

Don't Ever Give Up: The Power of Belief in Promoting a Turnaround

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Scratch Board by Willie Day Peppers, age 12

Sometimes, when I am asked to write a paper or deliver a speech about my troubled childhood, it seems odd. It seems odd because, 35 years ago, many child-care workers had written me off. These doubters saw a very disturbed and disoriented youth whose severe emotional problems and acting-out behaviors drove him deeper and deeper into the mental health and juvenile justice systems. Many believed that I was doomed to a life of continued pathology and failure.

Such labels as "neurotic," "schizoid," "schizophrenic," "high psychotic potential," and other less than positive diagnoses marked the files that followed me throughout childhood (Brown, 1983). According to the doubters, my prognosis was, at best, somewhere between "guarded" and "unfavorable." They had deemed my potential to overcome the past to be extremely limited.

Fortunately, there were some professionals whose approach was far more promethean. They saw potential where the doubters saw limitations. They provided alternatives, while the doubters sought concrete descriptions. They invested their efforts so that I might have an opportunity to prevail. They are the true heroes in my life; without their altruism and dedication I would have proved the doubters correct.

I am a product of the child-care system, albeit a "positive" representation of what intervention can accomplish. My life history echoes the theme of this journal which is providing information to professionals who work with children with emotional and behavioral problems. My life serves as an example of a job well done. Intervention can and does work. Even severely disturbed children can be saved.

In many ways, this paper reminds me of Franz Kafka's short story, "A Report to an Academy." In this fictional tale, Kafka imbues an ape with the ca-

pacities of intellect and speech. The ape, because of his acquired human behaviors, is invited to give an account of the life he formerly led as an ape. Kafka's ape and I are much akin. We both have been asked to recount our stories. We both have a message to give. Kafka's ape tells the assembled academicians:

I could never have achieved what I have done had I been stubbornly set on clinging to my origins, to the remembrances of my youth. In fact, to give up being stubborn was the supreme commandment I laid upon myself; free ape as I was, I submitted myself to that yoke. In revenge, however, my memory of the past has closed the door against me more and more. I could have returned at first, had human beings allowed it, through an archway as wide as the span of heaven over the earth, but as I spurred myself on in my forced career, the opening narrowed and shrank behind me; I felt more comfortable in the world of men and fitted it better; the strong wind that blew after me out of my past began to slacken; today it is only a gentle puff of air that plays around my heels; and the opening in the distance, through which it comes and through which I once came myself, has grown so small that, even if my strength and my will power sufficed to get me back to it, I should have to scrape the very skin from my body to crawl through. To put it plainly, much as I like expressing myself in images, to put it plainly: your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be farther removed from you than mine is from me (Kafka, 1952).

For me, my past serves as a reminder of what might have been had not certain people and events dramatically altered the course of my life. Like Kafka's ape, there was a time when I could have returned to my former patterns of behavior, a period of vulnerability when I might have succumbed;

but as the years and experience progressed, I was able to replace the pain of the past with the promise of the future. Like Kafka's ape, "I felt more comfortable in the world of men and fitted it better." I had found a way out of the cycle of emotional problems, delinquency, and institutionalization that had plagued my childhood. I had proved the doubters wrong. I was free to become more than an ape.

But I did not accomplish this metamorphosis alone. Had I been left entirely to my own devices, I would have continued to exhibit a myriad of emotional and behavioral problems. And had my fate rested in the hands of the doubters, I am reasonably certain that today I would be confined in a psychiatric ward or a prison.

Instead, my life has run an entirely different course than the doubters predicted. They neglected to see that I had "positive" potential, and chose to focus on my "negative" prognosis. And nowhere is this myopic perspective more revealing than in the clinical notes of the psychiatrists at the state hospital where I was placed for observation during the summer before my sixteenth birthday. I offer the following quotes as example:

It is felt that this boy's psychotic potential is high, that his prognosis is guarded and that we might even deal with the insidious beginning of a malignant, chronic schizophrenic process.

Schizophrenic reaction, adolescent type, with a very poor prognosis.

...agree with classification of schizoid personality and believe he will probably prove to be schizophrenic reaction. Should remain in hospital indefinitely and have intensive psychotherapy.

Schizoid personality. Affect flattened. Autistic signs of repression noticeable. In Staff shows drilled upon superficial insight. No change felt since presentation for diagnostic staff. Pro-

longed psychiatric care appears to be of questionable value. Prognosis is guarded. Feel that patient will become schizophrenic.

Clinically a schizoid personality, dynamically, he is schizophrenic. Consider his prognosis is very poor. In need of intensive psychotherapy. (Brown, 1983)

These five quotes offered by five psychiatrists exemplify the doubters' view of my potential. To their way of thinking, I was doomed to a life of continued emotional and behavioral problems. Were my destiny in their hands, they would have kept me in the state hospital indefinitely. That would have ruined me.

Thank God, there also were believers in my life, people who had not given up on me, professionals who nurtured my potential. Chief among these believers was my probation officer, Mr. Lantz. As a child, I blamed Mr. Lantz for many of my woes. I still can remember his wrinkled face, no neck, scrawny frame, piercing eyes, and constant questions. Throughout my teens, he was the bane of my existence. Why didn't he just leave me alone? Why was he always prodding into my life and sending me away to mean and restrictive places whenever I did something that did not meet his standards of conduct? What did he know about my life? Oh, how I disliked that man and the power he held over me!

I am no longer a confused and angry child. Today I am armed with the perspective of being able to read and understand the copious probation records Mr. Lantz kept about my case. And what I have come to realize is that he, more than any person other than myself, had the most influence in determining how my life has turned out. He was the one steadfast influence in an otherwise tumultuous childhood. He was the difference between what I am and what I might have become. He was a believer, and he believed in me.

When poring through the volumes of probation records Mr. Lantz kept on my case, I am struck by three insights: 1) how precise and complete were his notes, 2) how well he understood the circumstances that influenced my emotional and behavioral problems, and 3) how his notes were nearly devoid of criticism, labeling, or other forms of negativity when chronicling my life. Indeed, he was the consummate professional who believed that it was possible to turn around the lives of even the most severely disturbed juveniles. I was lucky to have him.

There were others, too, who believed I could be reclaimed, as there also were other doubters. The doubters are anachronisms who should never have touched my life, and who definitely should have pursued different vocations—preferably bookkeeping or some other form of impersonal activity. Doubters should never work with children, especially dysfunctional kids. They will do more harm than good: Children are sensitive creatures whose egos are quite fragile and still forming. Doubters limit the potential of "normal" children to conquer even the simplest problems. How dramatically, then, do they affect the outcomes of seriously emotionally disturbed juveniles?

The believers, on the other hand, are to be recognized and applauded for their inspiration. Their faith is what breathes new life into our confused and pained young minds. They do not give up on us. They merely seek to find other avenues to reach us, support us, guide us, put us in a position to turn our own lives around. That is what Mr. Lantz and several other child-care professionals did for me. They looked beyond labels and saw potential—perhaps only a little—but potential nonetheless, and they nurtured it until it took root and flourished.

Some child-care professionals believe that many emotionally or behaviorally disturbed kids are beyond repair. In my experience, psychiatrists seemed

particularly adept at weeding out those of us who were doomed to lives of dysfunction. But not all are jaded by impersonal clinical diagnoses. Many believe that every kid has a chance of recovery, and they set about to prove their belief correct. Even when the evidence seems to the contrary, they merely redouble their efforts and plod forth, believing they will find some way to "get to" a child. They refuse to give up on their young clients, just as Mr. Lantz refused to give up on me.

Belief can be a strong medicine for even the most disturbed child. And it certainly makes a difference when it comes to deciding how to handle a case. The doubters would have confined me to the state hospital. At 15 years old, I would have been initiated into a life of insanity, a victim of labels, never to know my full potential. But the believers, caring professionals like Mr. Lantz, made it possible for me to master my problems and turn my life around. He and others like him were the critical difference between what I was and what I have become.

To you, the professionals who work with emotionally and behaviorally disordered children like I once was, I have tried to impart what I deem to be my most critical insight, the product of a lifetime of introspection: Don't give up! Don't ever give up! For, you see, we are not destined to remain apes.

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