Communitas is a ritual-building process that inspires and revitalizes while reaffirming relationships within a community, state University of Virginia psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues. According to Anthropologist Victor Turner, building communitas is an essential step to activating a community to healthy family functioning, healthy child development, and other dimensions of well-being. It also creates positive emotion, which according to psychologist Barbara Fredrickson and mathematician Marcial Losada, builds upward spirals for individuals and groups.

Here is an example of some of the work I’ve done with my own family as an action researcher to build communitas and expand positive emotion. As we approach Passover and Easter, perhaps you will consider the power you have at building new positive traditions within the culture of your own networks. I call this Social-Emotional Leadership, which begins with your decision to stand up for the well-being of those you love.

Ho Hum Holiday

I have had the good fortune of being born into a large, Italian family, for which I am utterly and completely grateful. With aunts, uncles, and cousins, we are thirty members strong. Traditionally, we see each other at holidays, which are always about feasting and merriment; the events are orchestrated around the plethora of food and the drink. The men of the family typically flock to the television to watch the sporting events du jour; others of us less interested in sports stay in the living room to eat and imbibe or to kibitz about the food and drink. My siblings and cousins agreed: this tradition was feeling
I realized the need for Social-Emotional Leadership within my own network two years ago when I saw one of the youngest members of our clan exhibiting some troubling behaviors on Easter. This young boy joined the men in the family room in a friendly betting pool that my Uncle Charlie, a patriarch of our family, organized in good fun for the baseball game. But as this young boy joined in, I noticed his physical and emotional responses to first thinking he was winning and then, through a sudden turn of events in the game, thinking he was losing these seemingly “friendly” bets. His emotional and physical reactions were quite bothersome to me; I saw him embody real excitement and then real rage almost within the same moment.

Most bothersome was that we allowed his emotional roller coaster to continue without intervention. In fact, none of the other adults seemed at all fazed by his reactions as if a pink elephant were right there in the family room and we were all navigating around it, or worse, not even noticing it at all.

The Apple Doesn’t Fall Far From the Tree

But when I stood back to observe, I realized that the behaviors the boy was exhibiting were very much in line with what has been modeled for him by me and other members of our network. Compulsive behaviors (those that bring us to extremes—away from what Aristotle marks as virtue), including but not limited to gambling, are a recurring, multi-generational issue that affects our network; why would we expect a child’s reality to be any different unless we wanted it to be so?

The apple not falling far from the tree is no problem, so long as the tree is strong and deeply rooted in a nourishing bed of soil, tended to and cared for, by the hopeful gardeners who live off of it. Social-Emotional Leaders are hopeful gardeners.

A Whole Lot of Fun

So last year on Easter, I decided to act as a Social-Emotional Leader – to introduce a new custom that could be built into our tradition in addition to our traditional celebration. I invited my family’s participation in a Nintendo Wii tennis tournament. Everyone participated in the bracket—three generations—even those who were most reluctant. As teams were up to play, they got a practice round to get the feel of the Wii and then it was on to the tournament. In no time, teams were devising strategies and having real fun.

My nephew, Michael, and cousin, Tracy emerged as victors and during the final round of the tournament, the energy and excitement that came from the family room was a palpable sign that my objective was reached. As a result, interest in other indoor and outdoor games was generated that day and groups naturally formed to participate. This shows the contagious effect of positive emotion and that as social capital is built, it starts to grow exponentially.

What’s In This For YOU?

As we approach religious holidays this season, I urge you to consider what you bring to the table as a Social-Emotional Leader, should you choose to be. Put on your action researcher hat and consider what happens when you elicit positive emotion, intentionally, and how this space could help you create a new tradition for the culture of your network. My advice to you is to be creative, use your strengths, and leverage another Social-Emotional Leader or two to help you along the way.

As one of my coaches Mike Litman is fond of saying, “You don’t have to get it right, you just have to get it going.” I’d love to hear your stories – so please email me the results of your efforts. Have fun and good luck.

References:


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Louis, Another great article! I love how you remind us of ways to incorporate positive psychology into our daily lives through transforming family rituals. Our families are both accessible and challenging places to start being social emotional leaders and rituals are important to communitas. So why not transform the ritual as a way to re-engineer relationships? This is an important contribution to the science of hive-building! I’m going to try it! Happy Easter!

LOUIS
ALLORO
© March 30, 2009 - 10:57 am

Thanks, Eleanor. Glad you found the article meaningful. I agree with you that transforming rituals is a great way to re-engineer relationships. Any ideas of how you might do this with your hive? Do share!
And Happy Easter to you too.

MARCIAL
LOSADA
© March 31, 2009 - 10:04 am

Louis,
The term “upward spiral” is used often misused in positive psychology. I don’t use this term for several reasons (not even in my American Psychologist paper with Barb.)
Upward spirals is a bad choice to represent flourishing for several reasons:
1) Mathematically, a spiral is represented by \( r = a + b \cdot Z \), where \( Z \) is an angle and \( a \) and \( b \) are parameters that control how the spiral goes up. This equation is the quintessence of linearity. All complex interaction processes in human behavior are nonlinear. You cannot use a linear representation for complex interactive processes.
2) Psychologically, I don’t know of any data set on human interaction that would map into an upward spiral. That would be against the second law of thermodynamics which essentially says that is not possible to have processes that diverge to infinity (as upward spirals do). That is why mathematicians and physicists abhor of divergence and they seek convergence. String theory was born to a great extent out of this constraint.
3) We already know the dynamics of high performance and flourishing. With thousand of time series backing up the meta learning model, I was able to show that the signature of flourishing and high performance teams is the butterfly, not upward spirals. The butterfly also has an iconic appeal: it represents transformation in Eastern cultures. We don’t need upward spirals to represent goodness, resilience, growth or generativity. The butterfly fits all those nicely and precisely.

LOUIS
© March 31, 2009 - 11:17 pm

Marcial,
Thank you for the clarification on the upward spiral – well noted that the butterfly works best.
Louis
You're welcome, Louis. Beauty and Truth should go together. When they do, whole unknown universes open. In my clarification, I spoke about what is true from the point of view of the data and the mathematics that fit those data. But we should also honor Beauty. When people portray positive movement as upward spirals they are expressing a longing. This is what we must honor. Now the question becomes, How does the butterfly honor that longing?

Like yourself, I descend from a European family on both my father and mother sides. What you describe in your article, is quite close to what I lived as a child interacting with my extended family. Sometimes we were up, sometimes we were down, sometimes we turned left, other times right. Many times we moved forward, but we also had to backtrack. And those movements were always genuine, there was an authentic newness to them, a lack of routine. We traced those movements together because we were highly connected. Now, with the passage of time, if I were to trace the trajectories of the way we related, I would not be surprised if a butterfly would show up.

In my meta learning model moving up is positivity, moving down is negativity, moving forward is to embrace others, moving back is to fold into yourself, moving left is to inquire and moving right is to advocate for our point of view. We need to do all these movements to meta learn, to go beyond the place we already were. It is not easy to escape the routines that trap us and get us nailed to the ground. The way out requires many twists and turns. We move from there on wings of butterflies, not on upward spirals.

Wow, Marcial, THAT is beautiful. Thank you for explaining the movement of the butterfly as representative of not only data, but the most probable trajectory of any group of people who move together — up, down, left, right.

I love this quote on butterflies: "Adding wings to caterpillars does not create butterflies- it creates awkward and dysfunctional caterpillars. Butterflies are created through transformation."- Stephanie Pace Marshall (Founding President and President Emerita of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy.)

In his work on social construction, Ken Gergen talks about the butterfly effect in terms of connections we share with others (same as what you're talking about in regard to your family). He argues that we operate in Derrida’s ‘mimesis’ – carrying pieces: some of you, some of me, some of us. This is co-creation. Co-creation is beautiful and powerful.

All of us are racist.
All of us are not racist.
Everything that can be said, can be unsaid.
How do we fly and with what wings?
Louis

Thanks, Dr. Marcial F. for your Losada Line, for me is the most clear, simple and elegant way to know that I am going up in the espiral of a better quality of life, being much more positive than negative in all aspects of my existence in this old Planet...

Visualizing your complexors in non linear movements I feel the incredible amount of positive energy that I have when I am inside of the Losada Zone...

Ramon.
Dr. Marcial F.... When I am inside of the Positive Losada Zone, I don’t feel the time passing...opposite to the slow and bored time when I am thinking or feeling in a negative way...

Your Meta-Learning is really a wonderful, and best of all, a Mathematical Model that works in every field that we can imagine...So I thanks you very much for your great discovery!

Ramón Avelino.
Rebecca: Thank you Elaine. Your review is very great.

David: As a man, I can say you nailed everything there is to know about men in relationships. In 2 lines! Secret #1:

robinhoodi: Yeah! Very true, actually I heard about Carin Rockind even in the past that she has taught thousands of...

Lisa Buksbaum: You are both talented and wise.... think of all the lives you’ve enhanced. Twice graced with...

Eileen: I am a working hairdresser for over 30 years, also I am currently studying Mental Health Counseling/Art...

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