition of those with serious physical illnesses can be ameliorated when they help others afflicted by the same illness. For instance, behavioral scientist Carolyn Schwartz recruited patients with multiple sclerosis who were offered either eight weekly meetings in which they were taught coping strategies or monthly phone calls in which someone else with MS listened and gave them support.

The unexpected finding in Schwartz’s study concerned the “five MS sufferers who were trained to offer compassionate listening and support over the phone. Those five MS sufferers felt a dramatic change in how they viewed themselves and life. Depression, self-confidence, and self-esteem improved markedly among those givers.” Schwartz concludes, “These people had undergone a spiritual transformation that gave them a refreshed view of who they were.”

Gale Ironson of the University of Miami conducted research with 79 long-term survivors of AIDS. These were individuals “who had survived more than twice as long as expected after getting their first serious AIDS symptoms. The survivor group was significantly more likely to have volunteered—especially in helping others with HIV.” This group was also noted to suffer less depression and anxiety.

In a second study Ironson followed 177 individuals with a diagnosis of HIV who had never experienced symptoms of AIDS. “Ironson monitored their viral loads and immune function along with their emotional and physical well-being. Helping care for others and scoring high on measures of altruism significantly slowed increases in their viral loads over the next two years.”

In examining her findings, Ironson notes, “Altruism is such a potentially powerful positive force that considerable effort should be directed at understanding it better.”

Commenting on the work of Schwartz and Ironson, Post and Neimark offer a perceptive conclusion. “These studies are small but extremely important, because they help answer the perennial question: which came first, the generosity or the well-being? Here we have people who were critically ill, and yet giving bolstered their emotional and physical well-being. This is a very provocative finding.”

The beneficial effects of generativity extend into our elderly years, a point I advanced earlier in this article. For instance, Post and Neimark report research undertaken by Stephanie Brown at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research. She studied 423 elderly couples for five years and found that “those who reported helping others—even if it was just giving emotional support to a spouse—were only about half as likely to die as those who did not. And giving emotional support to one’s spouse, on its own, reduced the risk of dying by 30 percent.” Post and Neimark do caution that excessive amounts of helping others and volunteering can heighten the risk of mortality and thus, these activities should be undertaken with realistic moderation.

Some Final Thoughts

In our book *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*, Sam Goldstein and I advocate that we live life in concert with our values. My hope is that we assume as one of our most prominent values enriching the lives of others, which we have learned from the research reported in this article also enhances our own well-being. I also hope that this value is passed on to our children, not simply through our words but by their joining us in contributory activities. As Charles Dickens asserts, “No man is useless in this world who lightens the burden of anyone else.”

My best wishes for a happy and satisfying holiday season. Let it be a time in which we find opportunities to practice generativity and in the process add meaning and purpose to our own lives.