On the Journey

Spring 2009

TOOLS FOR LIVING
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From Hopeless to Happy

If life could be graded, Anthony would give his an F. His new job is stressful, his teenage daughter is struggling with depression, he and his wife are fighting a lot lately, and he hates himself for the extra 50 pounds he's carrying.

Anthony feels hopeless and his life seems depressing and dark. Every setback reinforces his pessimism and grim certainty that nothing will ever get better.

Barbara's struggles seem just as daunting. Her husband just lost his job two months after the birth of their first child. She is responsible for her elderly mother, who is becomingly increasingly frail. To make things worse, her best friend and main support is moving to another state and the landlord just raised the rent by $200. Despite all this, Barbara gives her life a strong B+ and knows there are some A+ days ahead.

> **'Hope' is the thing with feathers**
> **That perches in the soul**
> **And sings the tunes without the words**
> **And never stops—at all.**
>
> *—Emily Dickinson*

Unlike Anthony, Barbara sees her setbacks as *temporary obstacles* to be overcome. To her, crises are part of life, opportunities for her to gain in wisdom and courage.

Put simply, some people are optimists and others are pessimists. However, optimism isn't an accident—it's a skill that can be learned, one that can help us feel better, resist depression and greatly improve our lives.

Psychologist, clinical researcher and bestselling author Martin Seligman has spent 25 years studying optimism and pessimism. In his book, *Learned Optimism*, he states that pessimistic thinking can undermine not just our behavior but our success in all areas of our lives.

"Pessimism is escapable," he writes. "Pessimists can learn to be optimists."

By altering our view of our lives, we can actually alter our lives, he says. First, he says we must recognize our "explanatory style," which is what we say to ourselves when we experience a setback. By breaking the "I give up" pattern of thinking and changing our interior negative dialogue, we can encourage what he calls "flexible optimism." He believes that focusing on our innate character strengths (wisdom, courage, compassion), rather than our perceived failures, boosts not just our moods, but our immune system. Research has shown that optimistic people tend to be healthier and experience more success in life; therefore, he encourages parents to develop the patterns of optimism in their children.

Practicing "spiritual optimism" is another way to improve the quality of our lives, writes Joan Borysenko, psychologist, speaker and author of several books, including *Fire in the Soul*. She encourages people who experience feelings of despair and hopelessness in times of crises to remember it takes courage to live, and that we can find that courage by facing our fears, finding support and using prayer or meditation.

Similar techniques outlined by Dr. David Burns in his book *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, have been effective in treating depression. He believes that changing our thinking has a profound effect on our moods, including cases of severe depression. It's not our lives that depress us, he writes, but our thinking about our lives.

So unless Anthony begins to change his thinking, his life's outlook may remain bleak and dismal. Barbara, however, is likely to graduate to even more satisfying and fulfilling years ahead because she believes her life is filled with challenges and opportunities. ✻

10 Things We Can Control

We can't control the weather, death or another's thoughts, much as we might like to. But our lives are rich with choices that we make every day. The choices that we make in these 10 important areas are the rudder that steers our life.

1. Our actions. We alone are responsible for what we do.

2. Our words. Spoken or written, the words we choose impact our lives and the lives of others.

3. Our beliefs. Our thoughts, values and beliefs form the basis for all of our emotions. We can change our beliefs.

4. Our values. What's important to us is *our* call. No one else can tell us what to value.

5. Our work. Although many of us complain of being trapped in a job or profession, we do actually get to choose what our work in the world is.

6. Our friends. Those we associate with say a lot about what we think of ourselves. We can choose to have friends who bring us down or who support us.

7. Our input. We can select our sources of news, turn off televisions and radios, and/or ignore advertising.

8. Our time. Though it sometimes feels like we have no say, we do choose every day how we will use the 24 hours that a day gives us.

9. Our basic health. We can't control our genetic make-up, but we can choose to exercise, sleep enough, eat healthy food, get routine check-ups, etc.

10. Our legacy. All that we choose while alive—our actions, words, etc.—will become the gift we leave when we die. ✻

A Letter From

Michelle Barone, MA, MFT

Enjoy this issue of my newsletter.

My new book, Finding Your Way: Exploring Your Family's Educational Journey, *is now available through lulu.com. You can go directly to lulu.com or access the ordering page on my website: www.michellebarone.net.*

The book is a journey for self and family discovery. Full of thought-provoking questions and exercises designed to increase self-awareness, define beliefs about education and design family goals. You can hear a discussion of the book on my website. Seminar and teleseminar dates for Finding Your Way, *are also available on my website.*

My office news and services: I would like to welcome Laura Rauh, MA, MFT, as my intern. Laura graduated from Pacific Oaks college and brings with her expertise in breastfeeding, attachment parenting, prenatal stress, blended families and parenting. She is mom to five children.

Currently, I work with individuals, couples, families, children and teens. I bring my knowledge of interpersonal neurobiology, mind/body therapy and alternative health/education to my work. I maintain a large referral base of supportive health care providers. I currently serve on the board of the Glendale Area Mental Health Professional Association as the e-list facilitator.

Services Offered

- *Individual, couple, family counseling*
- *Healing grief and loss*
- *Mind/body therapy*
- *Stress management*
- *Alternative education/homeschooling support*
- *Parenting classes and support groups*

Office and phone sessions by appointment.

Please visit my website www.michellebarone.net for listings of groups, classes and speaking engagements.

Treat yourself gently,

Michelle Barone, MA, MFT

How Much Joy Can You Stand?

Everyone has a dream. It may whisper to us in a still, small voice or it may have the volume and intensity of Martin Luthur King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The problem is that not many of us are actually living our dream. But as Suzanne Falter-Barns says in her book, How Much Joy Can You Stand?, *if we begin to nurture and pursue that dream, if we can manage to leap off the cliff and trust ourselves to fly, we will experience a fine, effortless joy like nothing else. "It may take a while to wade through all your resistance, fears, misperceptions and basic disbelief in yourself," she says. "It may take far longer than you think it should. But if you can just keep going through the process, and trust yourself in a basic way not attempted before, the joy will be yours." Test your joy quotient with this quiz.*

True	False	
❍	❍	1. Creativity doesn't just belong to artistic types living in loft studios. It belongs to me and to every human. I AM creative!
❍	❍	2. I think of myself as someone who doesn't just want what I want, but as someone who is going to get it.
❍	❍	3. I keep blank notebooks in several places for jotting down my ideas and inspirations, and a tape recorder for recording observations.
❍	❍	4. No matter how "uncreative," sensible, logical and otherwise unimpulsive I might consider myself, if I have a pressing idea—a core desire—I'm going to express it.
❍	❍	5. My family, my community, my world all benefit from my pursuit of my dream.
❍	❍	6. Feeling vulnerable and insecure is part of the process of creating any dream. To see me through those times, I call on those who I know support my project, not those who might discourage my efforts.
❍	❍	7. I quiet my mind regularly, and when I do, creative ideas and inspirations often show up unannounced.
❍	❍	8. I look around my world—city streets or nature's paths—for creative inspiration and sources of joy.
❍	❍	9. I anticipate unexpected twists of fate, chance encounters and unorthodox solutions.
❍	❍	10. It isn't up to me what the world thinks of me. My job is to work on my dream and send it out there.
❍	❍	11. I make a regular habit of connecting with my wishes, and I'm not afraid to wish for too much. But rather than wish for personal success alone, I link my wishes to how they serve people.
❍	❍	12. I use affirmations—positive statements phrased in the present tense and repeated often—to calm any fears I identify as holding me back.
❍	❍	13. I know that false desires are accompanied by feelings that are anxious, grasping and withholding, whereas true heart's desires are accompanied by feelings that are joyful, releasing and generous.
❍	❍	14. I make it a habit to do one scary thing and to do one thing differently every day.

If you answered "false" more often than "true," you may be plugging up your joy channel. Please don't hesitate to call if you would like help clearing it and reconnecting to your joy.

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Oh, the Tales We Tell:
Getting Beyond Our Stories

Every night, Joanne tucks herself in and tells herself her favorite bedtime story: *My husband is weak, irresponsible, overly interested in sex and a complete idiot about parenting.*

Her husband, Jerome, has his own favorite story: *My wife is a critical and demanding control freak, who shuts me out of family life and out of our bed, and nags so much my head pounds.*

Every day, we tell ourselves enough of these kinds of stories to fill a library: Why my spouse left this morning without saying goodbye. Why my friend hasn't called in a long time. What the tire salesman meant when he laughed at my question. Why my father is so judgmental. Why my daughter is being so difficult. How my boss has it in for me. How I'm such a failure.

And on, and on, and on.

We live our lives as if the stories are true. We act and react, often in pain, from our often mistaken understanding of another's words or actions, our assumptions about why they are saying or doing what they are, and our thoughts about how those people—and we, ourselves—*should be* different.

Yet, it is these stories, and the emotions that come from the stories, that are usually the source of pain in relationships. We want to blame another, but in reality, it's usually our thinking that is causing the discomfort, says Byron Katie, author of the best-selling book *Loving What Is*.

For example, Katie says, when you think the thought, "My father shouldn't be so judgmental," you might get angry, resent his criticisms, his advice, his belief that he knows best. You might avoid him or not listen to what he has to say about anything. You might be silent or rude when you're with him.

But while you believe your father to be judgmental, another might hear his judgments as good advice, or as one man's opinion, while someone else might find his words amusing. Your belief that your father shouldn't act the way he does or say the words he says are what cause you the anger, resentment and possibly even separation.

What we need to do to ease the pain and experience more freedom in our lives is learn to get beyond our stories, to get under our beliefs to what's really living there.

"The result of investigation is often a deeper appreciation of the people in our lives, and a realization that it was not their words or actions that really harmed us, but our uninvestigated thoughts about their words or actions," Katie says.

In her book, Katie outlines a simple path of inquiry into these horror stories we tell ourselves that revolves around four questions:

1. Is it true?

2. Can you absolutely know that it's true?

3. How do you react when you think that thought?

4. Who would you be without the thought?

First, state your belief about someone and ask yourself if it is true and whether you can know absolutely, without a doubt, that it is true. For example, you might say, "My children are uncooperative ingrates." Is it true they are ungrateful? Uncooperative? Have they ever expressed appreciation or done their chores without complaining? Are they cooperative at school or at grandma's house? Do you know for sure that their unwillingness to help around the house is about wanting to make your life miserable?

The next question to ask yourself is: How do you react when you think these thoughts? Do you find yourself angry and resentful? Do you grumble all the while cleaning up after them? Do you yell at them, starting a fight and making chore day more like war day? Are you embarrassed when they forget to say "Thank you" for a gift?

Talk about lack of peace and harmony!

Imagine that you don't have this story any more. Who would you be?

Perhaps you would be a happy parent who merrily modeled the joy of having a clean house or work space. Perhaps you would be less concerned about what others thought of your parenting. Perhaps you would be a parent who expressed love rather than resentment to your children, and whose children then expressed it back to you. Perhaps you would be calmer and more peaceful.

The final step in this investigation is to turn around the statements you've been making. Try them on. See if they fit. Do you express your gratitude enough? Do you thank your children, express appreciation to your mate, your parents, your co-workers? How about to yourself?

And how cooperative are you? Do you work together with your children on *their* wishes and desires? Would your boss say you are a team player? Do you cooperate with your different inner "parts" to make sure you get enough rest and good food, new things to learn and fun time off, mixed in with all of your work?

With an inquiry like this, there is no right answer. The goal is not perfection, but truth.

"Who would you be without your story?" Katie says. "You never know until you inquire. There is no story that is you or that leads to you. Every story leads away from you."

When Depression is Mild

At some time, nearly every human being experiences feelings of depression —sadness, discouragement, the blues. These are common, normal feelings that come and go—mild depressions that can be seasonal or event-related, or simply part of the warp and woof of life's cycle.

Depression becomes an illness when symptoms intensify and persist over an extended period of time.

The good news is that depression can be treated; the sad news is that nearly two-thirds of depressed people don't get appropriate treatment. Even with all we know, some still believe depression is a personal fault or weakness, and that the person who is suffering could just "snap out of it" if he or she wanted to.

Like many other illnesses, denial that anything is wrong may be one reason help is not sought. Other times people don't seek help because they don't recognize the symptoms—in themselves or in others.

Following are some characteristics of depression and some dos and don'ts if you or someone you care about is experiencing mild depression.

Some Symptoms of Depression

- Persistent sad or "empty" feelings.
- Negative feelings—guilt, unworthiness, self-criticism or self-blame.
- Loss of interest in ordinary activities.
- Decreased energy, feeling fatigued, restless, irritable or lethargic.
- Increase or decrease of sleep, insomnia; awaking earlier or later than usual.
- Loss of interest in sex.
- Changes in appetite—eating more or less, gaining or losing weight.
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions.

If symptoms persist and the following additional symptoms appear, then professional help is needed.

- Excessive weeping or crying.
- Thoughts of suicide or death.
- Persistent physical symptoms such as headaches or digestive disorders.

When depression is mild, what should a person do?

Try to be with other people, especially supportive, understanding people. Go to movies or ballgames or other cultural or recreational activities that you enjoy. Participate in social activities or community gatherings. Do something physical —go for walks, work in the yard, plant flowers.

Break large tasks into smaller ones; set priorities. Only do what you can and check your expectations of yourself.

Talk about how you're feeling with friends and family. If you feel like you need to talk to your therapist, by all means, do so.

What are things someone with depression should *not* do?

- Don't isolate or hide out.
- Don't set difficult goals or take on too much responsibility.
- Don't make major life decisions —changing jobs, getting married or divorced—without first consulting with others who know you well and have a more objective view of your situation.
- Don't expect to suddenly get over the depression. Most likely, feeling better will happen gradually.
- Don't accept negative thinking and feelings as reflecting your true situation.

When these symptoms last more than a few weeks or if a person's mood becomes too depressed, there may be a question about the severity of the depression. Professional help may be the next step. ✻

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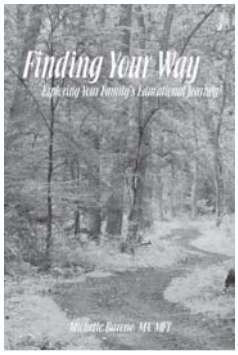

Michelle's new book, *Finding Your Way: Exploring Your Family's Educational Journey*, is now available through lulu.com. You can go directly to lulu.com or access the ordering page on my website: www.michellebarone.net.