

# Acknowledging Vulnerability and Finding Meaning

By Marilyn Lammert

Last May, I posed this question on the list serv: "In your life as a person and a mental health professional—currently or in the past—what is most difficult or stressful for you?" You can read representative excerpts from the responses I received in "Our Online Society" on the next page or find a full compilation of responses reposted to the list serv on June 15.

One issue that was raised and especially resonated with me was how to invest in work while managing the personal stressors inherent in this work and life in general. This has been a focus for me throughout more than 40 years in the mental health profession, beginning in my twenties, which were, for me, a time of much idealism. I worked 12 to 14 hour days in St. Louis' inner city, before and while I was in social work school at Washington University. I put everything into what I was doing and ended up in the hospital; actually I almost died. I loved that work, but couldn't continue. So I've done different things--gotten another degree, taught in several schools of social work, entered private practice.

After my illness, I struggled for a very long time, angry at life for handing this to me. Miriam Polster, a Gestalt therapy mentor, told me early on that I had something special to offer because of my illness and near-death experience. That surprising concept pointed me toward meaning.

How do we make the most of what life hands us? This seems the richest vein we have to mine when we are the "thou" in the I-thou relationships that are at the center of our work.

I had faced a serious risk, both with issues of the illness and its treatment. I knew deeply about facing death and the potential negative consequences of treatment I underwent in order to live.

An early private practice client had my same autoimmune illness and extreme treatment options. He didn't recognize his stress or vulnerability. I knew personally and from the literature that this illness is exacerbated by stress, and that acknowledging vulnerability often equates with weakness.

Intuition led to imagery work to access his vulnerability. Imagery allowed a kind of "end run" around his conscious awareness of anxiety about feeling vulner-

able; focusing (in imagery) on the medically vulnerable body part was just enough distance for him to be aware of those feelings and take part in a dialogue with what was needed to care for them. We worked this way until he was more comfortable with his feelings and with expressing them.

No extreme medical treatment was needed. He came to recognize the positive meaning of his illness. I knew we could get there because of my experience.

About this time I met Lynn Braillier, a pioneer in stress management. As part of our research on coping with stress, I interviewed participants in her stress management classes. We found that those who coped better had found some positive meaning in what had happened to them. This resonated with my experience.

In stressful situations, we are both vulnerable and also have the possibility of growth. Recognizing the positive aspects of negative experiences is strengthening, and serves to build internal resources. This, in turn, leads to more positivity and an upward spiral of feeling good that sustains itself.<sup>1</sup> This growth as a result of struggle has been coined "posttraumatic growth."<sup>2</sup> I look for meaning of events and solutions rather than obstacles. Understanding opportunities in events can provide a basis for using these to reinforce and inform clinical work.

The future is open and can be influenced. No matter what the current circumstances might be, I believe life is still full of possibilities. ❖

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1 Eric L. Garland, Barbara Fredrickson, Ann M. Kring, David P. Johnson, Piper S. Meyer, and David L. Penn, "Upward Spirals of Positive Emotions Counter Downward Spirals of Negativity: Insights from the Broaden-and-Build Theory and Affective Neuroscience on The Treatment of Emotion Dysfunctions and Deficits in Psychopathology," *Clinical Psychology Review*, November, 2010, 849-64.

2 Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence," *Psychological Inquiry*, 2004. Vol.15, No.1, 1-18.