

## President-Elect Message

Beth Rom-Rymer, Ph.D.



### Resilience

In this season of holiday lights and cheer and a revisiting of family narratives, I'm thinking about resilience and courage. In particular, I'm reflecting on one of my patients (all potentially identifying details have been changed to protect his identity). He is a 50-year old man, whom I'll name John, with shocks of wavy white hair. Several years ago, he had been charged with sexually touching a teenage girl whose cheerleading squad he had coached in a middle school out of state. Although the court process moved slowly, he was ultimately convicted of one count of sexual abuse and was sent to prison for 18 months. His life was in shambles. His parents and siblings stood by him but the humiliation was almost too much to bear. His wife of twenty years, whom I'll name Mary, couldn't promise that she would wait for him to be released from prison and told him that the stigma of his being labeled a "sex offender" for life, as well as his breaking his marital vows, were very painful for her.

My patient served about 13 months of his 18 month sentence. He had worked with a prison coach prior to his imprisonment and that coaching helped him create a routine of psychological separation from the other prisoners while he spent time in self-reflection and

study. Even so, he endured periods of deep depression and high anxiety. His wife, a nurse, and their three children visited him on four different occasions and he talked with family members at least once a week on the telephone. I received two calls from Mary while John was in prison because he had become so distraught. Both John and Mary wanted some specific anxiety management tools and some empathy. I gave them what I could and it seemed to be enough for those moments.

Finally, in 2002, John was released from prison but he had to spend another four years on parole. During this time, he could neither see nor talk to nor write to his young children because the Department of Corrections feared that he might molest them. Mary would tell the children that their Dad was working overseas and could not contact them. John was filled with heartache. He knew that he was missing much precious time with his children and he worried that they would never be able to reconstruct their relationship. During three and a half years of the parole period, Mary was a constant presence in John's life: they talked on the phone several times a week and they met for lunch once a month and for more private visits every six weeks. John participated in Department of Corrections group therapy sessions once a week while also seeing me for weekly sessions. This man, who had been a highly respected member of his profession, became a respected emotional leader in his group sessions, although most of his fellow group members had never been to college and had grown up on the streets of Chicago. John enjoyed the camaraderie and could share with them the anguish of his loneliness; the deep regret for his untoward behavior; the fears about losing his family; the high anxiety of being supervised, 24/7, by parole agents; and the knowledge

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Fax: (312) 372-6787

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Editor  
Terrence J. Koller, Ph.D.

Associate Editor  
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that an arbitrary system could put him back in prison at any moment.

Paradoxically, as John's release date approached, in 2006, his wife became more psychologically distant. She had habituated to their living separate lives and she began to recoil at the thought of his return and her having to live with this man who had so deeply disappointed her and shamed her. Just a few months before he was to return to live in their family home, she announced to him that she still loved him but that she wanted to divorce him. The walls tumbled down around him, again. All that he had come to depend on in his very limited existence had been taken from him. He could barely manage to go to work, eat his meals, talk to his brother, sister, and mother. He cried, uncontrollably, through sessions with me and began to call me between sessions. He couldn't see beyond the next hour.

I enjoined John to think about a future that didn't include his wife. I encouraged him to fashion a future with his children and his brother, sister, and mother but without the woman he so deeply loved and longed for. We worked hard on his changing his picture of his family constellation. But he couldn't let go of his devotion to his wife as the mainstay in his life. He desperately wanted his wife to participate in couples' therapy sessions with him. Dismissive of the idea, at first, she did acquiesce.

Mary fought hard to develop a voice in their sessions. She was fearful of him, intimidated by him, shamed by him, betrayed by him. She could not love him anymore. He was fearful of her, intimidated by her, certain that she could still love him, desperately in love with her, physically aching for her. They were working with an exceptionally skilled therapist (a wonderful colleague) who heard each of their voices and taught them how to listen and hear each other. Although reluctant to sustain her engagement in the sessions, Mary began to look forward to them and to feel safe in those sessions.

As much as John had blossomed in his individual sessions with me through the years of his parole, he went through a re-birth as he made the successful transition from parolee to unsupervised citizen post-parole. He drank in the ongoing re-educative process of both the couples' and the individual therapy sessions. Once released from parole, he began to spend many joyful hours with his beloved children and he and Mary began to spend short periods of "family time" in their home.

Although the reconciliation is still not complete and may never be fully realized, John and Mary are talking about issues that they had never dealt with during the years of their marriage when things were difficult and they were speeding off on their disparate, confused paths. They are coming together in ways unimaginable in recent years.

When faced with insurmountable challenges, many of our patients find that they can, over time, surmount their challenges. Resilience is a beautiful human quality. I always find it so rewarding when I can nurture that quality in my patients and watch it emerge and overtake the pain and the hopelessness and blossom in the open air.