

A story of self-discovery empowering readers to change behaviors.

**Stepping Out of the Bubble: Reflections on the
Pilgrimage of Counseling Therapy**

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VII. REFLECTIONS ON KIDS AND PARENTING

Facing reality is sometimes very difficult. For teenagers it is highly troublesome. Kids are faced with a multitude of problems, such as coping with parents, dealing with age-mates, stressors at school, and dealing with various temptations. Youngsters have a variety of techniques for soothing their psychic pain without actually leaving the bubble. Self-cutting is one of the methods that some teens use to ward off emotional pain. They tell me that self-cutting actually temporarily blocks painful emotional issues. It serves as a misguided means of displacing troublesome emotions. In my opinion, most self-cutting is a result of thwarted anger. Youngsters who can't or are not permitted to express their feelings at home may use this technique as a part of their arsenal. Self-cutting numbs the pain for a brief period of time, but long-range frustration and resentment remains.

By teaching teens to project their anger outward rather than inward, the cycle can be broken. Teens also use various drugs, including alcohol, as a way of coping with psychological pain. The use of alcohol, marijuana, stimulants, muscle relaxants, and cough suppressants are popular substances. All of these substances are designed to provide the teen with a way to avoid life's struggles. These stimulants and depressants act as immediate gratifiers for pain. Drugs work on the "pleasure" center of the brain and blunt emotional trauma.

This fact makes self-medicating appealing to many, including youngsters.

I counseled a young girl who had a troublesome addiction. She was a charming teenager. She and I had an affinity right away and we quickly developed a positive counseling connection. But this young lady had a major problem. She was addicted to stimulant medication. In large doses she would experience hallucinogenic effects, become extremely disoriented, and stay awake for many nights. When she came to see me, she had already been hospitalized several times for this addiction. She attended Narcotics Anonymous for her addiction and had a personal sponsor.

During our sessions, she would make reference to the fact that her friends did not understand her addiction. As we progressed in our process, I was able to get a sense of the emptiness and fear that was behind her addiction. She was afraid of both success and failure. She tried to hold down a job but would end up sabotaging it. She tried to attend college classes, but would drop out due to a lack of motivation and a fear of failure. She would start the classes that were below her level of performance, and end up dropping out before the end of the semester making excuse for her inability to complete the courses. Then she would get into self-blame, ruminate and start the cycle of addictive behavior once again.

She could not grasp a vision of completing school and moving on into the workforce. She viewed her condition as hopeless although

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we discussed ways of building success, setting appropriate goals, self-affirmation, watching for triggers for using, and relapse-prevention strategies. She relapsed and ended up in an inpatient treatment center. I went to visit her and she seemed to appreciate the gesture. She was eventually released and returned to live with her parents. She came back to counseling and when she did she began opening up about her family. She perceived her older sister as a tyrant who continuously upset things at home. This was a pattern throughout childhood.

She began to withdraw from responsibilities at school and part-time work. She decided to move out of her parent's home and moved in with a girlfriend who had leased an apartment. We talked at length about the pitfalls of making this change. The girlfriend was a substance abuser and this scenario was not good. She did not do well with unstructured time and I saw this change as troublesome. But my client made the move anyway and I did not hear from her for several weeks.

Finally, I received a letter from her parents. The parents shared with great sadness how their daughter had died of heart failure due to complications from the drugs. Every imaginable thought raced through my mind. "What could I have done differently? How could such a pleasant young lady take her life?" I thought a great deal about how I would have felt if this young lady was my own daughter. I felt that I had done everything I could have done to assist her in dealing with her addiction. Fortunately, the parents felt the same way and never faulted me for my efforts.

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Addictions can be nasty. And this one was disastrous. This young woman went back into the bubble for the final time. She couldn't muster the courage to face life the way it was. For whatever reason, life was too difficult for her. She couldn't handle the responsibility that was connected with every day living. She had learned to cop out when things got tough. Her fear had tripped her up and she had succumbed to it. I grieved the fact that she would never step out of the bubble and be the young woman that I envisioned her to be. There are many similar situations happening with kids every day and it is so sad because they have let themselves down, as well as the families and friends that will grieve their loss.

School Performance and Family Systems Issues

It is not uncommon for teenagers to use poor performance in school as a payback for unexpressed anger directed toward a parent. Several years ago I was seeing a teenager who was very bright. She was also failing numerous courses in middle school. Her parents brought her to counseling in the hopes that I could motivate her to try harder in school. After meeting with the parents, it became apparent that the mother and father were overfunctioning on behalf of this child. They would lecture, plead, contact the school, and set consequences trying to change the pattern of school failure. The child's father was away from home a great deal due to work, and when this dad was home he would lecture his daughter about the value of school.

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Many times family systems problems are at the core of a teenager's difficulties. The child's behavior may be a metaphor for what is happening in the family. Parents may try too hard and paradoxically end up creating a power-struggle that promotes a major roadblock to academic success. This child mentioned above was angry with her father. When I approached her about using her grades as a wedge against her father, she admitted that she might be paying her father back. Her perception was that her father didn't care about her, and that her dad was more interested in performance than developing a relationship. Through the use of a systems approach, I was able to get the father to open up communications, and stop his negative approach.

A systems approach involves viewing family problems as a whole, rather than looking at each separate family member's difficulties in isolation. His daughter began to soften and connect more appropriately at home. Academic performance began to improve once this child felt affirmed by her father. Once she made the connection between her resentment toward her father and her academic performance, she was able to address her anger toward her father in more understandable and appropriate ways and reconnect with her dad. She took responsibility for her problem. She permitted that which was unconscious to be open to awareness. That is what is involved in stepping outside the bubble.

Children's Mentors

It's pretty clear that family of origin issues affects one's current behavior. Some of us were born into the wrong family. In such cases we need to create a new sense of family. Maybe when some of us were youngsters we had mentors along the way who acted as parental figures for us when we needed their support. Many of my patients talk about the mentors who affirmed them throughout their childhood. I remember when I was a child that I had a friend whose family would take me with them on a weeklong vacation to a camp in Michigan. To this day I can remember the excitement and anticipation of this summer event. Adults and children who really cared surrounded me. I still have special memories of the family who included me in their vacation plans to a weeklong retreat. I remember spending a great deal of time at this friend's house. On the weekends, his mother would provide us lunch before we set out to play. His parents were always supportive and encouraging in their communications with me.

My brother had a special adult friend. He was one those adults who was always upbeat. He always put a positive spin on things. He helped my brother get a job during the summers and provided immeasurable nurturance and advice. He was caring, compassionate, and a great life coach. My brother will never forget the impact that this man had on his life. His friend recently died of cancer, but my brother had an opportunity to talk with him days before he passed away. He was upbeat until his last breath. He provided my brother with support,

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guidance, and direction for his future. He showed my brother how to handle new tasks, helped him cope with his anger, and was an exceptional listener and coach.

The Effect of Childhood Patterns

Family-of-origin issues can and do affect current behavior. My clients typically gloss over or dismiss core issues of their history that impact current behavior. The most significant aspects of counseling are often mentioned within the last five minutes of a counseling session. It is not unusual for a client to mention a significant issue prior to leaving my office. When core issues are mentioned at the end of a session, they are often done in a nonchalant manner. When this pattern occurs, there is generally little emotion presented by the client, and the client appears to see no relationship between such casual remarks and the nature of their current problems.

Clients have a tendency to talk *about* their feelings rather than *feel* their feelings. This is like the difference between talking about walking and actually performing the task. Experiencing one's feelings and sharing them with others creates a sense of vulnerability. Many clients, particularly men, are hesitant to experience a sense of vulnerability. Many clients have been the victims of their parents underlying assumption that "children are to be seen, not heard." Children's needs to thwart their feelings are behind a myriad of emotional disorders. Learning to feel is like learning to ride a bicycle;

it takes time to master. I assist clients in cultivating feelings by probing sensitive issues, suggesting that they journal their feelings, requesting that they write about early childhood recollections, and writing letters to loved ones without delivering them.

Many children exhibit a pattern of projecting their pain. Instead of owning their feelings of shame, hurt, rejection, and anger they tend to make others responsible for what they are feeling. Unfortunately, those who are closest to those who project their emotions suffer the most. Those who we are most intimate with are the brave souls who put up with the projected baggage. With family, we feel safe enough to abuse them.

I used to see a teen whose father was highly intimidating. Often people who have fathers who are powerful and controlling tend to idealize the parent. In this case the teenager did just that. Her father could do no wrong. Meanwhile, she was projecting all the thwarted anger and rage toward her mother. It didn't matter what the father did, he was always right. It didn't matter what the mother did, she was always wrong.

One day, this girl went over the edge with her anger and rage and needed to be hospitalized. When she came out of in-patient treatment she met with me and an interesting shift had occurred. For the first time, the teen began experiencing negative feelings about her father. She expressed all the resentment she had felt for him. Following the individual session, we had a family session in which we

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focused on projected feelings. We discussed the safety net that the teen experienced in sharing her feelings with her mother. God forbid that she should ever challenge her father's opinions or style of parenting. He would have put her down in such a way that it would have been impossible to respond constructively. Healing began to occur when she realized that her rage toward her father was being directed toward her mother. She needed to find another way to manage her frustration and anger. I suggested journaling, using a punching bag, exercising, and meditation.

The Parenting Process

Parents many times deal with their kids the way they were disciplined. This may involve some archaic notions about parenting that no longer work in today's world with children. It is not unusual for adults to tend to believe that parenting primarily involves the use of power and control. In William Glasser's book, *The Identity Society*, he makes the point that the nature of parenting has changed over the last several decades.

Authority figures are no longer respected by virtue of the role they play. Teenagers are no longer compliant merely because their parents bark out orders. Glasser is very pragmatic about this issue. It's not a matter of what's right or wrong with reference to the values of parenting, it's what works. Typically, using control tactics no longer works with kids. Many teachers have a problem grasping this concept.

They believe they can coerce kids into doing schoolwork. It usually doesn't impact the child. Parents try to act authoritarian around their children and it backfires. Discipline is about role modeling respect, being firm, setting appropriate limits, and establishing consequences.

The most important step to discipline is creating a positive relationship with a child. Next, one must educate and coach kids on what you want them to do. Developing autonomy within your children involves coaching and educating them to take responsibility for themselves. Respect must be modeled for one's children, whether you like it or not. That's the way things are within our current cultural setting. You can complain about it, say it's not fair, but it's the reality. Life is a lot more fun when your children like you and respect you. Most children will do most anything for parents they respect. I realize that there are exceptions, and in those cases parents need not feel guilty for bad parenting. Some kids make poor choices regardless of how connected we are to them.

For parents, stepping out of the bubble may mean viewing the parenting process from a different perspective. It may mean giving up the image of parenting that was established during their childhood. Sometimes clients will internalize the image of parenting that was handed down to them even if that perception was intolerable. Sometimes caretaking of our kids involves doing the opposite of what was done to us. We need to get in touch with the kid within us. We need to remember what it was like to play and have fun. If our

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childhood wasn't fun, then we need to do some grief work and vow to make things different with our own children. If our inner parent is critical, we will most likely have unrealistic expectations for our children. We need to listen to the inner critic and let it speak. We may hear tones of the tyranny of the "shoulds." The inner critic or parent is full of moral injunctions. It is the judge and jury of our behavior. Combine that subpersonality with the pusher driver part of us and you have a toxic combination. The pusher driver is the inner part of us that says, "What you are doing is not good enough. You must always try harder." Parents need to get in touch with the inner critic and the pusher driver and identify with their contents and then detach. Parents will want to rationally respond to these subpersonalities with more reasonable ways of viewing specific issues. For example, the parent may want to respond with, "Ok, is it always necessary to do my best? Why can't I give myself permission to slack at times?" This process of rational responding will assist in clearing up the "muddy water" when it comes to coaching and advising our own children.

Children are not usually amenable to being lectured, being given moral injunctions, or being coerced into handling responsibilities. The critical issue with parenting is creating a sense of involvement. In this era, a parent must have established a positive relationship with a child before being able to promote understanding about what responsibilities that child must accomplish. A style of relating based on mutual respect, encouragement and coaching is essential. Parents

need to listen to their children, and give them feedback with respect to different ways of viewing problems and issues.

Many times with my own children, I would use newspaper articles as teaching tools. For example, if some celebrity had died as a result of a drug overdose, I would hand them an article, ask them to read it and talk about their feelings regarding the situation. It is critical with children that as a parent you allow them to make value judgments about issues and problems. In a non-threatening manner, a parent can put a child in a position to make important value judgments. The key words are, "What would you do about this?" Or, "What do you plan on doing about this?" I call this "boxing the child in." When we, as parents, do the work of making value judgments for kids, they invariably dismiss our judgments. If we ask them what their plan is for handling a problem, we put the responsibility back on the children.

A number of years ago when I was working in the schools as a guidance counselor, I facilitated a parent-teacher conference for a passive teenager. During the conference, the teachers, one by one, were elaborating on the lack of motivation of this student. The student sat quietly at the conference while the parent feverishly took notes on missing assignments. This process continued until I finally interrupted. I responded to the parent, "Mrs. Jones, who's doing the work at this conference, you or your child?" She became rather embarrassed and got my point. I slid my clipboard down the conference table and

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requested that the child begin taking the notes on what was missing in his academic work.

Children need structure and parents need to provide it. It's amazing to me the number of parents who give their kids an allowance without demanding anything in return. I always suggest that parents set up a behavior chart providing their children with responsibilities. I have them put a monetary value on each daily item on the chart.

At first, I suggest that the chart be rather short. I have the parents and child focus on four or five areas that need improvement. Each night after dinner I suggest that the parents review the chart with the child. Areas accomplished successfully should be checked off on the chart or rewarded with tokens. At the end of the week, assuming the child has accomplished some tasks, he will get his allowance based on items completed. If the child saves his money, a ten percent monetary bonus may be given. If a child displays negative behavior such as prolonged temper tantrums, disrespect toward others and displays fits of anger, negative consequences are established. For negative consequences, focus on items that your child values the most and take them away for a reasonable amount of time. Negative consequences can be most effective as an immediate consequence for removal of privileges regarding serious behavioral infractions.

It is important as a parent that you are consistent in administering any behavioral consequence system. If you can't be consistent, then don't implement that system. It is also important that

you use the behavioral consequence system as a way of removing yourself from power struggles with your kids. Parents make a major mistake in overexplaining themselves to their children. If you have a rule or consequence, it needs to be enforced, not justified.

Parents who justify their parenting weaken their role because they believe that their children will disapprove of them if they assert themselves. Approval has nothing to do with parenting. Children do not respect their parents if they do not set appropriate boundaries for their conduct. Providing behavioral structure for your children is a combination of building respect, establishing rules for behavior and developing responsibility in children.

As parents, we need to work on setting priorities with our children. We need to ask, "What are the important values that I want to stress and instill in my children?" Make sure that you major in the majors, not the minors. If you focus on minor behavioral infractions, there is a tendency to create conflict and power struggles with your children. In focusing on the behavioral minutiae, you and your child may lose sight of the significant values that you want to instill in your child. Your priorities for your child's character and responsibilities should be on tasks such as serving others, treating others with respect, doing volunteer work, making amends for mistakes, and contributing to the household by doing chores.

When I worked in the schools as a guidance counselor, I once had an exemplary student who needed a recommendation for college. I

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asked her to provide me with a worksheet or resume of her distinctions so that I could write a quality recommendation. In her worksheet, she told the story about how she would go to the landfill with her grandmother, look for broken dolls, take them home and repair them. Then she would deliver them to the children at a nearby orphanage. This is what I mean by encouraging children to cultivate worthwhile values and priorities.

As a parent, don't get overly caught up in fashion design, hair color, and types of music played by your children. Obviously, there are school dress codes and they need to be honored by your children. You may need to set household boundaries on the playing of loud music, but don't prohibit that outlet. Focusing on these issues can create unnecessary battles that go nowhere. If you continue to battle over less significant issues you create the conditions for bigger power struggles and resentment to emerge. Setting limits and holding children responsible is a delicate balance, but it's important to keep the lines of communications open with your children.

Parents need to communicate effectively their wishes and desires for their children. Children don't respond well to parents who holler, scream and reprimand in a scolding voice. In fact, as tempting as this behavior may be, you can bet that your child is tuning you out. You may also be creating an oppositional child through your well-intentioned, though ineffective means of parenting. Using positive reinforcement when your child gets things right, or using

encouragement helps promote involvement. Maintaining consistent consequences, both positive and negative, are more effective than trying to coerce your child to do something for you.

Asking children to make value judgments about the choices they make is more effective than moralizing or pontificating about the right way to do things. If a child brings home a poor grade from school, resist the urge to lecture on the value of education. Ask your child, "Is what you're doing in this class good enough for you? How do you feel about this evaluation from the teacher? What steps can you take to improve your performance? What steps can you take to improve your behavior?"

Teach your child to take responsibility for his behavior. Do not accept excuses, such as "I hate this teacher, or I forgot to do some assignments." State your disappointment in what has happened and ask your child what he plans on doing to improve the matter. Box him in by making him accountable for coming up with a reasonable plan for improvement. Get it in writing if you wish, or with a handshake, but get a commitment for improved behavior. Never let your child off the hook. Make your child explain how he will change things for the better. Be calm, somewhat detached and persistent. Fostering involvement with your children which helps promote respect, setting character-building goals and priorities, and holding your children accountable for improved performance are essential characteristics of quality parenting.

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The Identified Patient Syndrome

Sometimes in working with children I run into what I call the identified patient syndrome. The parents may bring a child to me with the underlying notion that fixing their child will stabilize the family. They want no responsibility in the counseling process for sharing information vital to the healing of the entire family system. I have has some parents drop their children off at the clinic door and pick them up afterward. This is not an acceptable treatment plan for me. In talking with the child, I sometimes get a picture that his problem is a metaphor for what is happening within the family. The child may be purposefully acting out as a way of drawing attention to family issues, or may be the victim of problems in the family outside the child's sphere of influence.

Typically, in such cases, the child may represent the most functional person in the family. Without hesitation I try to draw the parents into counseling, but they may be hesitant and attempt to focus attention back on their child as the source of the difficulty. So I work with the child and try the best I can to help them cope with a bad situation at home. I enjoy working with these children because they generally are insightful enough to have a solid grasp on issues at home that are perpetuating problems. What they need from me is a clearer understanding of how the home environment influences one's behavior and how I can help them to function within the dynamics at home.

The Art of Parenting

Parenting is an art. There are no manuals to give one the answers. Sometimes we learn through trial and error. The key for parents is refusing to do the same things repeatedly that don't work. If you are parenting in a way that is not getting results, try a different approach. Remember that mistakes are a necessary function of change. The goal of parenting is to help your children develop a sense of autonomy. Teaching them to be self-directed and responsible means that one must learn not to underfunction or overfunction as a parent. Underfunctioning or being an absent parent leaves a child feeling alone and without support. Many children have had absent fathers or mothers and this unfortunate pattern has left emotional scars. The lack of encouragement, nurturing, and affirmation has an impact on current behavior.

Many parents overfunction. They get overly involved in every aspect of their child's life. They may vicariously live their lives through their children. They speak for their children, think for their children, and act for their children. I always tell my parents, "Never do for a child what he can do for himself." Children learn to manipulate overfunctioning parents to get what they want. Since overfunctioning parents fear the disapproval of their children, they cater and give in to their wants and needs even if they are unreasonable requests. Fritz Perls, Gestalt therapist used to remark, "Kids need to be appropriately frustrated." What he meant was that overparenting creates an

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environment whereby children do not learn the skills necessary for self-regulation. Sometimes we need to let our kids figure things out without interference.

Teaching Children Civility

Have you ever had someone cut in front of you in line? How about letting the door slam on you when you are entering a restaurant? What about children screaming in a store because they want something they can't have? Or parents leaving their grocery cart in a parking lane rather than returning it to the cart return? These are obvious examples of incivility.

As parents, we focus a significant deal of attention with our children on school work and social activities. We spend far less time teaching, coaching, and encouraging our children to be sensitive, caring and concerned about the needs of others. We need to teach our children to be supportive of others, regardless of one's socio-economic status, behavioral idiosyncrasies or learning deficits. Many children feel the need to elevate themselves by taunting other kids who do not meet their social standards as friends. Hurtful bullying, teasing and gossiping may become a pattern for children who lack the skills of civility.

The most important skills we can teach our children are how to respect, value and support other children, especially those who are different from their lifestyle, cultural or religious background, social

characteristics, or learning style. Our children need to learn from us to be inclusive in their social relationships, not exclusive.

Recently, I realized why the notion of civility was so important to me. One day when I was a teenager, my father invited me to attend work with him. I knew that he was a metallurgical engineer, but I had very little concept about the nature of his job. From my visit to my father's manufacturing plant, one memory still lingers about the trip. My father was a champion for the underdog. Although he was an executive manager, he walked through the plant and was known by all of the die-casting workers. It didn't matter who they were or what their role was, each worker would greet my father warmly and my dad would respond by acknowledging every person by name. My father's civility left a lifelong impression which I tried to role model and teach to my own children.

Years later, I remember how pleased I was with one of my patients, when a school psychologist conveyed to me a story about this young man's involvement with a special needs student. During my patient's high school career, he was a very popular student. The psychologist, who had completed a psycho-educational assessment on the special needs student, recalls how my client walked this student to different classes and befriended him. The special needs student played soccer with my client and they spent a great deal of time building a friendship. My patient's parents and I were proud that he had learned the lesson of civility in his relationships.

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When children get off course in their road to civility, parents need to redirect them to be more kind, considerate and caring of all children. Specific civility concepts that parents can teach are:

- Teaching about multicultural tolerance and acceptance.
- Teaching children to care about others because it brings them meaning rather than expecting anything in return.
- Involving children in public service at a children's hospital.
- Teaching children to respect senior citizens by volunteering at independent living facilities.
- Teaching common courtesies, such as introducing oneself, shaking hands with others, and thanking people for doing kind gestures for them.
- Teaching children to share and play cooperatively with others.
- Teaching children to respect and assist those who are disabled or have learning limitations.
- Parents can demonstrate through word and action what civility means.

A friend of mine has a daughter who has just completed medical school. Getting into medical school was a highly competitive process. Although she had outstanding grades and very high entrance exam scores, the deciding factor in being accepted to medical school was not related to academics. She had served in the Peace Corp, and as any

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college recruiter will advise students, her global service in caring for people less fortunate was the deciding factor in her college admission.

Our world lacks a sense of civility. It is the responsibility of all of us in charge of children to make sure that the world of our children's future is more civil than the world we leave behind.

IX. REFLECTIONS ON THE GROWTH ZONE

There are many people who would rather stay in hiding than come out and play. These are the people who prefer to feel victimized by life. "If only" is their motto. "If only things were different." Things are never *different* from the way they are, they are always *just* the way they are. Unfortunately, reality cannot be manipulated to make it fit the way the victim wants it. Life is a continual process of grieving and letting go of losses. As we age, one must give up the illusion of adolescence, physical prowess, personal beauty, physical energy, a changing world, unmet dreams, and the temporal nature of life. But on the other side of our grief and loss are hope, love, companionship, lasting memories and playfulness. We really can recreate ourselves. We don't have to live in the "rear view mirror." We can't go back to the way things were anyway. It's over.

The Persistence of Moving On

Stepping out of the bubble means moving on, no matter what the circumstances. It means being a fighter, the kind of fighter that never gives up hope. We can envision in our minds what we want the future to hold. Then we must go out into the world and work to make it happen. Complete failure is not an option. Mistakes *are* an option. Learning from our mistakes and moving forward is productive. We need to understand that the world isn't going to change to

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accommodate our self-pity. Anything we get, we must pursue with diligence. This is what persistence is about. It is a wonderful character trait. Persistent people are continuously knocking on the door of change. They want things to be better for themselves and others. They refuse to give in to problems and difficulties that surround them. Persistence is the quality that keeps you going when you don't feel like trying anymore. You refuse to let obstacles stand in the way of successful living.

Successful Living

Many define successful living as having the right car, living in the right neighborhood, and having the right job. Success for many is defined by the amount of money one makes. Many of my clients have had all of these things and have watched them fade away in a moments notice. What sustains you when the American dream is no longer a reality? When you are no longer around, will you be known for your professional talent? How about your ability to make a lot of money? How about the way you look? We must think about the character traits we want to leave as our legacy.

Being a fully functioning individual is about being true to whom you are and letting things be the way they are. Many of us spend an inordinate amount of time trying to change our lives and reality to fit a preconceived notion that we have about life. We try to manipulate life as a way of functioning, avoiding any anguish that

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accompanies living in current awareness. By living in the rear view mirror, we cheat ourselves out of all that life has for us in the present and future. Live in the moment, let go of the past, and don't try to anticipate the future. Move into the future with the conviction that all will work out. Your convictions will bring positive energy into the future and will help you realize your dreams. Believe that everything is possible. Nothing is out of your range of success. Your perception of events determines the kind of thinking that you will create. Reframe negative thoughts and circumstances so that things will move in a positive direction for you.

Getting Life in Perspective

Several years ago I went for my usual hairstyle appointment. When I got there I realized that my hairstylist had double-booked my appointment. She was very late in getting to me and then she had me wait while she finished up with her other customer. I was seething. My train of thought was, "I pay this woman well. I always tip her generously, how could she do this to me?" I started thinking that she was greedy and selfish. Finally, after her other customer had left, I confronted her about my concern. She indicated that her mother had suffered a stroke and that she needed to leave town on an emergency basis to visit her. She was sorry for the need to crunch her schedule. Needless to say, I felt like a louse. Here I was, agitating about a haircut, while this woman was frightened for her mother and couldn't

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wait to get to her hospital room. Life is all about the way we frame things. It is about getting issues in perspective. If we attempt to see events and circumstances in a positive light, we will feel lighter and will cope with stress more effectively.

Many of us get caught up in the small stuff. Richard Carlson has written several books that deal with the issue of examining our perception of events. Most of the issues in life that we agitate about are not worth the energy. At my office, I was having trouble parking in our behavioral health office area. Since it is a new complex and work was continuing on other buildings, two flatbed trucks were blocking my ability to find a parking spot. I finally parked in an undercover area reserved for one of our practice administrators. The secretarial staff encouraged me to move my car as soon as possible because the assigned person was infuriated. I immediately left my office and noticed that the flatbed trucks had left and I moved my car. At the end of the day she confronted me over the parking issue. She was incensed. I mentioned how I had just received a phone call from my prior practice. One of my former colleagues had gone in for a physical and they had found a cancerous tumor. When I mentioned this story to her, she failed to understand my point. My point....life is too short to major in the minors.

Healing the Dark Side

What stays in the bubble and is avoided will ultimately rear its ugly head and make itself known to the world. We cannot deny the darkness of our history. Without the healing of the darkness within, it will reemerge as a weapon of destruction in our personal and professional life.

There is a time in everyone's life when a choice must be made. Will I carry on the legacy of the past by avoiding the wounds associated with my history, or will I courageously face the pain of my history and reexamine it? If we can reexamine our past, we can then move forward in a new direction. We can recreate ourselves and make our life more meaningful. The mystery is, why do some choose to step out of the bubble while others do not? The truth is that many who do choose the path of courageous living recognize that we are ultimately responsible for our own direction and feel an urgency to change.

However, it is very easy to give up trying to improve our condition. It is so easy to avoid reality. Since many of us are rather lazy, it becomes our way of coping with reality. It becomes comfortable to remain emotionally stagnant. But, if we play out the martyr role, we may falsely cling to the notion that others will solve our problems for us. Many of us, on some level, believe that someone or something is magically going to rescue us from our problems. We keep waiting and hoping that this will happen as our lives run their course.

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Giving oneself permission is the way to find the passage toward adulthood. Recognizing that there is no one to rescue us but ourselves is the key. On some level, most of us hold onto the illusion that our parents, whether dead or alive, will bail us out of our unhappiness. As Mildred Newman and Bernard Berkowitz profoundly proclaim in their book, *How to Be Your Own Best Friend*, we must emotionally let go of our parents. We must let them go and transcend them in how we conduct our lives. As psychotherapist author Sheldon B. Kopp says, we must be an "on-your-own, take-care-of-yourself-cause-there-is-no-one-else-to-do-it-for-you-grownup." No one is going to come and rescue us. The permission lies within.

Giving oneself permission is the difference between living in a bubble and stepping out. We all have needs, wants, and aspirations. Sometimes these desires get put on hold because we are afraid of failure or afraid of what others might think. Many of us feel underutilized. We feel guilty for not realizing our potential. Appropriate guilt, the recognition that we have fallen short of our goals, is necessary if we are to change and grow. We have to be upset enough at our situation in order to change it. Many times people will say, "I'm sick of the way I behave, I've had it!" I remind them that they must get very tired of it before they will be willing to change the behavior. As reformed alcoholics sometimes say, "sometimes you've got to hit rock bottom."

The Urgency of Life

Life is too short. But the fear of passing time may give us an urgency about making things right. Such a feeling of urgency may create the conditions for changing the quality of our character and behavior. We don't have forever to redeem what remains lost. We must make amends with those we have offended, heal our relationships with those we care about, and move on. This is what fully functioning people do. They don't wait, they don't procrastinate, but they act. It was Roberto Assagioli, the great Italian physician and psychiatrist who wrote the book, *The Act of the Will*. The entire book is based on the assumption that people can learn to mobilize, to act.

When I worked in education as a guidance counselor, I would invariably meet with a child who would respond to a request that I had made by saying, "I'll try to do it!" To demonstrate to the student the impact of trying, I would say to him, "Try to get out of the chair you are sitting in." The child would look at me dumbfounded, and I can assure you that in thirty years of working with children not one ever stood up following my request. Next I would say, "Get up out of that chair!" No problem, every student would stand up immediately. Trying is another word for excuse making. People don't try to change; they commit themselves to doing it. It is only when one gives up the illusion of trying and makes a serious effort to alter one's behavior that real change emerges.

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The Paradigm Shift

Changing one's lifestyle calls for a paradigm shift. Many of you may remember William Deming. William Deming had a theory of management (lead management) and went to the big three U.S. automakers with a plan for changing their manner of doing business. Rather than maintain a hierarchal system of management, he developed a system that gave workers a vested interest in what they were producing. His theory of management called for collaboration, team-building, managerial coaching by example, and positive encouragement and reinforcement of employees. He felt that a shift in the management style would give the American automakers a needed edge in dealing with foreign competition from Europe and Japan. The CEO's of the American automakers couldn't catch a vision of his management style. They refused to listen.

With that in mind, he took his theory to the competitors. Our automotive competitors from Japan utilized Mr. Deming's collaborative management style and began producing automobiles that were significantly superior in quality to American counterparts. Because the workers were granted a vested interest in corporate goals and were positively reinforced for their efforts, the workers were motivated to produce a quality product. When workers are coerced to perform through a hierarchal management scheme, employees tend to do just enough to meet minimum standards. Excellence in quality fails, because the workers feel alienated from management and an adversarial

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relationship develops. Resentment breeds, and workers meet the minimum standards necessary to get their paycheck.

Motivational Theory

People's needs for validation, support, loyalty, and reinforcement must be met in order for motivation to increase. Lecturing, moralizing, dictating, coercing and being punitive do not work. And yet many parents, teachers, and managers continue to operate on a system of principles that are of no value. It's a form of tunnel vision that is self-defeating. The theory of bossing people to get a desired result is archaic and self-defeating. Most people boss-manage because they don't know any better, or because they are insecure about their competency. Managers who are insecure about their job abilities tend to overcompensate by trying to prove to others how ruthless they can be in the pursuit of performance. A quality manager can admit mistakes, role model appropriate professional behavior for employees, and connect with those he oversees.

Those who step out of the bubble are "paradigm shifters." They seek information, knowledge, and truth wherever it may be found. They are not afraid to look within every corner to find new ways of accomplishing tasks. They are creative and energized. They feel fulfilled in their personal and professional endeavors. They look forward to new and risky challenges. They are great listeners. In fact, they listen more than they talk. Vulnerability is not a sign of weakness,

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but represents an opening to new ways of thinking and feeling. These people will take responsibility for their mistakes.

Redeeming the Intergenerational Trap

Dysfunctional patterns of behavior may follow an intergenerational system of relating. That which is not brought to awareness in one generation follows the next. Many women, who experience domestic abuse as a child, maintain the same pattern in the relationships they establish within adulthood. Since they have no foundation for what a healthy relationship looks like, they believe that dysfunction and abuse is a normal part of relationships. They learn to "settle" because they have no frame of reference for what would be considered a healthy relationship. Many times, they bounce from one relationship to the next, looking for the love that they never received during childhood.

The cycle can only be broken when the person finally realizes that she has been duped. She recognizes that horrible nightmare that has followed her from childhood to partner after partner. She must learn to grieve and mourn the past and move on in a new direction. The paradigm shift includes a new way of looking at the nature of relationships and their value. Settling for dysfunction is no longer acceptable. Setting the bar much higher and believing that one deserves to be treated with respect is necessary. Only then will the nightmare of the past be broken. We all need role models in our lives

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that exemplify the characteristics of respect, integrity, compassion, empathy and courage.

People who live in a bubble always have lowered expectations. When it comes to protecting and nurturing themselves they fail to see their own blind spots. They will remain in abusive relationships with no regard to their own needs. These clients appear oblivious to how demeaned and poorly treated they are by their partners. They have never been taught that they are worth more than what they are experiencing. Who along the path of their life has taught them that they deserve better? Who has taught them that they have the inner strength to create a better life for themselves? Who has taught them to display the kind of courage needed to let go of a failing relationship? As a therapist, it is my role to admonish and act as a therapeutic model to strengthen, empower, and assist my client to understand her worth.

Redeeming the Past

We don't need to live in the cloud of our past any longer. We can redeem the past and move on to develop a new future. A client of mine who has recently been struggling with the issue of giving herself permission to change directions, provides a clear example. She is afraid to succeed because her parents personified failure. She feels guilty for leaving them behind in her emotional quest to find psychological growth and healing. We must all emotionally let go of our parents if we are to create our own destiny. This means that we must not be afraid of

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doing better than our parents did. It's really acceptable to move beyond their level of success and well-being.

This client had an interesting dream. In the dream she was on a roller coaster enjoying the freedom of the ride when all of a sudden the person in the car in front of her was cut in half. All that showed was the abdomen of an unrecognized person. She woke up terrified. She wanted an explanation.

Since I believe that aspects of a dream can represent specific features of a person's life, I had a hunch. I hypothesized that she was on a journey toward wholeness and that she felt cut off from realizing her dreams due to internal conflict over permission to succeed. I asked her if my interpretation fit. She was quite amazed to see the parallels in her own life. I believe that dreams and synchronistic experiences happen for a reason. As M. Scott Peck claims, they are "gifts of grace." These experiences come into our lives because we are open to new insights. They represent powerful tools for change. My client's dream was symbolic of all that was happening in her current experience. These "happenings" are tools that assist us in the pursuit of spiritual and psychological growth and development. For my client, it was a potent message to assist her in her journey toward fulfillment and growth.

The Power of Words

Don Ruiz, in his book called the *Four Agreements*, talks about the power of words. Most of us have had things said about us that were

emotionally damaging. Early childhood recollections of slights and criticism appear to impact all of us in negative ways. We tend to vividly remember comments that were expressed in a way that made us feel small. I can still remember how small I felt when a girl I dated to the homecoming dance turned on me the following week by giggling and laughing about me in front of her friends. I felt devastated. I couldn't understand how a night I enjoyed turned out to be such a humiliating experience because of the words and body language of a young girl. I never wanted to date again. Negative early recollections have a way of crystallizing and emerging as "hot buttons" later on in life.

I had a client who had a first grade teacher who was intimidating and mean. He is a very sensitive guy, and the mere mention of that experience still causes an emotional reaction. In fact, it was a presenting issue that we dealt with within the first several sessions. When a partner in a relationship continues to get beaten down through the use of negative communication, those words ultimately create a sense of indifference. After a period of time, the partner quits caring. They shut down to the power of words and give up on the relationship. The Bible says that "love covers a multitude of sins" but some words and actions are so damaging that irreparable harm may be done. Forgiveness no longer has much meaning. Trust has been broken.

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Healing is like peeling an onion. It's one layer at a time. Unfortunately, many of us keep finding new layers! My experiences, those of my friends and clients, emerged as a catalyst for writing this book. I do not want others to feel numb, to feel small, and feel the persistent pain that comes from those who have created disappointment. I no longer want others to avoid, to hide in the bubble, and to find ways of circumventing the process of “moving through their pain” toward psychological growth. I want everyone to come out and join the party, to get in the game and share their life with others. God bless those, like my wife, who have helped me to grow and change. I wish positive health and growth for all of my friends, family and patients, and for all of you who take the time to read this book. Step out of the bubble, it's worth it.

A story of self-discovery empowering readers to change behaviors.

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