



Resilience and Junk

By Kathy Marshall Emerson, Executive Director
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I see a particular poster today as clearly as I did 60 years ago. I was ten and enrolled in the annual two-week summer vacation Bible school at our little country church. The poster was white with a green and orange stick figure child; the yellow sun was big and splashy. The spiny old Norwegian teacher read with certainty: "God doesn't make junk!" The truth of the message has been with me all these years. This is the root of resilience. No human being is junk. Every person is *at promise*.

I recall Darlene Stewart's wonderful story of "Chico Learns to Read." (*Creating the Teachable Moment*, pp. 11-17) "Chico, a seventh grader reading on a first grade level, had years of classroom defeat behind him . . . 'I can't read. . . I've never been able to do it. There is something wrong with me. I've got a learning disability.' Chico was the most frightened student I'd ever met." Reading teacher Stewart paid attention to state of mind—her own and Chico's. "If either Chico or I were in an impatient or distracted state of mind, I didn't try to teach, but took that as a signal to tend to the mood" by playing a game or doing a puzzle. "After a few minutes the mood would change. . . . When Chico's mind was free of self-limiting thoughts and self-induced fear . . . he was capable of learning." After just eight weeks he was reading at the sixth grade level. " 'Do you know what that means? . . . Just think of the intelligence you have had to be able to do that. Learning five years of reading in eight weeks isn't something a learning disabled person can do.' . . . He was stunned, shaken, fragile, reborn, not yet knowing this new person in his skin. . . . He left the class that day in a daze. . . . Moments later he was back. He looked at me . . . his brown eyes brimming with tears and said, 'I can read. I really can read. There's nothing wrong with me after all!' "

Part of what Stewart was doing by attending to state of mind was reading the feeling. Another defeated student, Danny, on Ritalin for ADD, was again unresponsive. In exasperation Stewart, said, "Danny what in the world do you want?" Without hesitation Danny said, " 'I want shining eyes. I want someone, when they see me, to get eyes that are soft and wet and shiny, like they have light coming into them from behind. Shining eyes, that's what I want.' . . . Danny's words hit like cannon balls. A rush of long-forgotten feeling welled up inside and I knew exactly what Danny wanted. I wanted it too. All of us, whether we know it or not, are looking for shining feelings. . . . it's a beautiful feeling and we're all looking for it."

Stewart concludes, "I think we're looking for beautiful feelings because we had them once, when we felt most truly who we really are, and we won't feel whole again until we get them back. When we look for self-affirming, potential-releasing feelings outside ourselves, we get lost, because what we're looking for isn't outside. The feelings we're looking for, the ones that make us unusually strong, aren't outside. They're inside. We feel them in positive states of mind." (p. 155-56)

In one school-community where I trained teachers for many years too many young people saw themselves as junk. A large percentage of surveyed secondary students reported, "I do not have much to be proud of" and "sometimes I think I am no good." We aimed for increased teacher well-being so these adults could more easily see students as *at promise*. Syd Banks would always remind us to look for a good feeling. Like Darlene Stewart, he knew, "Positive thoughts and feelings will assist you to discover the mental health and wisdom that lie within you." (*The Missing Link*, p. 112)

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