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We grow as human beings because of the relationships we nourish, foster

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“Man is a relational being” this is how Jacob Moreno, one of the 20th century’s foremost advocates of human interaction defined his fellow human beings.

The quality of relationships we build and foster matters much. Without human interaction each of us will slowly lose our meaning to live and finally perish like a flower which dies before it blooms.

Relationships define us, give us cause to live and help us become who we are meant to be.

In my childhood days our family lived near the Music Academy in Chennai. In front of our house was a row of shops among which was a small barber shop, owned and managed by Mr. Palani.

Emotional bank

My father used to visit Palani periodically and avail of his services. Soon my father developed a liking for him and supported him with funds whenever he could afford them. After my father passed away my mother and I moved to another part of Chennai.



I went on to become a consultant and was commissioned to run a training program at a resort close to the temple city Mahabalipuram. While driving to the resort, my car had a flat tyre and I was unable to change it.

A car going in the opposite direction stopped and an elderly gentleman alighted and asked if I needed help. I explained my plight and he was kind enough to offer to drop me in the resort. In the meanwhile his driver, he said, would fix the puncture and deliver the car to the resort where I was running the training program.

As we drove to the resort the elderly gentleman enquired about me and when I mentioned my father’s name, he stopped the car almost in the middle of the road, held my hands and tearfully told

me that he was Palani the barber, who was now a wealthy businessman. He was able to start a business owing to Rs. 10,000 my father had generously given him without asking for it to be returned. My father’s investment in Palani several years before this incident was paid back with gratitude.

Whether it is in the context of an organisation or in one’s personal life, investment in relationships is like investing in an ‘emotional bank.’ As we invest money in a commercial bank, through deposits

that we create, the funds are available to us when we require them, so also in investing in people emotionally we are able to draw on them when the need arises.

The army has a saying 'if you invest in people in peace time, you bleed less in war.' No truer statement has ever been made.

Break-ups, starting afresh

Yet in spite of all we know and understand about relationships, we permit fracture, allow some to sour and even diminish one another through disregard, resentment, judgment, blame and such other.

My friend and I parted bitterly after being together, first in childhood as playmates and later as business partners aspiring to build an organisation and gain personal wealth. Though the event is now several years old, the memory and pain of parting still rankles. As I examined the reasons for our breaking up I recognise that it happened because we believed each was attempting to upstage the other. What could have been resolved through dialogue was allowed to fester and finally tear us apart. The possibility of creating what could have been a winning combination was thus forsaken.

Reflection now tells me that if both my partner and I had resorted to what is termed in management parlance as 'zero based,' which means ignoring what has happened and starting afresh, we could have set aside our differences and started afresh looking at what was happening in our relationship and thus find a way out of the impasse.

When we know that such erosions should not happen to our relationships, 'what prevents us from stopping it?'

It is not easy to stem the slide once erosion and toxicity set in. Yet it behoves each of us as human beings to prevent the spiraling down of relationships.

Fostering relationships

In my book *Creating Winning Relationships through Conversations with Self*, published by Notion Press, Chennai, I attempt to walk alongside each of my fellow human beings sharing with them through live examples of what relationships mean, as I have come to understand, what causes a tear in them, the challenges encountered and what each of us can possibly do to rebuild those that have faltered, enhance those that are already rich and functional and find and celebrate those that will heighten my existence.

There is a story I recall now many years after my father passed away and it gives me goose bumps.

Often, a leper, a man disfigured by disease would come to our gate and ask for alms.

Initially I or my mother would give him some money, but soon we felt uncomfortable seeing him so we would drive him away. Yet he kept returning every other month. Both my mother and I used to wonder why he was coming in spite of our not giving him any money and then we realised that my father would either directly or through our house help give generously to this man. Hence, he came back incessantly.

Some years later my father, mother and I were visiting a very popular temple in Kerala, that was known to be busy and bustling with people. Gaining entry into the temple was not easy and one had to wait in a queue to get in. It was early morning when we were there in the temple and the crowd was surging.

We were looking to find someone to help us enter the temple, when my father felt someone tugging at his shirt sleeve. He looked around and saw the leper who used to come begging to our house, pulling at my father's shirt. My father greeted the man and the man in turn asked my father if we wanted entry into the temple. My father said yes and soon enough the leper in a loud voice started

shouting and asking people to make way for him. The crowd suddenly seemed repulsed and moved away from the leper as he led my family towards the temple door. Soon we gained access and before the crowd could re-converge we found ourselves within the confines of the temple. The leper merely smiled at us and disappeared into the crowd.

As I recall the incident I realise that each of us, irrespective of the limitations we have, can contribute in our own way to fostering relationships. The incident of the gentleman who helped us enter the temple tells me relationships cannot distinguish between those who are infirm or disable and those who are well.

Generosity can be infectious

SJ Rao was a sales officer with a manufacturer of aluminium which I bought from him as it was the principal raw material for the aluminium bottle closures I manufactured. On one occasion we needed some raw material very urgently. The company manufacturing the raw material had declared closure of their plant owing to annual maintenance and the retail market in my city had no stock of the product. I met Rao one night past a sensible hour and pleaded with him to help me.

Rao was indisposed running high temperature yet no sooner I made my request, unmindful of his illness he got out of his bed and got ready. He came with me in my car.

We must have driven no less than 50 kilometers that night, reaching a small town on the outskirts of the metro I lived in.

He knocked at the door of an old home and we were met by an aging gentleman who at that hour seemed sleepy and quite disheveled. He met us at the door.

On hearing Rao's request made on my behalf he took us to a godown at the rear of the house, opened the door and showed us 500 kg. of aluminium, the only stock he had. He told me he was willing to part with it as Rao had always helped him in the past and he was only returning the favour.

I learnt that night that generosity can truly be infectious and I have sometimes also paid forward, a lesson I learnt from Rao.

As existential philosophers say 'there is only one life that each of us has, and if I cannot or do not live it to its full, when I depart I would have left all those I could have impacted poorer.'

A friend of mine shared his story with me about his mother who had recently passed away. He lost his father, a successful businessman, when he was 2 years old. As my friend's mother had no knowledge of the business, she left it in the care of a relative who swindled her and robbed her of her inheritance. The mother and child suffered owing to lack of any means to keep body and soul together and moved into a neighbouring slum. Not wanting to deprive her son of a decent education, she took up employment simultaneously in 4 homes where she would go to wash vessels, sweep and clean their floors.

Hard work afforded her the opportunity to send her son to school, later to college and finally to one of the country's best known institute of higher studies. When my friend was about 25 years old she even arranged for him to be married to an equally successful woman and soon owing to the acquired wealth the family settled into a wealthy residential locality.

My friend's mother passed away when my friend turned 60. At the condolence meeting he organised in memory of his mother were present families of her former employers. The number of families she had served in her life as a 'maid' exceeded 15 and they were all there. In his speech my friend said these words as an offering to his mother, words that ring still in my ears after several months "As I stand before you I feel a sense of sadness, for instead of parading my mother I have hidden her all these years. My mother toiled as a maid to feed and educate me but I neglected her. She often used to tell me that when she died she would ask God one question: 'Why oh! Lord, have

you made so many religions? Would not just one have been enough to bind us to you?' Now my mother has passed away and what remains with me is her unfulfilled wish."

After the speech all of us left the hall with tears in our eyes.

In life and in organisations we sometimes trample on people on our way up, even if we do it without awareness. Yet it is these same people that we meet as we spiral down. Thus it is important to remember all those who have helped and supported us as we climb the ladder of success for when we hurtle down they will be there to cradle and support us.

Positive psychology

Each of us has someone who we always remember for the positive manner they impacted us. Sometimes it is a teacher, at other times an old boss or sometimes a parent or a relative or even a friend.

I remember with fondness my teacher Srinivasan who became a Principal later. He gave me my first lessons in coaching. These lessons have stood me in good stead and have even found resonance in my work.

My father passed away when I was 13 years old. I was an only child, timid and scared. Though I may not have really been impacted by my father's death as my uncles and my mother were there to look after me, most people who visited us in the days after my father died commiserated with me and told me life was going to be tough and that I had to grow up fast. This upset me greatly as I did not understand them nor knew how to respond.

Soon friends and relatives stopped coming and my mother had to return to the UK where she was pursuing an academic course. I continued to live in the same city and my aged Grandfather came to live with me. He was stern and a distant man. This made me feel lonely and I wept greatly.

However, within a week of my mother's departure to the UK, Mr Srinivasan began visiting me every evening after school hours. He would come and escort me for long walks. In those walks he would encourage me to share, to talk first of the day gone by, and then slowly nudge me into talking about my achievements.

Long before positive psychology was talked about, my teacher gave me my first lessons in looking at what I did right than what I did not do. He would then help me look for signs of what 'I believed in' i.e., he would help me discover the core of my strengths and those in all the people I knew. He taught me to look for positives in myself and others, a keen concept in what today is called 'Appreciative Inquiry.' He would direct me to phrase statements in a positive fashion, thus help me elicit an equally positive response from people I related to. He always told me that if I focus on what I have, which is my strength, what I did not have, which perhaps were my flaws, if any, would in time disappear.

All the subliminal lessons he taught me then have been available to me as I have attempted to build relationships both in my work and in my life.

Relationships are always worth restoring, preserving and enhancing.

The following tips can help preserve and enhance relationships:

****Recognise that** conflict is rooted in unmet needs. When you expect someone to meet your need and it is not done you set yourself up for disappointment and bitterness.

****Always take** the initiative. It does not matter whether you are the offender or the offended. Make the first move. Don't wait for the other person; go to him or her first.

****Restoring broken** relationships is important. Don't procrastinate; make excuses or promises such as 'I will get around to it someday.' Delay only deepens resentment and makes matters worse. Acting quickly also reduces damage to us.

****Sympathise with** their feelings. Use your heart more than your ears. Listen first to understand than to be understood. Focus on feelings not on fact. Begin with sympathy and not with solutions.

****Confess your** part of the conflict. Admit your mistakes. Confession is a powerful tool for reconciliation. When you begin by humbly admitting your mistakes, it defuses the other person's anger and disarms them.

****Attack the** problem not the person. You cannot fix a problem if you are consumed with fixing the blame. How you say it is as important as what you say. If you say something offensively it will be received defensively.

****Emphasise reconciliation**, not resolution. It is not necessary that everyone agrees with everything. Reconciliation focuses on relationship while resolution focuses on the problem. When we focus on reconciliation, the problem loses significance and often becomes irrelevant.

We can establish a relationship even if we are unable to resolve our differences. Sheryl Sandberg, in her phenomenal book 'Option B' says 'death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship.'

A fitting closure for this article.'

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