Hope for Children Like Betsy

By Lynn K. Wilder and Rob Weidmann
The patterns of human lives are as unique as the patterns of snowflakes. Betsy’s pattern formed an extraordinary design. She was born into a cold Wisconsin world in early May of 1930, chilled from two sources—damp Wisconsin weather and troubled German parents. The weather in Wisconsin has always been harsh from the forces of nature. Betsy’s parents chose their own harsh pattern.

Her father, Hans, had been recognized early in life for his brilliance. He was the youngest man ever to graduate from Marquette Medical School. Betsy’s mother, Alberta, was equally talented. Before her marriage to Hans, Alberta had been a concert pianist trained in Chicago, who had taught at the Milwaukee Conservatory of Music. Strikingly handsome and well to do, they were a popular couple in the small town in which they settled. He, outgoing and admired, ran a medical office and pharmacy out of their basement; Alberta took care of the home. Well, sort of.

Betsy was the one who assured the patients that her father would come down soon. She was the one who struggled to get him out of bed. She was the one who got herself and her brother up for school and made peanut butter sandwiches at lunchtime. She even traveled with her father in the middle of the night to the homes where he delivered infants, cared for the dying, and injected a serum made from his own blood into his patients with polio (he being a survivor of the disease). This serum was reported by county residents to have miraculous healing qualities; unfortunately, its benefits were never documented. It was Betsy’s job, she felt, to keep her father awake at the wheel—to keep him alive, and to keep the image of respectability alive.

That Betsy assume such roles became a necessity. Hans and Alberta were drug addicts. He had become addicted while in medical school, when the stress of 36-hour emergency room shifts had prompted him to take amphetamines to stay awake and narcotics to go to sleep. Alberta had joined him. In the nighttime, their home was rent by shrill quarreling, pushing, screaming, scuffling over sexual antics, and falling down stairs, with the chaos eventually subsiding into the melancholy sounds of Alberta’s piano playing. Later in life, Betsy looked at the old bedspread from her parents’ room and remarked, “Oh the beatings that took place here.” Her brother Billy’s job was to protect his mother as best he could, though he was barely a year older than Betsy. At night, Betsy closed the windows in an effort to keep the neighbors uninformed.

Hans toiled over several years to break the chains of addiction. He traveled to Texas and lived with a relative, a nurse, as he tried to conquer the addiction. But Mexicans desperate for money ran new supplies to him across the border under cover of darkness, and he did not turn them away. Back in Wisconsin, Hans finally gave up the struggle by closing the garage door, starting his car, siphoning the exhaust into the car, and drifting off to death.

Eleven-year-old Betsy came home at lunchtime that particular day. Alberta and Billy were still in bed asleep. Betsy heard the car running in the garage. She quickly made herself a sandwich and ran back to school. After school, the car was still running in the garage, so she went upstairs and awakened her mother, who checked to see why the car was running. Together they found Hans completely out of the car, as if he had changed his mind about his suicide after it was too late. Betsy lived with the awful realization that he might have been alive at noon, and she might have saved him. She could never be sure.

Alberta didn’t handle the tragedy well. She was overcome with grief and with drugs. The neighbors washed her hair, cleaned her up, and dressed her for the viewing of Hans’ body in the family dining room. None of Betsy’s grandparents (even the pair who had kept her every summer that she was old enough in their summer cabin on Lac du Flambeau) came to the funeral; but her Uncle Tony came, and he alone held her. Directly thereafter, she and her brother were taken to separate foster homes; Alberta went to a state institution. The family lived apart for several years.

After the stresses and tragedies of her young life, Betsy might have been expected to make some poor decisions as she matured, but she didn’t. As her daughter, I know Betsy well and have pondered for many years on why she did so well, considering the risk factors of childhood abuse and
neglect. From what she expressed to me before Alzheimer’s clouded her mind, I believe she survived and even thrived on the strength of two qualities not uncommon in those who have learned to handle a storm. One is resiliency, the other spirituality.

Resiliency

Resilience is the inherent ability of an individual to cope with stressors. Research indicates that at risk children who successfully avoid mental illness and poor choices typically employ a number of coping skills (Kinsella & Anderson, 1996). Betsy, who was definitely at risk, applied several coping skills in order to stay emotionally healthy. One coping skill that builds resiliency is constructive escape. Children like Betsy need to become involved in activities—indeed independent of the home—that occupy their time and attention in constructive ways and bring them pleasure. Some activities that serve as constructive escape are tutoring younger students, participating in athletics, participating in service learning activities, joining after-school clubs and study groups, acting in drama productions, taking art classes, joining music groups, participating in organized religious groups, and attending other extra curricular or social activities (Wilder & Obiakor, in press). One way Betsy escaped was through dance.

Shirley Temple, the little curly-headed movie star, was about the age of Betsy and Billy. With her popularity, dance studios sprang up all over the country, including the Hollywood Dance Studio in Waukesha, Wisconsin. Alberta, always anxious for anything she considered proper and classy, drove her son and daughter twice a week to tap dancing lessons. Billy didn’t tap very well, even with instructions, but Betsy blossomed. At the exclusive recital, held at a local movie theater, she literally shook the stage with her pronounced stomping every fifth or sixth beat. Billy, who hadn’t made the cut to perform, teased his sister. She took it characteristically well and offered him a few suggestions on how he could improve his dancing skills. Dance helped Betsy feel competent at something, feel like she belonged to an important group and had power as a group member. Creating such conditions for children at risk helps them to feel optimistic about the future (Sagor, 1996).

Another coping skill that builds resiliency in children is learning to seek support from healthy individuals. Adults are especially effective, but anyone who cares can help (Beardslee, Wright, Salt, Drezner, Gladstone, Versage, & Rothberg, 1997). Resilient children tend to be active, affectionate, and good-natured, making it easier for them to gain social and other kinds of support from others (Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001). Betsy constantly fostered strong relationships with others. One of the most valuable relationships in her young life was with her brother Billy. On one occasion, Hans’ oldest brother Tony took Betsy and Billy fishing on Pokegama Lake. Immediately Betsy began catching fish, and Tony was kept busy taking the fish off her hook while praising her ability as a great sportswoman. Meanwhile, Billy sat in the boat holding a rod with a bare hook. Finally, during a lull in Betsy’s fishing success, Tony attempted to help Billy become a great outdoorsman, too. But, alas, as Betsy once again started to pull them in, Billy sat there with nary a nibble. Tony praised Betsy’s prowess, now and then glancing at her brother. Finally, Billy whined that he should change sides with her because all the fish were on her side of the boat. Betsy cheerfully agreed to the change, but she continued to catch all the fish. Billy responded by griping and teasing. Betsy endured his harassing on this and many occasions because she didn’t want to jeopardize that important relationship with her brother.

The gift of building relationships continued into Betsy’s adult life. She had an unusual talent for...
making anyone near her feel comfortable. She truly loved people, showing genuine interest in their troubles. She spent the days of her adult life looking for people who were hurting and then doing what she could to ease their burdens, as if these acts were in some way an atonement for her childhood troubles. She was determined that her own children, the children of her neighbors, and, later, the students she taught in religious education classes, would never experience the kind of pain she had known without the support that she had to offer.

Some might recognize this gift as charity. Betsy was contented with it; she caused others to feel it, and they were drawn to her. More than once, as Betsy went through the checkout at a store with her purchases, the line of customers would accumulate behind her as the clerk, a total stranger, told Betsy with great intensity about the nuances of her personal life. Betsy listened with heart and soul, unconcerned about the mounting numbers behind her. She survived and even thrived despite her childhood experiences because of her resilient personal characteristics, her use of constructive escape, her precious personal relationships, and her attention, as an adult, to helping others who were experiencing pain as she had experienced it. Betsy learned to turn bad experiences into good personal qualities, even though the images and emotions of her abuse and neglect never left her memory or her conversation until Alzheimer’s changed her.

**Spirituality**

Another coping mechanism that saved Betsy from the all-too-common emotional problems that can result from childhood abuse and neglect was an increase in spiritual faith. Kinsella and Anderson (1996) reported on a retrospective study of these children and siblings of persons with emotional problems:

> Many of the respondents spoke of distressing periods where they felt hopeless and helpless. A religious or spiritual faith was articulated by several of the participants as an important means of coping during the bleakest of times. Existing family values appeared to be influential, but were not necessarily linked to the use of this coping technique. A daughter whose mother had been diagnosed with [a mental illness] prior to her birth stated, “I’ve always had faith in God—that God cared about me. So I always prayed. I always believed that He would hear me, so I never gave up, and that’s how I kept going, otherwise I would have quit. So, I remember praying. I’ve always prayed, and I believe in my heart that my faith kept me alive.” (p.28)

Typically, children who have a strong relationship with a healthy parent or other adult figure tend to adjust to hardships in life better than children who lack that supportive relationship (Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001). For some individuals at risk of emotional problems, like Betsy, a religious figure or a personal image of God can serve as this dependable, loving adult who cares. Then spiritual strength becomes a daily companion; spirituality becomes more than merely an exercise that improves one’s life, but one that sustains it.

> Who builds a church within his heart
> And takes it with him everywhere
> Is holier far than he whose church
> Is but a one-day house of prayer.

Morris Abel Beer (Clark, 1941, p. 87)

For Betsy and others with similar stressors in their lives, spirituality with its concept of an adult of a higher power can be the very lifeline that moves them along toward normalcy.

After Hans’ death, although no one talked to Betsy about her pain, someone invited her to Sunday School. She later indicated that this was a turning point in her life. Having been introduced to God, she believed He cared whether she lived or died, as no one else seemed to. God was someone to talk to. She felt that he was there for her. This
gave her faith in herself. If the great God of the universe cared for her, then surely she must have value. She threw herself into her schoolwork, an instance of constructive escape in her teen years, where she excelled as her father had. She attended church regularly. For some individuals, a relationship with a higher power contributes a unique, often reinforcing dimension to the experience of support. Spirituality and support from a higher being can strengthen a sense of personal coherence, of being a “whole person” with a purpose in living (Fallot, 2001).

Another benefit of spirituality is an increase of hope. Chamberlain (1993) found that belief in a higher power gives individuals hope. Hope in the possibility of a better, more positive life drives many vulnerable children to overcome their difficulties (Werner, 1992). Change is a form of coping, and belief in a higher power can be a catalyst for change when individuals believe that change is possible. Not only does this spirituality help individuals change the rules of the coping system, it helps them change their attitudes and value systems as well. Husaini, Blasi, and Miller (1999) found that religious involvement is related to a greater sense of well-being and fewer symptoms of depression. Case and McMinn (2001) found that religious psychologists use prayer and meditation as an important means for coping with the stressors of their occupation. The same effect can be observed in others, not just in psychologists. Hope, change, religious involvement, and prayer all assist religious individuals in dealing with stressors.

In addition, spirituality promotes personal values that, if lived, can greatly influence lives. As an adult, Betsy was with a group of friends that was gossiping about another friend who was not there. The spurned woman found out about the conversation, and Betsy lost her friendship. Betsy subsequently taught her children that one should never say unkind things about another person. One of her daughters reported taking that lesson to heart as a small example of a larger lesson not to judge others. Betsy espoused the value of avoiding judgment due to her spirituality; judging others was clearly wrong. This belief was evident in her response when one of her daughters chose a religion quite different from her own. Betsy listened to others’ judgments, quietly accepted them, and never responded with an unkind word. Spirituality allowed her to espouse a constructive value, practice it in her life, and teach it to her children.

Fellowship and altruistic service are other aspects of spirituality that greatly influence people. Participation in fellowship and service can strengthen the faith of the individual, help the person avoid self-preoccupation and foster unselfishness, give him or her a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose, and give the individual further help in coping (Richards & Bergin, 1997). Betsy made full use of the therapeutic effects of altruistic service in her life. Because she sought opportunities to help others in genuine ways that were comfortable to her, using her individual talents, she found peace in her own life. Her service was only part of the solution, though. Another aspect was her connection to a religious community that gave
her fellowship and provided occasions to give service to others. For Betsy, as for others like her, spirituality has been a lifeline to positive mental health.

What Does This Mean for Children at Risk?

Just because abuse and neglect place children at risk of emotional difficulties, such children are not necessarily “ruined” for the rest of their lives. British child psychiatrist Rutter (1987) lists among the protective processes those that reduce the impact of risk, reduce the likelihood of negative reactions, promote self-esteem and self-efficacy, and launch opportunities for growth and mental health. Activities that build and reinforce resilient personal characteristics, provide constructive escape, increase healthy personal relationships, promote religious fellowship and spiritual practice, and give opportunities for service to others will improve outcomes for children at risk of poor mental health. Betsy is a superb example of what an at-risk child can become, a model of coping mechanisms that can make a difference for a child who has endured hardships and tragedy.

Children who are at risk of poor mental health need unremitting support from a healthy individual, particularly a parent or other adult. This relationship is more effective when it involves a parent because of the family connection that already exists. These children need to see how well-adjusted people function in life, so they can copy similar traits and activities in their own lives. In addition, children at risk need a religious grounding. They need to learn prayer or meditation to help them cope with life’s stressors, and they need to practice religious values. The centering of perspective that prayer or meditation and service can bring helps children bounce back from trauma. Mentally healthy, caring adults (even unseen) can help children rise above childhood abuse and neglect by helping them build both their resiliency and their spirituality. When parents or other adults who associate with at risk children follow these suggestions, the children will be more resilient to negative stressors in their lives, perhaps even as resilient as Betsy.

Postscript

Betsy is still amazing. All of her life, her outlook has been positive, hopeful. She continues to see only the best in others. Betsy lives full time in an assisted living facility now, and she smiles constantly. Even though she can say only a few phrases, they are all positive, encouraging ones. She says things like “Isn’t he the best?” “You’re so good,” “Didn’t we have fun!” and “Aren’t we lucky?” My father was sure she wouldn’t know who I was when I went to visit her. She didn’t know my name or perhaps even that I was her daughter, but the moment she saw me she arose from the couch (a difficult task for her) and shuffled toward me, shouting, waving her arms, and then throwing them around me. “Oh! Oh! Oh! You came to see me! We were always such good friends!” And then with surprise, “You look just like me!” We cried and laughed at the same time.

I sometimes dream of rocking Betsy to sleep. One night when I visited her in the assisted living center, I had the privilege of preparing her for bed, reverently, quietly, in that dark room, gently singing along with her to the “Tannenbaum” playing on her music box. My dream came true and I actually got to hold her, stroke her hair, and rock her to sleep. I have had many privileges in my life—being a wife to Michael, a mother to my precious children, a faculty member at Brigham Young University. But one of the greatest has been to have been taught and loved by Betsy.
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References


