

The Walking Wounded

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Part One

I recently saw a movie that I'd like to recommend: *Brothers*. For personal reasons I have an interest in the brothers theme – but to be perfectly honest the main reason we saw this film is because my wife Linda has a crush on the lead actor, Toby Maguire. (We see a lot of George Clooney movies, too.)

As the film begins, we are introduced to two brothers. One is a happy and successful family man with a lovely wife and two young daughters. The other is a troubled loser who's just finished serving prison time for a failed bank robbery. The “good” brother is a Marine officer about to be deployed to Afghanistan. The “bad” brother seems a lost soul, troubled and without direction.

We follow the good brother to Afghanistan where a horrific set of circumstances leave him seriously traumatized.

Meanwhile, the troubled brother makes an emotional connection with his sister-in-law and nieces. Through helping his brothers' family while his brother is overseas, he begins to develop a sense of self-worth and some insight into what really matters in life. It looks as if the “bad” brother has a chance to become a good person after all.

Eventually, the good brother returns home from war a changed man. He suffers from a crushing case of PTSD and has trouble reconnecting with his wife and children. The kids clearly prefer their uncle to their father, whose odd and sometimes explosive behavior makes them feel unsafe. Unbeknownst to his family, the hero carries a terrible secret that alienates him from the uncomplicated life he once knew. We watch in horror as his paranoid delusions drive him to the brink of violence. By the end of the movie the “good” and “bad” brothers have, for all intents and purposes, exchanged places.

Gifted acting makes the transformation completely believable, driving home the message that human character is not set in stone. On the contrary, the human psyche is fragile, and good people can be driven to madness and violence by extreme circumstances.

A few days later, I talked with my mother about the movie. I joked: “Maybe Ted could be the ‘good brother’ for once if I did something really bad.” Needless to say, Mom did not think this was a good idea.

According to Mom, Ted was traumatized by a prolonged stay in the hospital when he was just nine months old. In those days, hospitals weren't very welcoming to families, so Mom and Dad were only allowed to visit their infant son every other day for two hours at a time. When Teddy returned home from the hospital, Mom said, he no longer smiled or made eye contact – as if his spirit had been broken.

If a healthy and mature adult can be unhinged by a traumatic experience (as in war or genocide), we can only imagine the long-term impact of trauma on a small child. Last November, the Center for Disease Control published a study which found that people who had adverse childhood experiences (ACE's) – in other words, those who had experienced serious emotional, physical or psychological trauma in childhood

– had life expectancies twenty years shorter than average! Even the researchers were shocked by their findings.

A social worker once told me, “Trauma unaddressed is trauma that will be re-enacted in one form or another.” It might manifest as depression, substance abuse, self-harm, or aggression toward others — including acts of violence. Unfortunately, my brother’s trauma (if Mom was right) was never fully addressed. Years later, while a student at Harvard University, he was lured into participating in a psychological research project that exposed him to regular humiliation and abuse. I say this as a statement of fact, not to make excuses. No one but Ted constructed and mailed the bombs he used to kill people. But I do wonder if his psychological balance – the essential trust we must have in others to remain healthy – was undermined by his childhood hospital trauma and by the psychological abuse he endured as an unwitting guinea pig at Harvard.

Every act of violence – whether it is the violence of hurtful and demeaning language, bullying, spousal abuse, child abuse, assault, or murder – leaves people traumatized in its wake. The walking wounded are all around us, their mental scars mostly invisible. When we hurt the most, we’re often most alone. Only kindness can make a difference, so we might try extending as much kindness as we can.

Part Two

From Three Stooges skits to the Eddie Murphy-Dan Akroyd film, *Trading Places*, American pop culture has toyed with the question of heredity vs. environment. Which has the greater influence?

It would be hard to deny that environmental factors have a significant impact. There is a large body of research supporting the premise that abused children have generally poorer life outcomes than children who are not abused. There is corresponding research to indicate that skillful early interventions with at-risk families can improve a child’s prospects while reducing their likelihood of future involvement with the criminal justice system.

Why is it, then, that some people who’ve endured incredibly traumatic childhoods (e.g. extreme physical or sexual abuse; being orphaned in war) become well-adjusted adults, whereas others are seemingly scarred for life by lesser childhood setbacks?

In the early 1990’s, I got a job counseling youth at Equinox Youth Shelter, located in Albany’s tough South End neighborhood. Teenage residents came to the shelter through various avenues – voluntary check-ins, referral by Traveler’s Aid, being dropped-off by a parent, brought by CPS after a home removal, or placement by family court in response to a JD or PINS petition.

But it made little sense to label these kids based on which door they came in by because they all presented similar, severe problems mixed with typical teenage angst. It was tempting to guess who had the better chance of succeeding in life and who was likely to end up on drugs, in prison, or dead. But we didn’t have any crystal balls. We

could only hope and fear for each child, and meanwhile pray that something about their interaction with us might prove helpful.

One of the smartest kids I've ever met grew up watching his mother being beaten up. When he got older and tried to defend her, he got beaten up too. Time to split, he decided, at the age of 14. But, gosh that kid was smart! With a little help from the shelter's tutor, he aced his GED in Vermont with the highest score I'd ever seen.

Two years ago, I received a letter from him from a state correctional facility. He was looking at a 12-year bid for manslaughter. The news broke my heart. I'd really hoped this young man would be OK.

Another kid I knew carried scars from physical abuse. He'd also been sexually abused by a family member. In middle school, he was unable to spell simple words like "cat" or "dog." Upon leaving the shelter, he asked me if I would help him with his homework after school. I thought I might see him once or twice, but he kept coming back, day after day, nursing an impossible dream that he might legitimately graduate from 8th grade. But he did more than that. Four years later, he graduated from Albany High School. Today, he attends college part time, has a 3.2 grade point average, and runs his own business, working seven days a week. A few people have told me, "Dave, you saved that kid!" but I beg to differ. Even at an early age, this young man knew the difference between a positive person and a negative influence. He had little reason to trust anyone, but he knew he needed to trust someone. If he hadn't found me, he would have found someone else.

Both of these boys had traumatic childhoods. So why did one end up in prison while the other went to college? We often say it's a matter of "character" – but what exactly does that word mean?

For some time now, researchers have been studying a trait called "resilience." Back in the 1960's, researchers studying the effects of childhood trauma found what they expected: traumatized children often experience serious problems as adults. But they also discovered something unexpected: 20–40% of traumatized kids became fairly well adjusted in adulthood. Although trauma affected their lives, it didn't bring them down.

One explanation of the phenomenon of resilience has focused – with some evidentiary support – on the child's relationships. Researchers found that the presence of just one supportive adult in a child's life could help counteract the harmful effects of trauma. It is reassuring to learn that psychological damage caused by traumatic experiences can be overcome. In the field of social work, we learned to focus less exclusively on a child's deficits once we concluded that a child's supports and assets matter too.

More recently, genetic researchers have identified what some have called a "resilience gene" – actually two specific bits in the DNA chain. Based on various genetic combinations, researchers now believe that about 33% of the population can be classified as especially resilient, 50% as ordinarily resilient, and 17% as lacking in resilience. So we're back to that old debate about heredity vs. environment.

But there's really no contradiction in believing that both heredity and environment are important. On one hand, everyone struggles through life with their own unique set of gifts and challenges. On the other hand, how we treat people genuinely matters.

The Ted K Archive

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