

A photograph of a sunset over a mountain range, with the sun low on the horizon and rays of light spreading across the sky. The mountains are silhouetted against the bright light.

The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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Bouncing Back: Rewiring the Brain for Maximum Resilience and Well-Being

© Linda Graham, MFT

**Based on the book *Bouncing Back* by Linda Graham.
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One lunchtime, my client Serena saw a small group of boys playing soccer in a neighbor's yard as she rode by on her bike on her way to the gym. She instinctively slowed down and kept her eye on their game. But suddenly the soccer ball flew from behind a parked car into the street, and one of the little boys darted out after it. Serena swerved to avoid hitting the boy, hit the bouncing ball, and went headfirst over the handlebars onto the pavement. She landed on her right shoulder, fracturing it on impact.

Serena had had falls from her bike before; she knew to keep her body still and breathe slowly into the pain. She managed to think clearly enough to ask one of the older boys to get her cell phone out of her backpack and to explain to him how to call the emergency services. By the time a neighbor dashed out to help, the ambulance was already on its way. Serena asked the neighbor to store her bike for her and to call and ask her sister Anita to meet her at the hospital.

Greetings

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

The Bulletin is offered freely, and you are welcome to share it with others. Past issues are posted at <http://www.wisebrain.org/tools/wise-brain-bulletin>.

[Rick Hanson, PhD](#), edits the Bulletin. [Michelle Keane](#) is its managing editor, and it's designed and laid out by [Laurel Hanson](#).

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Holding Anita's hand at the hospital, Serena was able to stay lucid and coherent as the doctors x-rayed her shoulder and fitted her with a sling. She had Anita cancel the two sales calls she had scheduled for that afternoon; she even thought to schedule her first physical therapy appointment before she left the emergency room. Serena managed her body's stress resiliently, which enabled her to ask for and get the help she needed as quickly as possible.

Resilience

Resilience is the ability to face and handle life's challenges, whether everyday disappointments or extraordinary disasters, as Serena did, with flexibility and adaptability. Capacities to bounce back are innate in the brain, but their development can be derailed over time by negative patterns of response to stress or trauma that become deeply encoded in our neural circuitry.

Neuroplasticity is the capacity of the brain – also innate – to rewire itself, to grow new neurons and new connections among those neurons (thus new neural pathways and circuits), and even repair brain structure, lifelong. Recovering our resilience means choosing the experiences that will cause neurons to fire together and wire together – self-directed neuroplasticity – in ways that create new patterns and/or rewire old ones.

Below are edited excerpts from the book *Bouncing Back: Rewiring Your Brain for Maximum Resilience and Well-Being*, that will illustrate some of the 80 exercises offered in the book to do that rewiring, safely, efficiently, and effectively. (These excerpts will continue in the next issue of the *Wise Brain Bulletin*.) As you learn to use tools and techniques drawn from mindfulness practices and relational psychology to create and accelerate brain change, you can recover what I call the 5 C's of coping: calm, clarity, connections to resources, competence, and courage. These 5 C's strengthen the parts of the brain we need to cope skillfully with the twists and turns of life and become the core of a deep well-being that will last a lifetime.

Keep Calm and Carry On

The fastest way to regulate the body's stress response and return to a sense of calm is to activate the release of oxytocin in the brain. Oxytocin is the neurotransmitter of safety and trust and is the brain's direct and immediate antidote to the stress hormone cortisol. Oxytocin can be thought of as the neurochemical foundation of resilience.

The fastest way to release oxytocin and mitigate stress is through safe touch in a soothing relationship, as Serena chose to do by holding Anita's hand in the hospital. Fortunately, neuroscientists have demonstrated many times that even remembering or imaging someone we love and by whom we feel loved is enough to release small but regular doses of oxytocin.

Exercise: Hand on the Heart

We can come into steady calm by experiencing moments of feeling safe, loved, and cherished and letting those moments register in our body and encode new circuitry in our brain. This exercise offers a way to evoke those feelings.



1. Begin by placing your hand on your heart, feeling the warmth of your own touch. Breathe gently and deeply into your heart center, taking in a sense of calm, peace, goodness, safety, trust, acceptance, and ease.
2. Once that's steady, call to mind a moment of being with someone who loves you unconditionally, someone you feel completely safe with. This may, of course, be a partner, child, or parent; but if the dynamics of those relationships are complicated and the emotions mixed, you may choose any true other to your true self: a dear friend, a trusted teacher, a close colleague or neighbor, a therapist, your grandmother, a spiritual figure like Jesus or the Dalai Lama, or your wiser self. Pets are also great for this exercise.
3. As you remember feeling safe and loved with this person or pet, see if you can sense in your body the positive feelings and sensations associated with that memory. Really savor a feeling of warmth, safety, trust, and love in your body.
4. When that feeling is steady, let go of the image and simply bathe in the feeling itself for thirty seconds. Savor the rich nurturing of this feeling; let it really soak in.

The Neuroscience:

Breathing deeply, gently, and fully activates the calming branch of our autonomic nervous system, the parasympathetic branch. The parasympathetic modulates the body-brain's fight-flight-freeze response when we feel threatened or agitated. Breathing, or *pranayama*, has been a core practice in yoga and meditation to relax the body and steady the mind for over 3,500 years.

Breathing positive emotions into the heart center steadies the heart rate, restoring the equilibrium of the body so that we can remain present and engaged. In evoking a memory or image of feeling loved and cherished, we evoke a sense of safe connection with others; the oxytocin immediately reduces our stress. That evocation also activates the prefrontal cortex, which triggers the hippocampus to search for explicit memories of moments when we have been held, soothed, protected, encouraged, believed in - times when we have reached out for help and received comfort and support.

Through safety and trust in connection, we come back into our baseline equilibrium. From

there, with our higher, thinking brain calm and alert, we can mobilize quickly, act skillfully, and take care of business.

Clarity

The practice of mindfulness — training the brain to focus its attention and to strengthen conscious awareness — allows us to see our conditioned patterns of response clearly so that we can get unstuck from them when we need to. Mindfulness trains the brain to become astutely aware of our experiences in the moment and of our responses to those experiences, even of our enduring patterns of response (resilient or not), and entire styles and strategies of coping and their effectiveness.



Years and years ago, I was on a two-week vacation with my friend Sara in the Canadian Rockies; we were hiking, biking, and driving the Icefields Parkway through Banff and Jasper National Parks. One sunny morning, I had neglected to fasten my bike securely on the bike rack of the car; ten miles down the road, it flew off onto the highway. Hitting the road at 60 mph, the front wheel was badly skewed, making the bike unrideable. I flipped out.

My friend was calm and patient. No one was hurt; the wheel could probably be fixed; it was a beautiful day in a beautiful part of the world. Sara's steadiness helped me notice, name, and thus manage my own anxiety about

the wheel not being fixable and spoiling our trip. I put my hand on my heart; we breathed together deeply, and her steadiness helped bring me back into equanimity. That recovered equanimity helped alleviate my guilt about my carelessness spoiling our day. It also helped me surrender and accept the situation as it was.

The guy at the bike shop wasn't as empathic. "This is just a bump on a pickle," he told me. But he did guarantee he could fix the wheel in four hours. As Sara and I settled ourselves at a nearby lake for a leisurely picnic, I began to reflect on the event more deeply.

Maybe the bike shop guy was right. In the bigger picture, was this really such a big deal? Would I be upset about this five years from now? Next week? By dinner? Stepping back and reflecting helped me put the whole event into perspective. What was, was just fine.

Coming to an inner peace and acceptance of what was happening allowed me to re-engage with Sara. The chance to relax and talk for four hours, rather than racing each other up and down hills on our bikes, was a luxury. By the time we picked up my repaired wheel, we realized it was one of the best times of our trip.

The Neuroscience:

The Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom

The Institute is a 501c3 non-profit corporation, and it publishes the Wise Brain Bulletin. The Wellspring Institute gathers, organizes, and freely offers information and methods – supported by brain science and the contemplative disciplines – for greater happiness, love, effectiveness, and wisdom. For more information about the Institute, please go to <http://www.wisebrain.org/wellspring-institute>.

If you enjoy receiving the Wise Brain Bulletin each month, please consider making a tax-deductible donation to the Wellspring Institute. Simply visit WiseBrain.org and click on the Donate button. We thank you.

Neuroscience research data is just beginning to illuminate what happens in the brain during mindfulness practice:

* Even introductory levels of mindfulness practice can increase the cell volume of the anterior cingulate cortex - the brain structure that focuses our attention - and other associated brain structures. This helps us clearly see what's going on, and then see our choices about what to do about what's going on.

- We strengthen the insula and improve its function of interoception – awareness of what’s going on in the body. Focusing our awareness on body sensations, impulses, and movements — such as an itch, an ache, a tightness in a muscle — builds our capacity to become similarly and resiliently aware of big surges of rage, grief, terror. We train the brain to notice and be aware before events and our responses get out of hand rather than spiraling into major reactivity.

Being mindful allows us to recognize any feeling *as* a feeling, any thought *as* a thought, any cascade of emotions *as* a cascade, any pattern of thoughts *as* a pattern. We become aware of entire processes of mind or states of mind as simply that — processes and states of mind. We recognize any beliefs or “truths” *as* beliefs we believe to be true. We become aware of entire belief systems, views, identities — as no more and no less than belief systems, views, and identities. These may include stories we’ve told ourselves since we were five, or twelve, or since we got married or divorced, or since we became a CPA and wished we had become a welder instead.

We can know that any view, no matter how forcefully compelling or stubbornly held in this moment, is not — does not have to be— true in all moments. We can be aware of changes and inconsistencies in ourselves: sometimes I think this way, sometimes I don’t. I’m thinking or feeling this way now, but I wasn’t ten minutes ago or yesterday. We can



appreciate the power of the human brain to generate the complex, comprehensive stories that it does and still realize that what we're seeing is not the ultimate truth but tracings, or the entrenchment, of patterns of neural firing in the brain.

Exercise: Noticing and Naming Creates Options

1. Imagine you're walking down the sidewalk of a busy street in your neighborhood. You notice a friend walking toward you on the other side. You wave and call out "Hello!" but the friend does not respond. Notice your own split-second reaction to that lack of response: a contraction in your body, a drop in energy. Notice whatever thoughts might begin to cascade in response to your body's reaction. Maybe you think, "Hmm, that's unusual. I'd better try again." Or, "Whew! He has a lot on his mind. I wonder if I should even bother him?" Notice any reactivity to those thoughts. "Gee, he seems a little stuck-up today." Or "Oh, no! What have I done wrong?" Notice whether your thoughts follow a pattern that you have noticed before, such as feeling bad about yourself or wanting to reach out even more.
2. Now imagine that your friend sees you and, on his own, waves and calls out "Hello!" to you. Again, notice your own split-second reaction to his connecting with you: maybe a smile, an uplift of energy. Bring awareness to any shifts in your body, notice any shifts in your thoughts: "He noticed me!" Or "I'm glad we weren't disconnected after all." As you reflect on your experience, notice whether your thoughts follow a pattern that you have also noticed before, perhaps of relief or gratitude.
3. Take a moment to name the reactions and the patterns you discovered, with compassion for any reactions that may have been triggered by the noticing. With every moment of practice in noticing and naming, you are strengthening the capacity of your prefrontal cortex to create choice points, giving yourself the chance to respond with more flexibility and choose a different response the next time.

Competence

I once hiked with my friend Donn up a steep trail on Mt. Tamalpais, near my home, following many switchbacks for more than half an hour to reach a grand viewpoint. Belatedly I realized that if we were to take the same switchbacks down the mountain, I

would get back to the parking lot too late to pick up my goddaughter at her gymnastics practice. Donn asked if I could bushwhack straight down the mountain. After years of backpacking in the high Sierra, my automatic response was “Sure I can!” Down the steep hillside I went, surefooted; Donn quickly followed. We arrived at the parking lot in less than fifteen minutes.

Saying “Sure I can!” is an important somatic resource of resilience. Researchers have found that the greatest predictor of success— in anything — is a previous track record of success — in anything. In other words, we don’t have to have faced the same challenge before to feel confident that we can deal with what we’re facing now. We have resilience when we know that we have dealt successfully with *anything* before. The feeling of confidence about bushwhacking down a mountain becomes an inner resource encoded in the neural circuitry of our brain that we can call on whenever we need to bushwhack through any difficult terrain: getting an aging parent to write a will or tracking the thousands of details involved in moving overseas.

Confidence is a somatic memory of competence. Interestingly, research shows that even if we have an inflated sense of that earlier competence, it still serves as a resource of confidence now. We get through an “uh oh!” by remembering “uh oh!”s we’ve gotten through before and by evoking the visceral feeling of “Sure I can!” that came from that success.



Research also shows that for purposes of somatic resourcing, it's not so much the size of a previous success that matters as the genuine sense of competence or mastery that comes from it. Succeeding at something we accomplished all on our own (painting the living room, repairing a broken lawnmower, helping an athlete feel better about herself after her mistake cost the team the game) creates a sense of ownership of the success. Once encoded in the neural circuitry, that feeling can be even more effective at creating confidence (and thus resilience) than playing a small part in a larger organizational effort with no sense of ownership of the final outcome. If we're hammering nails in a Habitat for Humanity building project, it's the "Sure I can!" from the three walls and a door frame that we built ourselves—the sense of competence in our own work rather than the sense of accomplishment at the completion of the entire house — that becomes the somatic resource of confidence that we can draw on later when we need to rebuild a business or a marriage.

Exercise: Wiring In Current Confidence from Previous Competence

1. Identify areas of your life where you would like to have more of the feeling of "Sure I can!" They might include returning to school after thirty years in the workforce, buying into a franchise, or facing an empty nest when your youngest child has moved away.
2. Identify three moments in your life when you actually had that sense of "I can!" in your body — a visceral sense of confidence arising from a moment of competence. Reflect not so much on what you did, because that will change with circumstances, but on how you felt when you realized that you had done it. Remember, we're talking moments here, not major events: opening a stuck jar lid for your mom, intuiting which way to turn to find the train station in a strange city, knowing just what to say when your child experienced a disappointment. Modest but genuine successes can mean just as much for rewiring the brain as those that are more dramatic.
3. Focus on the sense of mastery those successes brought you. How does that remembered sense of mastery feel in your body now? Take in the feeling of "I did; I can" as a body based resource.
4. Try to bring that visceral sense of "I did; I can" into the present and apply it in the areas where you would like to feel this confidence more often. Even the slightest success at doing this reconditions your brain toward resilience.

The Neuroscience:

Our brains begin encoding experiences of mastery into schemas or templates of “I can!” almost from the moment we’re born. A baby can typically grasp a toy at two months of age, reach for people at four months, hold its own bottle at six months, and give a hug and walk with support at twelve months. Each of these successes conditions the pattern of “I can!” into the developing brain, providing a neurological underpinning for the inner sense of trust and security that builds the base of resilience.

As we intentionally create an archive of explicit memories of successful coping, we are strengthening that base and thus our capacity for resilient coping now. Any time the prefrontal cortex accesses a memory that carries with it the somatic sense of “Sure I can!” it can send an inhibitory transmitter — GABA — to the amygdala. This inhibits the firing of the amygdala, signaling, in effect, that the prefrontal cortex is taking care of business and that the amygdala does not need to activate a survival response. Remembering a moment of previous coping when we’re facing a daunting task or situation can help us anchor in trust and reassurance of our competence and mastery.

...to be continued next issue.

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Linda Graham, MFT, is an experienced psychotherapist who offers trainings nationwide that make the integration of modern neuroscience, mindfulness practices and relational



psychology accessible and understandable. She is the author of *Bouncing Back: Rewiring Your Brain for Maximum Resilience and Renewal* (New World Library, 2013) and monthly e-newsletters on *Healing and Awakening into Aliveness and Wholeness*, archived at www.lindagraham-mft.net. *Bouncing Back* will be available in bookstores April 17, 2013, and is available for pre-order through links at www.lindagraham-mft.net to Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and New World Library. *Bouncing Back* will be a featured alternate of the One Spirit Book Club in April-May 2013.

Your Best Brain

A Benefit Workshop for the Wellspring Institute Sunday, April 14, 2013

Your brain is the bottom-line for how you feel and act: change your brain, and you change your life.

In this four-hour workshop on Sunday, April 14 in San Rafael, CA, we'll cover *ten great ways to change your brain for the better* – for more joy, more fulfilling relationships, and more peace of mind and heart.

Grounded in brain science, you'll learn practical, research-based ways to:

- Feed your brain with the right foods and supplements
- Calm down the amygdala for less anxiety and other negative emotions
- Energize the neural networks of compassion, empathy, and love
- Boost acetylcholine to light up the circuits of learning and memory
- Tap into your brain's natural core of happiness
- Increase levels of key neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine without medication – for improved mood, attention, and motivation

This will be fun, down-to-earth, and super-useful – and you even get handouts! Your presenters are [Rick Hanson, Ph.D.](#), author of *Buddha's Brain* and *Just One Thing*, and [Jan Hanson, M.S., L.Ac.](#), who wrote Nutritional Neurochemistry in *Buddha's Brain*.

This workshop will benefit the [Wellspring Institute For Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom](#), which publishes the [Wise Brain Bulletin](#), offers all the great resources at [WiseBrain.org](#) and hosts the [Skillful Means Wiki](#) (methods for psychological and spiritual growth). Registration is \$50.

* An online version of the workshop will be offered later this year for those interested in attending in a virtual capacity.

Tickets are available via the Showcase Theatre box office.

To purchase tickets go to:

<http://tickets.marincenter.org/eventperformances.asp?evt=68>

Contact Michelle Keane at michelle@rickhanson.net with any questions. For a good cause, this will be a fast-paced summary of ten fabulous things you can do to develop your own best brain. Tell a friend for twice the good karma – putting the word out to others will be a wonderful contribution to the good work of the Institute!

Compassionate Presence: Are we Preparing Students to Live Outside the Walls of Schools?

© Lori Desautels, Ph.D

Education and learning are as natural to us as breathing. It simply occurs in the spirit and soul of every human being. “Thriving” is our natural state of life and life is meant to work and our purpose is to thrive! If the purpose of education is to live outside the walls of education, then why or how do we end up teaching in ways where Language Arts, Math and Science assessments define our adult entry into this diverse and populous world; externally labeling us successful, smart and college bound? Does going to college equate to a successful life abundant with well-being? Are we respectful and accepting of our differing preferences, perspectives, innate gifts and passions?

Make Your Mark Heavy and Dark

On a recent Friday afternoon, an unemployed twenty-year old posted a message on YouTube, simply offering to “be there” for anyone who needed to talk. “I never met you, but I do care,” he said. By the end of the weekend, he had received more than five thousand calls and text messages from strangers taking him up on his offer. (Retold by Dr. Howard Cutler and The Dalai Lama, from *The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World*.)

What kind of mark do we leave on our students, our children and our own lives? Do we value the entertainment and professional sports industry to the degree of insanity, paying twenty to thirty times the income of that of an effective, caring and creative educator’s salary? How do our children and young adults perceive this societal and cultural truth? Do we truly value education in a way that we are willing to re-assess, explore, question and discuss a novel and philosophical perspective buried at the root of teaching and learning that shifts the way we prioritize, view and act upon the present dysfunctional educational

system? If students are not learning, then education is not happening, and as Sir Ken Robinson clearly states in his revised tenth anniversary edition *Out of Our Minds*, we need to clarify and redefine the purpose of education, and this begins with personalizing it. We can't afford not to!

Perspective, Story-telling, and Questions

(A Gateway to Resiliency)

There are three themes that run throughout this article. These themes do not provide answers, solutions or suggestions for expedient and radical changes, but they do invite the reader to explore the roots of a system that is crying out for changes at a macro and micro level of functioning. Within these themes I have introduced a few tangible practices that invite our children, adolescents, parents and educators to self-reflect, dialogue and envision in one another that which cannot be felt or seen, just yet!

A. How do the personal and collective perspectives of educators, parents and students affect their happiness, success and motivation in school and in life? Do we hold a victim



perspective in which experiences, actions and words just occur without our conscious or subconscious participation, or do we hold a perspective that embraces self-design, reflection, and co-creation? As a parent and educator it is my privilege and responsibility to share a variety of active perspectives with my children and students as situations arise. Inside this dialogue, we are able to tap into a scenario that a child possibly could not see or feel in the heat of a moment. I always encourage my students to become observers; much like a detached onlooker reporting her perspective from a different angle! We then simply listen to the responses, validating the perspectives held while gently questioning how the positive shifts in a relationship or experience could occur. Two minutes of perspective sharing, gentle questioning, validating and discussion create improved emotion directly affecting the plasticity of the brain!

As an educator, the greatest gift I can give my students is to sit beside them and help them to envision their dreams, goals, and passions. My grandmother once told me, “Lori, you cannot love and worry about someone at the same time!” I hear these words in my head and heart today and I know that when I envision and share the talents, the possibilities, and strengths that are bubbling beneath the surface of my students and children, I am energetically tapping

into their potentiality.

Enthusiasm and passion are contagious and my goal is for them to catch a glimpse of their inner power and knowledge.

My students and I make an appointment with one another as often as we need to, sitting down and listing, discussing and creating a dream map with tangible and larger goals that move their thoughts, actions and words in a positive direction. We assess these goal/dream maps often, adjusting when an



Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

obstacle occurs...shifting perspective and seeing the “gift” in the obstacle!

B. Questions: What do you need?

How may I serve you? What can I do? Questions fuel our minds with wonder and options, and they are vehicles for creative solutions and critical thinking skills. When we

ask another what he or she needs or

desires, we open doors of resistance as defense mechanisms break down and begin to fall away. Building relationships through inquiry, while sustaining them with a steadfast “trust,” not only deepens learning, but creates a safe place for self-expression and exploration.

These questions although helpful, are often times difficult for students to ask one another in the heat or aftermath of an angry encounter. We sometimes need to be reminded of the commonalities, vulnerabilities and beautiful fragilities that we carried into this existence.

Last semester, I asked my students (graduate teachers) to ask their students to bring in their baby or toddler pictures and write a brief description of who they were as young children, inviting them to share their fears, their excitable moments, and who pulled the hardest on their heartstrings! These short passages and pictures were displayed, and especially highlighted and shared when bullying, conflicts, and angry encounters occurred.

Collectively, we remembered our pasts, those experiences that might have contributed to *pain based behaviors* and we reminded one another that today is a new day and our brains and minds are wired for positive change, even though the negative feels impossible to remove!

We wrote letters to ourselves and to one another. When we had time to reflect on the angry conflicted episode, we asked one another: *What can I do to make this better? How can I help?*

This was an extremely effective eye-opening strategy to see how our behaviors, words and feelings are molded from experiences. We also greatly welcomed the changing perspectives and the new set of “ears” that learned to listen deeply and to understand!

C. Story-telling, personal and communal, has the power to affect the way we ingest, understand and manipulate information and experiences. I once read that there are no new stories or ideas, just new ways of presenting these recurring themes and tales. When we listen to another’s storyline, we may embrace an epiphany or insight that we have long awaited inside our own lives. It may be one word, expression, paragraph or restated theme

that strikes a chord in our minds and hearts, changing the way we walk through this world. This theme provides an incredibly powerful way for teachers and parents to share their experiences, their growing pains, challenges and successes as they begin to develop a mutual compassionate respect for one another's personal story seeing the similarities and differences while honoring both. When we share with another, we invite the heart to open as the critical mind takes a backseat.

Although these themes do not provide answers to the questions posed, my hope in sharing personal narratives, inquiry, and research based on perspectives, positive psychology and the process of happiness, is to engage the reader in exploring positive shifts that begin inside one heart, one mind and one individual at a time. How may I serve you? This is where the trajectory of educational reform begins and ends. As educators, and parents, have we become so concerned about effective instruction, accountability, teacher evaluation, higher and competitive test scores, global economic rivalry, and college acceptance that the joy of teaching and learning has been severed from the creative equation and process of teaching and learning? As parents and educators, are we feeling stressed to the point of exhaustion, apathy and indifference with changes that feel out of our control? Open up and look inside. Look inside your own heart at the perspectives that keep you churning uncomfortably, wearily or happily inside a pool of emotions and thoughts. Make your mark heavy and dark...



You can never cross the ocean unless you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.

~ Christopher Columbus

Spirituality and Education?

(A Definitive Yes!)

Teachers change lives! For better or worse, their presence with students affects change. School environments, administrative policies, and content expertise do not hold a candle to the gentle “personal philosophy” that radiates from teachers who create connections and relationships with their students. Techniques, strategies, and methodologies are important, but we must begin with a compassionate philosophy, an educational spirituality, as the building block for securing happy, effective, and creative students, teachers, and parents. This philosophy must be discussed and shared because as simple as it is, we have forgotten the power of a compassionate presence. Compassion discussed, revered and implemented is the warm conversation we must return to. It is a conversation that must become solution oriented rather than problem oriented, which takes incredible awareness, reflection, and a shift in attitude.

But spirituality and education? Be wary of linking the two together, because we are a nation and world that appears to stress competition, growing global economies and mastery of



curriculum interspersed with rigor and assessment, assessment, and more assessment. Just read the newspapers, technology links, and headlines. Don't discuss the communion of education and spirituality unless you are referring to parochial or private school culture. This is public education, paradoxically, an entity that is starving for a compassionate unity of function, but emphasizes assessment, higher test scores and turnaround programs to the detriment of addressing the social and emotional needs of every child and adolescent.

Why would we need a spiritual, compassionate educational foundation? Let me ask you a question. How would you like to "feel felt?" "Feeling Felt" is a term coined by Dr. Dan Seigel, psychiatrist, author and advocate for "mindful awareness," a strategy implemented to focus attention and awareness in everyday experiences. Feeling felt is what we all yearn for at the core of our being. Students who "feel felt" begin to feel successful and capable, demonstrating

improvement on test scores, self-regulation and levels of motivation. They are able to apply their latent potential and prior knowledge in and outside of school, complying with rules and regulations even though they disagree.

Do you feel felt? Do you feel understood by those you deem important and significant in your life? This concept and quality of character development in its finest moment rests at the core of educational reform. Yet, "feeling felt"



is initiated when we learn to take care of ourselves; when we nourish our bodies with adequate sleep, nutritious food, and exercise. We begin to fill our minds with positive thoughts, creative options, and a bit more hope. Often times, this is not easy when we are sitting in the habitual trenches of family and educational upheaval and change. Yet, when we practice listening to that intuitive inner teacher, the heart, we strengthen and multiply our creative alternatives and choices for problem-solving. Creative visualization and quiet reflection literally change our experiences, thoughts and words when we are receptive to the possibilities.

We can ill afford not to begin with this philosophy of compassionate presence, because the research is exploding with findings and studies that the brain is wired for relationships, and that positive emotion and optimism, coupled with feelings of self-worth and success, initiate motivation and drive learning, retention and retrieval of knowledge to new heights. The desire to feel successful deepens learning and is the emotional prerequisite for applicable intelligence, and a process for happiness, thereby intimately addressing the emotional and social aspects of education.

One year ago, on a Saturday afternoon, I desired nothing more than to write the final words of my manuscript. I received an invitation from a graduate student who asked me to have a sushi lunch and talk about our school years. As the green tea was poured, she looked at me, hesitated and said, “Lori, it has been a tough few weeks, and I want to tell you what has happened.” Candace squirmed a bit, played with her chopsticks, and then began to share this story.

Javier and the Shoes!

Javier became Candace’s student in mid-November after being kicked out of his large high school for absences. It did not take long for her to understand the reason Javier was absent so much from his previous school—he was reading at a fourth grade level and had already been retained three times in his life, making him 16 years old in the 9th grade. Javier avoided school because he did not feel successful, but that changed once he and Candace started working together. Javier began to come to school regularly, worked hard in school without any behavior problems, and even happily attended Saturday tutoring to get additional help. Although Javier showed tremendous progress with Candace and an intense desire to learn, his progress was not fast enough for the school principal, who decided immediately after winter break that it was time for Javier to find a new school. The school

had just opened, and the principal was concerned that Javier would bring the End-Of-Course Assessment scores down.

Candace did not fully understand the resoluteness of the principal's words until four weeks later, when the principal suspended Javier for three days for wearing black shoes instead of the required white, on an afternoon when Candace was out of the building. Upon returning to school, she learned of the incident and was extremely upset since the typical punishment for dress code violations was an after-school detention. When she inquired about this unusual disciplinary action, the principal again reiterated that it was time for Javier to find a new school.



Javier and his mother were required to meet with the principal prior to his being allowed back into school after his three-day suspension. Javier's mother asked Candace to come with them to the meeting because she had established a strong and trusting relationship with the family. While being forced to wait for thirty minutes before the principal would meet with them, they watched as five children walked through the office wearing black shoes!

Once the meeting began, the principal opened the meeting by telling Javier how far behind he was academically compared to his peers and that it was time for him to find

a new school. Javier and his mother explained that this was the school they wanted, so the principal shifted back to the issue of the black shoes. Javier explained that he and his mother had been evicted the day he was suspended and had been homeless for the past three days. His mother would not have enough money to purchase him shoes for two weeks, so he wondered if he could wear the black shoes until that time. The principal forcefully said, “No. He needs to have the shoes today or he is being kicked out.” Candace offered to purchase Javier a pair of white shoes in order for him to remain at school, but his mother turned to her and said in Spanish, “It is not about the shoes. The principal no longer wants my son here. It is time for us to find a new place to go.”

With those words, Javier was gone from school and Candace’s life. Statistically, there is little chance now for Javier to ever graduate from high school. He is currently homeless, Latino, speaks English as a second language, has been raised in a single-parent home, and has been retained already three times in his life. With considerable ease, the school principal traded Javier’s future for one less “fail” on the standardized test at the end of the year. As a teacher, the experience made Candace wonder what the goal of education had become. When she chose education as a career, it was to work with the tough cases like Javier’s in order to change her students’ life trajectories, not to allow them to become another sad statistic.



Following Candace's story, I just sat there. I couldn't find any words to describe how I was feeling, or more honestly, what Javier and his mother must have experienced and felt. I share this story because no matter the grade level, age or gathered experiences from teachers and students, educators must embrace and integrate the emotional standard of compassion, extending to our parents and students the power of "feeling felt." Compassion is defined as "a combination of feeling for someone else, experiencing the suffering and a positive move to reduce the suffering of others." Are we truly compassionate with one another? Do we extend to one another even a small invitation to see and express what is possible? As parents and educators, we must begin to implement the emotional support to drive what we are and what we do in and out of school.

I can't type fast enough as I almost feel desperate to share these words, because students like Javier comprise the intellect, the emotional intelligence and heart to be successful, to contribute to another's well-being and to exercise their innate intelligent birthright. However, administrators and teachers hold the power to nurture or kill it off. I am grateful for Candace's presence in Javier's life, and it is my hope that a part of him will remember all that is possible, and what this special teacher saw and nurtured inside him.

One final thought comes to mind focusing on teacher effectiveness, learning outcomes and student growth. It has been brought to my attention and to the attention of educators



across the country that the future platforms for assessment of teachers that state and national political and educational reformers will be putting into place will quantify and quantify student growth based on standardized test scores in each classroom and school. This is precisely the reason that the aforementioned administration at Javier's school wanted him out. Candace is one of the most effective educators I have known, creating relationships, building a sense of self-esteem and incrementally raising academic achievement, but her students still fall far behind. She is challenged with a diverse culture of children and adolescents who do not fit into the western world's educational factory model of instruction and assessment. I realize there is not a perfected measurement for our diverse, dynamic and vulnerable learners, but how can we implement such ineffective, short-sighted instruments knowing all that we do about our nation's growing and rich cultural diversity?

We claim that children in our inner city schools are not learning but that is incorrect. These children learn everyday and in some way, much too soon before children should learn these things... and we fail to notice what it is they know and have learned.

Two Lens - A Science and an Art

Through one lens I see: Assessment, Common Core Standards, Charter Schools verses Public Schools, No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, Teacher Evaluations, Impoverished Environments, Failing Schools and a No Excuse Culture. Through another lens I see: Hopefulness, Resiliency, Optimism, Experiences changing the Brain, Emotional Engagement, Enthusiasm, and Inquiry.

I observe teachers, new and veteran, trying to save the souls of the world while their hearts and minds grow weary, tired, depleted, and they become diminished and overwhelmed. They begin to mirror what they see in their students. When negative emotion overrides positive emotion, immune systems are compromised, cognitive skills narrow, and solutions and change opportunities become stuck and frozen in repetitive thought processes.

There has been much recent work in the field of educational neuroscience, tapping into those social and emotional skills that can be learned and are an integral part of well-being as we generate solutions, creatively think through problems, emotionally enter into sustaining relationships, and manage our lives with improved thinking and positive affect.

Our neurobiology is wired for relationships, empathy, stories and service! We have quietly forgotten in this time of standardized testing and data driven instruction how we are primed for relationships, pleasure, patterns, novelty and prediction. When we emotionally engage our students, tapping into their unique brains, we begin to create dialogue and questions that can create emotional capacity; rewiring and strengthening neural connections based on enriched experiences. But most important in this process is our own evolution and the possibilities that we generate when we self-reflect, question, and serve ourselves and one another. When we begin to feel better our worlds shift and nothing propels our personal well-being more than ‘feeling felt’ in service.

I am excited for the day when my children and grandchildren will be video conferencing with students from Japan, India and China who together will create a communication and performance-based assessment that will align our countries with a deepened respect for the rich diversity each holds, rather than worrying and placing competitive edges inside the hearts and souls of those who were born to relate, to inquire and wonder! A compassionate presence...we now begin...

So now that we have discussed these compassionate principles, what can we expect and what are the outcomes as we create a presence that invites dialogue, collaboration and a brain that is responsive and malleable?

1. We create a gentler and productive conversation when feelings and thoughts are not hot, negative and misinterpreted; because when we listen, understand and learn, we broaden our perspectives and increase positive emotion in the brain.
2. When we share a personal story, actually personalizing the subject matter, we become “real” people with “real” feelings and experiences standing before and alongside those who dares us to teach them! In turn, by sharing a part of ourselves as we create a compassionate presence inside our schools and homes, we self-reflect, re-thinking and re-appraising our own stories and beliefs, and how we came to embrace these so tightly. Maybe it is time to stretch, allow and refigure what does not serve **us** inside our lives any longer. “Our students are our greatest teachers!”
3. Questions are processed in the brain long after they have been asked. When we question with deference, inquire from a need to solve a problem, the question unlocks the key to collaboration and invites equity into every relationship. In our schools where children and adolescents have very few choices and feel a lack of control, providing opportunities to receive feedback, and possible options and ways

to relate in a challenging situation, can pave the path for trusting relationships, increased motivation and higher achievement!

Offering

This work I do is an offering
from my hand and heart.

Let the imagination awaken the power that
is within each student, releasing healing communion throughout the world.

~Shelley Richardson

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Skillful Means

The [Skillful Means](#) wiki, sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

Emotional Journaling

Purpose / Effects

Getting your emotions down on paper can help you to process difficult times as well as help you with sorting out general emotional problems. A journal acts as a free talk therapist..."someone" you can spill all your feelings too, no matter what, without judgment. Using a journal to self-express can relieve anxiety, help you to understand negative emotional triggers, and resolve problems in your daily life.

Method

Summary

Write down your emotions every day as entirely as possible; re-read them later for insight.

Long Version

1. Choose a journal. You can use a plain notebook or a fancy one. You might even want to write an anonymous blog. There are also guided journals like [Writing to Heal](#),

Writing for Emotional Balance, and *Time to Write to Yourself*; guided journals may be helpful if you don't know where to start and feel uncomfortably overwhelmed just using the tips below.

2. Before you begin, remember that this journal is personal. Don't try to write masterful prose or try to analyze your feelings too much. Just spill out your emotions as fully and truthfully as possible without self-judgment. Try to write for ten or fifteen minutes straight daily. Afterwards, re-read your writing for possible insight.
3. Start by describing a recent event. Answer all the basic details of who was there, what were they doing, where and when it occurred, and why things happened as they did. Write in detail, using all five senses to describe the moment. Remember, smells and tastes are as important triggers to emotional memory as sight and hearing. Now, express your feelings about this event--how all your sensory inputs



and interactions with others made you feel. This exercise helps you to become comfortable with a full-spectrum emotional journaling experience.

4. Now, instead of focusing on an exterior event, focus on an interior feeling. Using the emotional trigger linking techniques above, try to understand the “big picture” of your emotional response. If you are anxious, consider the situations in which your anxiety arises and try to identify its triggers. Express your anxiety in its fullness; do not be ashamed. Nobody will read your personal journal; you must bare your raw feelings as much as possible. You will often find thoughts rising up that you couldn’t have expressed otherwise. Follow these thoughts and feelings to their root and try to understand them.
5. You may want to use the event-describing techniques above to examine experiences in your past. Take a life-changing event (whether it is positive or negative) and try to describe it in its fullness. Find all the triggers for emotional response and explore them. You may find links you didn’t realize were there!
6. If relationship troubles are part of your life, use your journal as a way to express your feelings and problems without hurting your partner’s feelings. You may be able to see the situation more objectively after letting off steam. It also may help you to better pinpoint the reasons behind your anger or sadness so that, when you converse with your partner, you’ll be able to resolve them.
7. Notice the words that you use. Sometimes they are the key to deeper feelings within the subconscious. Highlight or underline words and feelings that seem to recur. Try to understand why these particular things are important to the unconscious mind.

History

Diaries and journals have existed for millennia; the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius’ famous work *Meditations* began as a journal expressing his personal philosophy and shows remarkable emotional insight. However, the method of

using a diary as a method of personal emotional exploration is mostly a 20th century phenomenon, seen in the journals of figures like Carl Jung. Later, psychologists such as James W. Pennebaker began exploring the very real benefits of emotional journaling with experiments demonstrating that journaling (especially expressing undisclosed or unexamined trauma) strengthened mental wellbeing and even improved physical health.

Caution

Don't over-think while writing. Let your 10-15 minute writing period be stream-of-consciousness and nonstop. Later, after you've expressed all of your feelings, you can re-read what you wrote and analyze it. Do not, however, do it in the moment.

Notes

Many choose to write before bed as a way to process the events of the day and to release any tension that might impede sleep.

Did you have a diary when you were a teenager? The emotional turmoil of adolescence leads many young people to journal.

If you choose to see a counselor and discuss your emotional progress, the journal can often act as a helpful jumping-off point.

See Also

[Self-Affirmation to Reduce Self-Control Failure](#) - another writing technique that can work synergistically with emotional journaling

External Links

[One of Pennebaker's original papers](#)

[Emotional journaling and homeopathy](#)

[The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius](#)

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.