Creating a culture of second chances

Holly Elissa Bruno:

The hardest thing to do is to forgive someone who has hurt you, especially if that person is yourself - Fred Rogers

When Winston couldn’t fly

Even with doctors’ reassurance that preschooler Winston will fully recover from his accident on the playground, teacher Evangeline cannot forgive herself. Evangeline frets: “I knew Winston wanted to fly like a superhero; I shouldn’t have taken my eyes off him for a second! I could have prevented his leap from the top of the slide.”

Colleagues and even Winston’s mom remind Evangeline that she was understandably engaged in comforting Winston’s inconsolable classmate, Jakob, at the time Winston fell. Jakob’s mum had flown off that morning to her first overseas military assignment. Regardless of others’ support, Evangeline laments: “I can never forgive myself. A child suffered on my watch because I failed to be attentive.”

Could you say anything to Evangeline that would make a difference?

If a child were hurt “on your watch” could you forgive yourself?

Evangeline blames herself

Let’s look at the effect of Evangeline’s guilt on herself and others. Assuming she failed in her responsibilities, Evangeline forsakes her upbeat, optimistic and easy going style that children loved. Her fear that another child will get hurt has turned her into a hovering helicopter teacher.

Picking up Evangeline’s fear, children hold back from taking risks. Their curiosity and playfulness are inhibited. Jakob worries he caused Winston’s fall because Jakob made Ms. Evangeline pay attention to him, not Winston. Evangeline’s colleagues grow weary of her mournful, dour countenance.

How do you feel about Evangeline’s reaction to Winston’s fall?

If you were her team-teacher, what would you want for Evangeline?

Evangeline believes she is doing the right thing by taking full responsibility for her actions. She feels she must somehow pay for her misconduct by berating herself for her failure and by becoming a more vigilant teacher. She maintains: “I cannot change what happened; but, I can do everything possible to make sure it will never happen again.”

Do you think Evangeline was responsible for Winston’s fall?

When you make a mistake, what do you do next?

Even when we feel we are at our worst, we have choices. Viktor Frankl, author of Man’s Search for Meaning (1946), lost his wife and young son in a Nazi concentration camp. Heartstuck, but soldiering on, Frankl questioned why some people maintain resilience in even the darkest of times while others give up. He concluded: “The last of the human freedoms is to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.”

Frankl’s insight offers us perspective on many difficult situations. Some people berate themselves saying: “If I make a mistake, I am a mistake.” Viktor Frankl points us in another direction: “When I make a mistake, what do I do next?” Perhaps instead of focusing on beating ourselves up, we could choose to make things better.

Magic words

My son and daughter learned early on that when I reminded them to use their “magic words”, I hoped they would remember to say either “Thank you” or “I’m sorry” depending on the situation. I was grateful when Nick especially wouldn’t roll his eyes or scowl when he said: “I’m sorry”. Who hasn’t heard an “I’m sorry” that really meant, “I am anything but sorry!” An authentic apology can be the Balm in Gilead, soothing wounded souls. A forced apology, as my mother used to say, “Rubs salt in the wound”.

An authentic apology can have healing results that feel at times, like magic. Resentments don’t form; sides don’t have to be taken. Acceptance sets in even before forgiveness. Do you remember the words of that once-popular song: “There is not good way. There is no bad way. There’s only you and me and we just disagree.”

To be authentic, believable and healing, an apology needs to be:

- From the heart
- Real, sincere, authentic
- Timely, given as soon as possible after the mistake is made
- Followed by a change of behavior as well as a change in heart
- Restorative to the persons harmed, making them as whole again as possible
- A clear signal that the same mistake will not be made again.

I learned this from author, Dr. Barbara Kellerman, a guest on my radio program, Heart to Heart Conversations on Leadership: Your Guide to Making a Difference. Dr. Kellerman is the author of a Harvard Business Review article entitled: “When should a leader apologize and when not?” To listen to the ten minute podcast of this interview, go to BAMradionetwork.com and enter Barbara Kellerman’s name into the search box.

Dr. Kellerman offers compelling examples from history of apologies that have diffused and/or ended bloodshed. Do you recall the Reconciliation process in South Africa after Apartheid?
came to an end? Both truth-telling about horrific events and heart felt amends were indescribably powerful.

Could an apology from Evangeline bring the magic of healing to her classroom and school? Imagine Evangeline saying to Winston's mom: "I am sorry that Winston was injured and that I was unable to prevent his fall. In the future, if I am focusing on one child, I will ask other teachers to make sure that all children are as safe as possible. Can these words followed up by a change of behavior remedy the situation? If so, there is magic in the words and the changed behavior.

- How do you feel after you make an authentic apology?
- Were you able to change your behavior so as not to repeat the same mistake?

Why an apology trumps beating yourself up

Can feeling guilty ever be a selfish act? Although this may sound counterintuitive, I believe the answer is: “Yes”. When I allow my energy to be sapped by guilt, I have little energy left over for my work. I can’t think of others if I am preoccupied with my own worries. For sure, I can’t improve my behavior unless I can “get over myself” first.

Roger Neugebaur in his Exchange Everyday emailed notifications, sends insights and tidbits of information that he believes will be helpful to early childhood professionals. Here is one of Roger's recent Exchange Everyday emails:

A director in New Jersey once told me, ‘Guilt is a selfish emotion.’ I was stunned! I always thought feeling guilty was the first step toward accepting responsibility for what I need to change. For that director, prolonged guilty feelings block her from taking action to make changes for the better. Guilt is ‘all about me’ and is paralyzing. In that case, I came to see her point. As Wayne Dyer, author and motivational speaker, observes, ‘Worry is an attempt to control the future. Guilt is an attempt to control the past.’ Perspective is a director’s best friend. (Bruno, H.E., What You Need to Lead, NAEYC, 2012).

Creating a culture of second chances

Making amends can be very difficult. Courage and humility are often required to make a true apology. Courage is choosing to do the right thing, regardless of the pressures, external and internal, not to take action. Beating ourselves up and feeling guilty can be far easier than acting courageously.

Humility is accepting our “perfectly imperfect” selves. I picture humility as the melting of my ego: I throw off my cloak of stubbornness and surrender my pride to the greater good. Every time I make an amend rather than wallow in guilt, I feel freer within myself and more hopeful about the world. Does that make sense?

Fred Rogers invites us to consider this: "The hardest thing is to forgive someone who has hurt you, especially if that person is yourself. The hardest thing for us as early childhood professionals is to feel we have harmed a child in any way. If you would like to be emailed directly with updates please contact: kate.thornton@vuw.ac.nz

NZEALS CONFERENCE 2014
Leadership in Times of Change

New Zealand Educational Administration & Leadership Society conference, Wellington

29 April - 1 May 2014

Keynote speakers include:
Jennifer Garvey Berger, Holly Elissa Bruno,
Dave Harris, Margie Hohepa & Jan Robertson

Early bird registration closes
28 February 2014

www.nzeals.org.nz