

What Happens Next – Sunday June 13, 2021
War on Cops, Risk in Finance, Be Happy, Casablanca
Tal Ben-Shahar QA

Larry Bernstein:

In the last few decades, the idea that if something traumatic happens in your life, that there's an expectation that it will weaken you and that we need to build up a system to deal with your post-traumatic experience. I don't hear anyone ever talk about this as an opportunity for growth other than Kelly Clarkson in her famous song, but why has society embraced the fragility aspect of trauma and played down or rejected or not even considered the opportunity for growth, the knowledge of it, or for that matter the ability to encourage growth from a traumatic event?

Tal Ben-Shahar:

It's a great question. And there are a few reasons for it. One reason, perhaps the main reason, has to do with our desire for a quick fix or an easy out. Everything has to be instant and fast. Now when we experience hardships and difficulties immediately in the moment, it's hard, it's difficult, it's painful by definition. And what our culture seeks is a quick solution to it. So how do we do it? Well, one way is to perhaps medicate it away. Another way is to avoid hardships and difficulties. And that's a problem because when we avoid difficulties and hardships, we don't cultivate that system. Again, going back to the analogy of, of the gym. If you go to a gym and all the weights are on zero, you're not going to get stronger. You only get stronger when there is resistance, same in life.

And you see it with child-rearing, for example. Parents are literally, and I'm using this word with intention, are obsessed with helping their children avoid difficulties and hardships, with solving problems for their children. So the children don't lift any weights. And then they don't develop those muscles. You know, Maria Montessori put it nicely. She said, "Don't do for a child what a child can do for him or herself." We see it in the realm of leadership as well. The best leaders, the best managers, this is research by Morgan McCall USC, are ones who have gone through the most difficulties and hardships and challenges. So instead of trying to avoid and prevent difficulties and hardships, I'm not saying we need to look for them, but I'm saying we need to deal with them, confront them, cope with them as opposed to avoid them or help others avoid them.

Larry Bernstein:

There was a book *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*. I think that the advent of the cell phone has allowed parents to be a helicopter parent, to be involved in almost every decision, to be able to monitor and also assist children in their upbringing to a much greater extent than ever before. Is that something that we should... Is that the same concept of active participation or is that something different that you're saying it's okay to skin your knee, and to figure out how to get up?

Tal Ben-Shahar:

The answer is yes, i.e both. It's absolutely the ability of parents to be more involved, whether it's because they're in touch constantly and it's not like the child is on his own or her own all day until the parents come from work. It also has to do with the general fear factor that has a significantly increased. Some people associate it with the milk carton when children went missing and parents became more afraid. It's certainly connected to media. We're exposed to horror stories and parents are afraid of it. It's the heuristic effect that Daniel Kahneman talks about. We see that kids have hurt themselves, seriously hurt themselves and no parent wants that, so we become more protective. But we become more protective and through that overprotection, we're also hurting our children. And of course, as you know, it's so much more of an art than a science, meaning making mistakes, experimenting, and learning from it when it comes to how much do you need to help your child? But if you help too little or too much, you can always correct. The thing is we need to experiment. And the goal is not, the objective is not, to avoid all hardships difficulties.

Larry Bernstein:

I have a question about communication. It seems that children or young people today, young adults, choose to text instead of picking up the phone to deal with a problem. It may have started from original miscommunication, I don't know what, but they're very reticent to use the phone and instead choose very short texts as examples to communicate. Even in the dating world, the young adults that I speak to are fearful of asking a girl out on a date for maybe fear of rejection, but also fear that they will find that too intrusive using a phone call instead of a text. And then in management situations, I also think that managers are very concerned about how to deal with problems at work with their employees and the directness of challenging an employee. How do we think about methods of communication and what the softening of dealing directly with a problem has done to our collective resilience?

Tal Ben-Shahar:

Yeah. There's a real problem around that. I think it was Faulkner, but I'm not sure who said that, "How do I know what I think until I see what I write?" So a lot of our thinking, a lot of our analysis, comes from writing. It comes from communicating in depth and what just short text messages do is they help us or our children avoid thinking. And that's unfortunate because if we don't learn how to think, we also make worse decisions, not just when it comes to dating also when it comes to political decisions. We go a lot more for what's emotional and arousing rather than what's rational.

The lack of thinking, that is the problem that is a result of a lack of communication and vice versa. It's a downward spiral because we communicate less because we're thinking less. Now, how do you create an upward spiral? How do you reverse this no thinking no communication? By making writing more central. Schools need to take responsibility for that. Parents need to take responsibility for that. Schools, you need more papers, more longhand papers and high standards in schools, not lowering the standards as they'd been doing until now. Second, parents need to spend time with their children. They need to talk. And if there is a pregnant silence and they often used, "So how was your day, good? Then they need to probe. And they

need to also lead by example. They need to share about their day, but communication needs to take center stage again. It's important, as you pointed out, for relationships. It's also important for our becoming rational animals once again, as Aristotle pointed out.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's just expand on that a second. The thing that we can no longer seem to tolerate anymore is the uncomfortable situation. I mean, the Larry David show obviously has taken that to an extreme. It's a show about uncomfortable situations. And Seinfeld had a bunch of those as well, but today it seems that the young people are doing everything they can to avoid an uncomfortable situation. Yet it seems to me what you're saying is the greatest learning gets and personal growth gets done because of either an uncomfortable situation or a traumatic event. How should we encourage everyone to jump into that uncomfortable situation with the objective of growth?

Tal Ben-Shahar:

The most important thing that we can do is, as is usually the case, is to lead by example. What that means is as parents share our difficulties, our hardships, our struggles, and what we learned from them, as managers create in the words of Amy Edmondson from Harvard Business School, psychologically safe environments where we as managers, leaders express our difficulties and hardships. And where we encourage not just failure, we encourage talking about learning from failure. So failure doesn't become the end of the world. It becomes the beginning of learning. And one of the mantras that I repeat over and over again, whether it's to my kids, to my clients, is "Learn to fail or fail to learn." And when you look at the most successful leaders throughout history, business people throughout history, artists, scientists, they have failed more times than others. In his book, *Originals*, Adam Grant talks about how the distinguishing characteristic of highly original individuals or highly innovative creative individuals, and it's not that they get it right, either they fail more times than others.

Larry Bernstein:

We had Ernie Freeburg talk about Thomas Edison and his repetitive failure as a means of the creative process. So most of the innovators are failing all the time.

Tal Ben-Shahar:

So Thomas Edison, two of the things that he said, one he said, "I failed my way to success." And second, when this was pointed out to him that he failed 1000 times trying to invent the battery, he said, "I haven't failed 1000 times, I've succeeded 1000 times. I've succeeded in showing what doesn't work."

Larry Bernstein:

And let's say you wanted to be either happier or more resilient. What sort of active exercise can I do to challenge myself to be either happier or more resilient in more difficult situations?

Tal Ben-Shahar:

The first one has to do with what we've just been talking about, which is giving ourselves the permission to be human, giving ourselves the permission to experience the full range of human emotions. It is when we reject painful emotions like sadness, like anger, like fear, like frustration or anxiety. When we reject these emotions, they only intensify. They grow stronger and paradoxically, when we embrace and accept them, they don't overstay their welcome. So how do we accept and embrace painful emotions? One way is to talk about it. We know that we talk to whether it's our best friend or a therapist, we feel better after expressing rather than suppressing our emotions. Second, writing about it. There's a lot of research on the importance of journaling. And that also has to do with your question about writing longer sentences, not just text messages.

When we write and express what we went through, we help the emotion be integrated into who we are and grow from it. And the third way of expressing emotions is shedding a tear. There's a lot of research on when we cry, we're releasing oxytocin for example, the love hormone, which calms us. We also release an opiate. This is through expression rather than suppression of emotion. So that's first, giving ourselves the permission to be human. Second, relationships, number one predictor of happiness. Number one predictor of physical health, and number one predictor of post-traumatic growth is quality time we spend with people we care about and who care about us, whether it's chatting, whether it's doing things together. And the interesting thing about the relationships is it doesn't matter what kind of relationships, meaning it can be romantic relationships.

They can be with our family or an extended family, or with friends, or with colleagues, as long as the relationship is supportive, authentic, not perfect, but supportive and authentic, then that relationship facilitates not just happiness, but also growth following a hardship. In the words of Francis Bacon, a British philosopher, "Friendship doubles joy and cuts grief in half." And today we have the data to show just how right he was. It's permission to be human, it's relationships. And one other thing is physical exercise. There's research showing that regular physical exercise has the same effect on our psychological wellbeing as our most powerful psychiatric medication. In fact, it releases norepinephrine, serotonin, dopamine. These are the fields, good chemicals in the brain. During COVID my kid, we have three teenagers, they were largely on Zoom. Throughout the year when they were on Zoom, I never used to ask them how they did in school.

But every day I would talk to them about exercise, or I would go exercise with them or encourage them to exercise, because I just know what it does for the brain, how important it is for the body and the mind. So regular physical exercise, even if our favorite gym is closed, even if we are in lockdown, is critical for wellbeing, for anti-fragility. And finally, one more, and this is probably the most talked about study or group of studies in the field of positive psychology. Gratitude, turns out that Oprah was right. Keeping a gratitude journal is good for us because what keeping a gratitude journal, especially in difficult times, is critical. Now my favorite word in English is the word appreciate, and the word appreciate has two meanings.

The first meaning of the word appreciate is to say thank you for something. And that's a nice thing to do. Cicero called it the mother of all virtues, just about every religion had gratitude at

its core. But there's another meaning to the word appreciate beyond gratitude. And that is to grow in value. The economy appreciates, money in the bank appreciates. And the two meanings of the word appreciate are intimately linked, because what we know today is that when you appreciate the good, the good appreciates. Unfortunately, the opposite is also the case. When we do not appreciate the good, when we take the good in our lives for granted, the good depreciates. We have less of it.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to talk about dying for a second. In the Jewish tradition, we have a Shivah, which is the family gathers after the loss of a loved one, but during COVID that wasn't possible. One of the great things about religion is these life events have been tested out over thousands of years and have been focused and refined, but Shivahs weren't possible because we couldn't get together physically during COVID. I'm just wondering, what do you think we've learned about how to deal with loss when we couldn't do a Shivah and what we can learn from that experience and what we can take to heart?

Tal Ben-Shahar:

You know, Larry, if we were talking 15 months ago, I would've pointed out when it comes to relationships that 1000 friends on social media are no substitute for that one best friend, that we need those face to face, live, in-person interactions. And I'm still 100 percent behind it. However, what can we do that over the last 15 months, that has not been possible for many people around the world. So rather than making the distinction between real and virtual relationships, which is an important one, but less helpful today, we need to make the distinction between superficial and deep relationships. So, yes, ideally, we want the Shivah. And again, all the research points to the importance of being together in the same room, crying, laughing, going through the process. There's no substitute for that. But when that's not possible, short of that, we need to make the distinction between superficial and deep.

We can still enjoy deep relationships through technology, whether it's by phone, whether it's on Zoom, or as people used to do in the not so distant past, through writing, through letter writing. And we can still have and enjoy deep relationships with all the benefits thereof, one of the benefits being dealing with hardship. It cuts grief in half. So this is what we need to focus on. Even if we're forced, relegated, to virtual relationships, let's not give up on depth. Not ideal, however, essential.

Larry Bernstein:

Tal, let's end on a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about?

Tal Ben-Shahar:

So what I'm optimistic about is that what we're seeing is that people are changing as a result of COVID. So more people are talking about and acting with kindness. More people are appreciative rather than taking for granted. More people are focusing on the basic important values, basic and important when it comes to goodness and basic and important when it come to happiness. And then what I'm optimistic about is that this is, or at least some change,

is going to remain, even when we go back to whatever the new normal is. More appreciation, more focus on relationships, more focus on goodness and happiness.