Reading the Ability of a Patient to Change His or Her Life

by James P. Gustafson, MD

Half of what I do in the clinic with our residents is help them find the drugs for their patients that will provide the greatest benefit and the least harm. This is a subject that is generally well taught and sometimes taught excepted.

The principle of the single example. To reach the patient quickly and powerfully, you need key details that will arouse great feeling in her. Strangely enough, the simplest way to get there in no time at all is to ask something like, “What is bothering you the most right now? Just off the top of your head, tell me what other things you are doing.” The patient is usually unguarded against such a question because she has no idea that her single example is the story of her whole life. Why this turns out to be the case is a matter of considerable theoretical interest. James Mann once called it “the present and chronically recurring pain.” I have explained it in terms of the fractal principle of chaos theory, which is that certain structures recur on every scale of time and space.2 The reader with more time can follow the theoretical argument there.

Now, it is also true that about half of our patients will decline an invitation to give an example of what bothers them. They will say, “Nothing,” or “My drug is pooping out,” or some such thing, which puts us back to supplying them with more of our neurotransmitter agents. Thus, the defenses do operate against openness.

The principle of the best of times and the worst of times. James Mann often called it “the principle of compensation.” For millions of years, aboriginal humanity was selected for its ability to engage in relativity. The principle of exchange.

CASE VIGNETTE

A young businessman woman, presented to me by a resident as having dysthymia, had been depressed for as long as she could remember, without suicidal ideation, inability to function, manic phases, drug or alcohol dependence, or psychotic elements. I asked her for an example. “What got her depressed?” Two things, she responded: going to work in her business, which is boring, and taking care of her boyfriend, who is always sick.

The principle of the best of times and the worst of times. Something about our field brings about a flattening of the hist...
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COMMENTS

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Pallor in the face of ever-changing circumstances. The principle of exchange would have a bad time, and he would have a good time, and she would have a bad time, and therefore he should go himself! I was impressed with her readiness to consider her exchange and to say no. What about saying yes to what she wanted for herself, I asked. I was quite astonished when she now came forward with having designed a house in high school and many similar projects, including a book of house designs, in the last few weeks. How had she managed to do this? Well, her therapist before me, who was leaving, had challenged her to finish it and submit it. Suddenly, from having no energy to complete anything, she had more than she needed in a burst of enthusiasm. I commented that it seemed to make a great difference that she had a person in her corner (the ally effect).

There was much more I wanted to go into, but that would have to wait for the next meeting. I wanted to know about her acquiescence to miserable exchanges in her family of origin, and I wanted to know about the lack of support for her original work (the principle of the best of times and the worst of times always applies to childhood). I also wanted to drop into her dreams, and I invited her to jot down what was on her mind every evening and what followed in the dream night.

Of course, this too was only a beginning but, again, we had a patient ready to pursue the hard work of therapy with considerable force mobilized. She, too, would slip many times, for the exterior world would dim the interior, when she acquiesces again, and the interior world will dim the exterior when she gets high and mighty in her originality and then balks at crossing over to show it to anyone. It will take a while to get her exchanges consistently right. Yet, it is already evident that she can move along a new trajectory to a better life, given the kind of help I have outlined.


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