

## Web-Based Radio Show


### Series on Learning Differences, Learning Challenges, and Learning Strengths:

#### ***Principles to Live By: Basic Truths About Life, Relationships, Children, and Families –Bringing out the Best in the Other person – Part 2 of 4*** Stanley I. Greenspan, M.D.

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Today we are going to continue the theme that we started last week of a new series on “Principles to Live By; principles really for families and all relationships. Last time we talked about two critical principles, always to do more and expect more. Not do less and expect less or do less and expect more or do more and expect less. The two go together. So whenever you want to have more out of a relationship, give first. But then be highly expectant as well, not in a demanding way, but in setting up high standards and hope the other person will meet your model. Usually it works out that way, as we discussed last time. We also discussed the principle of how to really tune into the other person; how to truly empathize and beat to their drum, so to speak. This is very important in parent/child relationships, but also all relationships. The key there, as we discussed last time, was while behavior may be your joint agenda, with a child it may mostly be your agenda to set the standards, the conversation, what they talk about, what they say should be their agenda, although with adult relationships share to some degree. But with kids, if you want to really get in their way and have them open up to you, it’s best to share their agenda. Talk with them about their interest, not have your interests because then they will clam up on you.


Today we are going to talk about one and hopefully maybe two principles. The first one will be a very, very important one, also one of our top few: ***Always try to bring out the best in the other person, whether it is a child or an adult.*** In other words, don’t fall into the trap that we all fall into of bringing out the worst in the other. Typically in spouse relationships, you’ll see adults criticizing one another. They want the other one to be cleaner or more on time or make more money or be a better lover or be more understanding or be this or be that. Everyone, kind of when they get married, or just have any sort of serious relationship with someone else, is looking for their ideal.



Sometimes they are looking for their ideal self – what they were never in life. They want their child to be the perfect athlete that they were never or the perfect student that they were never or the perfectly behaved child that they weren't, “so you don't make the same mistakes I made.” They want their spouse to do for them what their mother never did for them or what their mother did do for them but no one else will do for them. But there is something that the other person isn't living up to – an expectation of a prior relationship or the opposite of a prior relationship, or part of themselves that is being lived out, even if it's in positive or negative ways. Sometimes you want the other person to be a part of yourself that you view as negative in an ironic twist – you want the other person to be more aggressive because you were never aggressive.

Whatever it is, it is not the other person, often. It is some image of your own; some need that you have that you are trying to fulfill. That causes you to, instead of bringing out the best in them, to criticize them, either overtly by being angry and always saying, “Oh, you aren't doing this” or “You aren't doing that” and “I don't know why I ever formed a relationship with you” or “I don't know why I ever married you” or this or that. Or, if not overtly critical, kind of just not being happy with the other person. Kind of finding little minor faults in other things they do. Maybe that they are not like your mother, which is the real issue, but it's just that they are sloppy or not clean enough so you aren't saying, “Oh can you clean this?” but instead you are saying, “Gee, could we do this” or “Could we do that better” or “Why isn't this done?” or “Why isn't that done?” Whatever it is, we are bringing out the negative in the other.


Why is it important to bring out the best in the other person? Well, let's look at a marital relationship. If you bring out the best in the other person and you always try to bring out the best, they are a better spouse to you because they feel more confident and better, and they are more likely to do the things you want them to do because they feel good about themselves and they want to please you. They feel happy. If they are a mother or father to your child, they will more likely be a better parent. What more could you want than to have a better collaborative parent? If they are your child, they are likely to perform better at school. They are likely to do chores around the house with more pleasure. Why? Again, because they feel good about themselves. You are bringing out the best in them. It's not easy to bring out the best in the other person, particularly if you are disappointed, angry, or want more. But actually, another paradox is, the steps to getting more in a relationship for the person being a better partner, is to



bring out the best in them. So you may want more, and the way to get more is to bring out the best in your partner, not to bring out the worst, not to make them feel negative about themselves where they are getting even with you or feeling hostile.

Now let me give you some examples. I've been talking about this in the abstract, but let me give you some examples of how this actually might play out in a relationship. Let's take two adults who are just getting to know each other, or know each other well but are in the early stages of a relationship. Just such a pattern was evident with people whose names I'm going to change, but we'll call Harold and Judy.


Judy always felt that Harold was too passive and the man she really wanted her relationship with was more assertive and more dynamic. But, she never seemed to be able to maintain relationships with those sorts of men and Harold was very sweet and understanding and she really felt good in his company and just enjoyed being with him and found it impossible to give him up. It wasn't ideal and actually her father was a very dynamic person and she kind of, from having her in therapy at one point, kind of knew that her desire to have someone more like her father was not necessarily the kind of person she related to the best or who were her good friends. When she tried to have those relationships they hadn't worked out because she would get angry at them for not paying enough attention to her or not being involved enough, understanding enough, and they countered by being annoyed with her and the relationship would fall apart. So she kind of learned through experience and through her therapy that she had to expand her horizons and Harold was the kind of person she had been really good friends with in the past, and now she enjoyed their relationship. As she said, "I could never really give it up – he's so sweet and understanding and I have such a good time when we are together." But she had this nagging doubt so she was constantly saying little off-the-cuff things like when they saw a movie with a dynamic hero, she would say, "Don't you ever wish you were like him?" She was sort of joking, but not really joking and he would get the twist of the knife and twinge a little bit, but being the sweet person that he was, he would let it go. Sometimes he would even say, "Yeah, I wish I could be a hero for you." Before they were living together, they often spent long weekends together either at her place or his place, and she would frequently comment on things he didn't have, implying that if he were more dynamic and made more money, he might have this. So, "You don't have this computer option?" or "Gee, I thought you would have had a much bigger TV set." Just little passing comments that made him feel smaller. As a consequence, even though they weren't big league hostile jabs, and they had many nice



conversations, he was even more timid with her. For example, a few weeks ago they went out to a restaurant and had made a reservation but somehow he must have given it to someone else because they were making them wait and she was getting annoyed and she wanted him to go argue with the maitre de that they had the reservation and obviously someone had greased their palm with five bucks or something or fifty bucks and taken their spot and make a fuss about it. He was not only reluctant, he wouldn't even talk to the maitre de about it or complain even a little bit. Something he confided later on that he felt badly about that he should have talked to the maitre de and if not the maitre de, then the owner of the restaurant who he had actually known at one point because he had frequented that restaurant quite a bit and could have easily gone.

Even there, Harold was becoming more passive and more cautious because of the worry about criticism from his good friend, from Judy. Judy saw him, actually, evidence more of the very trait she hoped he would change. Also, he found himself beginning to close down a little bit and he found himself a little less open to fear that again, that she would make one of her slights. So rather than being this sort of humorous, warm, and very open person who shared all his foibles and vulnerabilities with her, he would tell her when he had a hard time at work when his boss didn't give him a raise, for example, and how sad he felt or how mistreated he felt. She would instead of empathizing and saying, "Gee, I remember some time like that when I didn't get what I wanted" or "How did it make you feel?" or "Do you have anything you can do to change matters around?" she would say, "Well, there you go again. If you don't stand up for yourself, you're not going to be appreciated." So rather than hearing that again, he would simply keep those areas closed off. He also liked Judy a great deal and there was much in their relationship that they shared, they loved music together, there were movies they shared together, they enjoyed each other physically, and just enjoyed "hanging out." So the relationship was becoming overall less satisfying.


When I saw them, interestingly, not yet as a married couple but as a couple going out in a consultation, I suggested to them this principle, about always trying to bring out the best in the other. Instead of harboring in the negative, bring out the best. Say, "What can I do to help Harold be more confident and more open? Will criticism do it or will criticism only do the opposite, or implied criticism?" And to Harold, "What can I do to bring out the best in Judy so that she isn't always feeling like she isn't getting what she needs; why she wants the dynamic leader type person?" We kind of sensed pretty quickly that these were the kinds of patterns that were involved in, and they



were sort of aware of it and it didn't take much insight to formulate these two patterns for them. To bring out the best in her and to help her be confident, he said that what she really wanted was a sense of being taken care of; that the image of "the leader;" the other person she wanted was really someone who would understand her and take care of her and would, in a sense, to not necessarily have to be a world beater underneath if that's what she really wanted. Because her father, as it turned out in closer inspection, while he was dynamic and strong, didn't take very good care of her. He kind of left her to her mother most of the time, he was out in the business world or among his friends. But he was impressive, but not very protective, it turns out that she felt a little abandoned by him and focused on his leadership and his strength as a way of ignoring or denying that. That would make her, perhaps, more confident and a more open, giving person and a more complimentary person, something he wanted from her – someone who valued him more.

I asked Judy what she thought would help Harold be more protective and back to being more open with her again and maybe at times stand up for himself and herself a little bit more. She said that to help him feel more confident she would need to really emphasize his warmth and his humor and his creativity. He was actually quite a good musician himself as an amateur and they both loved music together. She thought that would go a long way. So with that in mind, they both began trying to shift their patterns a little bit and "bring out the best in the other one."


Every time we had a principle or rule that Judy was about to make a slight or was feeling, "Oh I wish Harold was just a tougher person," she would in her mind find something in what he just did that also showed a trait that drew her to him – maybe not always consciously, but while she was in the relationship. So for example, when in a restaurant and service was slow and she wished he could complain to the waitress instead of just sitting at the table, she immediately asked herself what the other trait that he has that I actually like about him? Or, what would my father have done in this situation that I seem to want him to do? Well, her father would have thrown a big fuss and raise the roof, but Harold also showed a lot of patience. He was making some jokes about it. So she said she does love his patience – he is very patient with me and he never bugs me. My father always demanded a lot from me but he wasn't there for me. So instead of saying something negative, she empathized with him and said that they weren't really in a rush and this gives us more time to talk and I'm glad they served some bread and cheese as a warm up while you were waiting and I'm glad they had



such good bread and cheese. Actually when she focused on the patience that he had, they were really enjoying what they were talking about. There was no reason to try to finish the meal sooner. She also ordered a little less to eat which will save some money. So she found a silver lining in this situation and was smiles and happy and enjoying a conversation. The conversation was actually – they were talking about something that was happening to her at work that day that had troubled her, while she would have preferred having her whole meal there in front of her, it was fine being more patient and in a few more minutes the waitress came over and took their order and they got started.

That little shift; that little change changed the tone of the evening from a negative slight or how tense or how inhibited, her positive comment, which is also true about Harold feeling good about the conversation. He actually offered her a good insight about a woman at work who was very jealous of Judy and Judy was feeling some tension from and how what he thought was going on from other things she said about her about her jealousy that put things in perspective for Judy that Judy enjoyed talking about. The evening went much better. Their physical intimacy later that evening was warmer and more fulfilling because the evening was, overall, more positive. From that humble beginning of a little change in tone of dinner, their relationship got back gradually over the next few months, more mutually open track, Harold started opening up again and feeling good about the way Judy felt towards him. Over time, Judy saw Harold get a little more confident and balance his warmth and empathy with a little more assertiveness; a little more leadership. For example, he would suggest things that they do on the weekends rather than always defer to her, which is what she had wanted for him to come up with more ideas so that she could respond, and she didn't always have to be the one to always think about things.


Things generally picked up on a more positive direction with him being a little more confident, still being the warm, sweet person and not the aggressive person that she thought she wanted. And, not unexpectedly in physical intimacy, he was a little more the leader. He was a little bolder, which he had always wanted, but not too bold, which was the kind of man she thought she would like, but were actually very unsatisfying to her. Overall, things got better. Just recently, they set a wedding date. Both are much happier with each other. For his part, while he was more confident and Judy had done the lion's share of the changing, he was making attempts to help Judy feel protected. So when she felt vulnerable at work, for example, with this work mate



who was very jealous and sometimes would do undermining things such as come up with critiques for some of the reports she had done that were not necessary or not necessarily warranted, he provided strategies that she could use to offset it. He was very clever and very strategic in terms of figuring out what to do in these complicated business situations. He had always been reluctant to share some of these with Judy because of the fear that she would criticize them and Judy wasn't benefiting from them. She felt he was actually taking care of her a little bit at work. For example, when her colleague in a meeting would pick just the moment she was making a suggestion to make another suggestion that would take attention away from her, he suggested that she introduce her comments with a statement such as, "I know there are other suggestions" and she knew what her friend might say and anticipated what the friend might say, "such as blah blah blah, but here's why I think A is the right way to go." That took the steam out of her colleague before her colleague ever got her steam going. It worked, actually, very, very well.


Here is where a minor shift changes the tone of the relationship, both Harold and Judy both felt more confident, both brought out the best in the other one, and hopefully that will continue. Let me take another example of a situation between a parent and a child.

Warren was a 9 year old little boy who was being a little bit of what his parents described as a "space cadet" at school, where he was forgetting to bring home his homework, he was only in the third grade so it wasn't yet a catastrophe, and he was forgetting to hand in the homework, if he brought it home and wasn't doing it always, and they didn't want him to "get into bad habits" as he progressed into the higher grades and eventually went to junior high and high school. They were concerned about it so naturally they did what all parents did – they criticized him for forgetting his homework, they took away TV and computer time, play dates with friends, and matters only got worse – he became more negative and some days refused to go to school. He talked periodically about hating school and saying he was going to run away to some place where he wouldn't have to go to school, and they became more concerned. He also became a little more sad-looking and a little more reserved and less open; they were having less fun together as a family. He also had a younger brother who was just a year and a half younger and was in the grade below him who was an exceptional student. He was organized and orderly, he brought everything home, he got "A's" on his reports and things or little checks on assignments, etc.



When parents brought Warren in for a consultation, I saw that he had some mild problems with sequencing; with holding in mind a 4-5 step sequence, and his penmanship and fine motor skills weren't as good as his overall coordination, so he was quite average in terms of his athletic and coordinating ability. He was a good reader and already understood math concepts and seemed to be a bright, articulate youngster, and so there were no significant reasons, other than the fact that it was a little harder work for him to sequence, especially in fine motor things and aspects of verbal memory, where he had to hold in mind many steps in a row. But he could do it when he was motivated. We played some games that were highly motivating like a treasure hunt game where the treasure was something he really wanted, and he could hold in mind that sequence, but if it was something less than he wanted that badly, he would get confused easily so it wasn't a piece of cake for him. So this was an area of relative vulnerability. It seemed to get worse as his parents made him more anxious and were punitive about his being forgetful. So we talked about this principle: Bringing out the best in the other. How could they bring out the best in Warren and not the worst in Warren, how could they help him concentrate and actually do some exercises that would give him the ability to improve his sequencing ability. I gave him a bunch of fine motor exercises and little games to play like some treasure hunts where he had to remember three or four things in a row and problem solve in a row. And I also gave him some strategies for remembering his work. We created a little chart where he would list the homework and his parents would actually get the assignments a week ahead of time so they could check the chart to see if it had everything in it, and if not, plug in the missing pieces. Then he would hang the chart in his room and on it would be the assignment and he would fill in when he wanted to do it – that evening, that afternoon – how much he wanted to do it on a 1-10 scale – from not wanting to do it at all, to loving it. Also, not only when he would do it and how much he wanted to do it, but what he thought his likelihood of his doing it was, given that if it was something that he didn't want to do, and then what actually happened – did he do it or not. So the decision making would be now conscious. The only deal we made on his parents part was that they wouldn't nag him – it would be his responsibility. But at least he would know what he was doing and why he was doing it. So we had a little game like that.


But the key to getting him to implement this and start this whole pattern going was to first figure out how to bring out the best in him and get him motivated, to want to do things. So in discussion with this parents, we tried to figure out what were the things he was good at. What were the things that he took pride in? Well, it turned out



that he was very social and one of the things he liked to do in school while he wasn't always writing down the assignments was he liked to chit chat with the kids. He was just beginning to come into his own, socially. He had been shy as a younger child and now was beginning to enjoy peer relationships and what I like to call the politics of the playground, and had three or four good friends, but he liked to mix it up with different groups – be part of this group or part of that group. So there were the “cool” kids he could be part of because he was very social and very funny, but also because he was a little more athletic, other kids liked him because he was a good enough soccer player so he could be on the soccer team, and again he was a funny and open and warm child. Even the girls liked him and even though he was only nine, he had an eye for the ladies because he was, again, funny and not into the chasing of the girls or being hostile to the girls. He was a little more positive about it. He was very good socially.


When I met him I felt his eventual work would be something to do with people. Whether it's managing people or being an educator or therapist, but something to do with people. So I asked his parents how they could bring out the best in him. They said they could focus on his friendships and we could certainly not take away play dates when he doesn't do his work. So we began just making comments here and there when there was an opportunity, of his skill at being able to be friends with this group and that group. And how there was this kid across the street who was difficult for people to befriend who he had befriended and who actually was better behaved with him because he somehow knew how to get through to this kid across the street who turned out to be a behavior problem with other children and get into mischief, like throwing a baseball through the window or breaking things or knocking things over. Also, on the weekends, because of his pleasures and friendships and relationships, I encouraged Dad to let him invite one or two friends along on special projects they would do, whether it was going to a baseball game or just going to the park. They lived near a big county park that actually had a nice boating area and a little pond and he and his dad liked to often rent a boat and he got to invite one or two of his good buddies with him, and he loved that. He loved the gregariousness of it and he loved the opportunity to be the “leader with his friends.”

So we emphasized that, and his parents really took pride in his being good at that. Also, at school, he was a naturally good reader and good at spelling and sequencing, math was a little tough before because of his sequencing problems, so they emphasized his writing and his skills. They began wondering if he could use that



strength after three or four weeks of just focusing on the positive to help him overcome some of the things that were harder, like just remembering assignments. Also, by identifying that it wasn't easy to sequence; it wasn't easy to hold in mind three or four steps, particularly when you are really enjoying talking to your friends, whether he had an idea of how to do both because it was at the end of the classes when he would be writing things down that it was his little chance to chit chat before the teacher started the next lesson. He thought that one thing he could do was, just simply, he had a very studious friend who wrote everything down, he could get it from him at the end of the day and then he wouldn't have to worry as much if he missed something during the period. His parents thought this was a good idea and they didn't criticize him for not getting it down himself but they thought that was reasonable. He could try, but if there was a pressing discussion going on with a distinguished colleague in the third grade, he could give that priority if he wanted to.

With this pattern of pride and positive solutions, he became more motivated. He began not getting his assignments all the time, but a lot of the time. So then his parents brought out the idea of the chart I had mentioned that would help, and that they could probably engineer getting the assignments a week ahead of time to fill in any missing pieces, and is that something he would find helpful? They let the decision be his, and he thought it would be a good idea. Particularly he liked the idea of no nagging and his chance to indicate whether he wanted to do the assignment or didn't want to do it. And to indicate if he did it or not, realizing that his grade and the teacher expected him to do it. He didn't become an A student in that class, but he, through this, and there were days when he decided not to do something because he thought it was silly or, as he put it, "busy work," and his parents let it go by, so he had some "not turned in" homework sheets for which he got zeros, but he managed to do better and he got the equivalent of B's and A's in some of the reading and spelling tasks where he didn't have to do much work for, and things turned around. His parents felt better about him, he was feeling more positive again, they were bringing out the best in him, and he, in his own way, was bringing out the best in them by being very good at what he was good at with his social skills, his friendships, and the diversity of people he could relate to and understand and understand him and enjoy. His parents started enjoying him more and he started enjoying them more. The talk of running away not only stopped, but he talked about things they were going to do that next summer and things he was looking forward to.



These are two very simple examples – not big league – everyday kind of common examples of bringing out the best in the other as opposed to the worst. Where, in one case, a child and in the other case, two adults, but they happen in a million different ways, through all walks of life, and it’s amazing what can happen when you simply remember to bring out the best in the other person. They are either my child or the parent of my child or they are the person I’m seriously considering becoming the parent of my child eventually, or I want to share my life with, it’s not in my best interest to bring out their worst and get on this negative tone. And, can I be the leader in turning it around? If each member of a relationship tries that, it’s remarkable what can happen.

That is all we are going to do for today, just focus on that one principle – bringing out the best in the other, because we got started a little bit late today. Next time we will focus on another principle, one that also will be important for families, as well as for adult relationships. We will continue on our series of “Principles to Live By” next week and I look forward to seeing you then, and in the meantime, try out these first couple of doing more and expecting more, tuning in to the other person, and bringing out the best in the other person.