

September 9, 2013

Strong Attachments

This past weekend, my family took a road trip through New England. The weather was stretching out to giving us the last of summer brightness, the traffic was responding by flowing smoothly, and my kids nodded off at the monotonous stretches of I84/I91 in Central Connecticut. So, we turned to an NPR chat show, which was mildly weaving through the topics of cooking mishaps and college admission blunders.

Then, my attention was anchored by a moderator's question, "And how does this confirm your basic beliefs?" A great therapy question, perfectly paced and timed! I re-focused and found myself immediately identifying with the next story. Like its main character, I underwent immigration in my teen years. And, like the character, my adaptation was buffered by the support of a scholarship from a competitive college. Of course, the protagonist's experiences traversed the extremes that I was fortunate to avoid: leaving the home country at gunfire, or being placed by the UN in an impoverished and racially divided Southern neighborhood. Once again, the moderator highlighted young man's core beliefs: life creates crises that are survived through steady optimism and through accidental kindness of random strangers.

When we arrived, I remained in the car, riveted to the conclusion. The man illustrated his life story by describing an essay that he, apparently, translated and plagiarized from a book by a Bosnian writer, which he smuggled against all odds to the US. That essay captivated a substitute teacher, who shared it during her job interview at a prestigious public school and, through luck and confluence of events, gained the young man an admission. From there, he proceeded to Harvard and to a tenure track position at Chicago University.

A heartfelt and inspiring story! But, the show host continued, narrating with a great sense of humor and irony the efforts that it took to locate the young substitute teacher. And, here the good enough story became fascinating: when their memories were compared, the protagonist was simply wrong! The teacher was monitoring his progress for over a semester. She had full support of the rest of the faculty, who thought that he was advanced beyond all their AP courses, particularly in math and sciences. When she was contacted by NPR, she immediately guessed the reason for their call because, for these many years, she remained certain that this student was destined for success, with or without the support of a private school scholarship.

In therapy, I often talk to my clients about the concept of cognitive dissonance: people most often ignore data that is contrary to their core beliefs. External input is absorbed if it is already supported by intrinsic values. In this story, the core beliefs may have been highly adaptive. It probably served the character well to remain optimistic. Quite likely, it served him well to count on the kindness of strangers. But, by stressing the role of accidental kindness, did he also discount the impact of his own initiative, or under-rate his own potential?

Every week, I am presented with beliefs that are less adaptive: "people ignore my talents," "my value is solely in the serving of others," or "if I voice my needs I will be met with disaster." Of course, I may spend time arguing against such thoughts. Indeed, I may do so for a bit, following the guidelines of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Theory, however, suggests that such arguments would be considered for a moment and, then, become largely discounted as dissonant to the core beliefs. Using Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) approach, I may apply mindfulness and visualization techniques

to slow down the process of discounting new data. The therapy, then, proceeds like the experience of listening to a great talk show: considering alternative view points, with good humor and irony, so that – over time – one may loosen attachment to the old beliefs. When psychotherapy works, the result is inspiration, energy and wonderment – the same feelings that coursed through me on that late summer afternoon.