

---

# The Man With A Black Belt In Intellect

David Pitonyak

---

**"All we have at the end of our lives is how we have treated ourselves and each other."**

**-Hugh & Gayle Prather**

There was a time when people with developmental disabilities were institutionalized and segregated because we thought they were too vulnerable to live in the community. There was a time when we closed institutions and created thousands of "homes" that looked like real homes but were often little more than smaller institutions. We realized then that being in a community does not guarantee *belonging*. We began the difficult job of replacing old and hurtful practices with things real - real educational opportunities, real jobs, real homes (to name just a few). And now we are realizing there is really no difference between "us" and "them." We are all the same. Each of us

needs to be himself or herself. And we all need to belong to the Whole.

## **Poison Arrows**

I heard stories recently of a man who occupied a prominent position in the human services bureaucracy. I was attending a workshop on nonaversive approaches to challenging behaviors in his State. The stories, all different in detail, shared common themes: this man did not care about people with disabilities; he was stuck in the past and ignorant of the latest and best practices. He was a paper pusher who used his position in the system to halt progressive ideas. "He is a joke," one person said. "He got to his present position because the person before him died. Government rewards mediocrity and he took the prize."

It seems this man knows little of the progress made by people with disabilities. He thinks that integration and supported employment are fads that will come and go. He has blocked important initiatives that would help people to buy their own homes because he says there is a "lack of data" to support home owning. He supports the limited use of aversive procedures to control unwanted behavior because he believes aversive treatment *is* supported by "data."

"He's disgusting" said one detractor. "He wears the same business suit everyday and he has a kind of muted body odor." There was much laughter. One woman summed up the group's feelings when she said, "Who could love a man who makes it his business to hurt people with disabilities?"

Who indeed?

I have to admit that I've slung my share of poison arrows. It feels good to unload an unkind word or two when you're feeling angry or under siege. And I've had my share of laughs at another person's expense. I'm not proud of it. But I do understand why people do it. There is almost an addictive quality to these barbs. They give a temporary boost to one's metabolism, but the rush is over quickly. The only way to get high again is to hurl another barb (and then another) (1). On this day, however, I did not feel like poking fun. I was concerned for the man who was the subject of everyone's laughter. Perhaps I could feel for him because I did not have to interact with him. He did not block my efforts directly. I wondered how this man, this bureaucrat with muted body odor, would *feel* if he heard the joking. Would he laugh too? Or would he be hurt? It seems likely that even if people refrain from such jokes in his presence, he hears the laughter as it stops and starts. My guess is he has put two and two

together. My guess is that the laughter hurts.

### **The Man With A Black Belt In Intellect**

I know a man who insists that people call him "Doctor." He has his Ph.D. in Psychology and has been known to terminate conversations with people who refuse to address him as such. When I first met him, I was a bit put off this formality, but I called him "Doctor" anyway (to be courteous and because I am not terribly assertive). After talking with him for some time, I realized that he was afraid of me. It was as if he expected me to pulverize him with information -- "facts" that he did not know. By insisting I call him "Doctor" he was secretly warning me off as if to say "Be careful. I have my black belt in intellect. You could be hurt."

Being "right" is of vital concern to some of us. It is almost as if the truth of a thing, whatever it is, is incidental. Being "right" is being "on top" (and knowledge is just a way to get there). If you listen

close enough, you are bound to hear people disagreeing with each other in our field. You can hear the institutional crowd arguing with the community crowd, the nonaversive camp arguing with the aversive camp (it may be more accurate to call it shouting). Someone is "right" and someone is "wrong" and someone always gets the upper hand. What was once thought to be a "theoretical possibility" becomes the *Right Thing To Do* and then everyone claims to be doing it.

Who could deny that the "fight for what's right" is often a fight for justice and equality? Many have suffered because of injustice. Champions are needed and there are many real champions. But for some the fight for *what's* right is really a fight to *be* right.

I wonder if people who obstruct important change do so because they fear being displaced. Could it be that the bureaucrat with muted body odor is afraid of being displaced? And could it be that people who make jokes at his

expense are afraid too? How many of us cling to our credentials or our positions because we are afraid of no longer playing a role. I believe that many of us have heard the Demon whisper, "You are not intelligent. We do not need you. You are not helpful. Go away" (2).

### **Belonging**

If I think about my own development in the field I find that one thing is true over and over again -- I have been wrong, *often*. There was a time when I thought that autism was more important than the people so labeled. I fancied myself a kind of hero working with "those" people. Some friends of mine --people with autism, taught me that I was putting them down (I was literally *putting them down* in four point restraint). There was a time when I thought that people with challenging behaviors needed to be punished if positive reinforcement failed (I thought *being positive* meant putting M&Ms in people's mouths and telling them they had "good hands"). And there was a time when I thought

people with disabilities needed professionals like me to take care of them (now I am learning there is a big difference between taking care *of* someone and caring *for* someone). The point is: I have been wrong so often it is likely -- no, it is certain -- I will be wrong again.

Despite my impressive resume of mistakes, change has never been easy for me. "Not knowing" something can make me feel vulnerable, especially when I think I *should* know. When I make mistakes or lack an answer, I have a tendency to beat myself up and focus on my limitations. I feel embarrassed or unworthy (or both). When I am wrong about a work-related matter, I begin to think that *all* of my work is corrupt. I arrest the good with the bad and soon it is me that ends up "behind bars" for "not knowing."

While I do not pretend to know *all* of the reasons for my harsh self-treatment, I think that at a very basic level I fear "not belonging." If I no longer have a role to play, if I am

no longer needed, will I belong?

It seems to me that the desire to belong to something bigger than ourselves is true for most humans. For some, it is religion that defines our place and purpose in life. For others it is a family tree with limbs that stretch across generations. We humans fall "in" love. We join clubs and enjoy traditions that connect the past with the present. We are happy to work for organizations that share our world view. We need to be needed. We need to "fit in" (3).

Many of us cling to unhealthy or outdated ideas because these ideas help us to belong. They define our place, our purpose. Adopting a new point of view (even considering it), can threaten far more than our old way of doing things, it can threaten our very sense of belonging. It is no wonder that some of us react angrily or defensively to new ideas, new ways of doing things. Like immigrants confronted by the customs of a new land, the

message is very clear --  
*"you will not belong if you do not conform."*

### **Look For The Real Problem**

John Graham is the director of a program that calls itself "The Giraffe Project." The organization is devoted to helping people "who stick their necks out for the common good." He encourages people to join sides instead of taking sides. Graham says that every conflict can be transformed from *you* have a problem to *we* have a problem." He encourages us to stop trying to win, seeking instead a better understanding of our opponent's position. Graham says, "Look for the real problem. It will be far more complex than you first thought."

A story.

Ransome lived down the street from me when I was a small boy. He was a friend of sorts. We competed over everything and it must have appeared to onlookers that we were more foes than friends.

Ransome was athletic. He could chin himself on a bar fifty or sixty times. I struggled (with sweaty palms) to lift myself over the bar even once. He could run fast, faster than any kid his age. I was slow, a turtle of sorts; the kind of kid who always got caught in a game of tag. Ransome had fabulous eye-hand coordination. He could catch baseballs thrown by older kids and was often invited to join their pick-up teams. I closed my eyes whenever a baseball was thrown too hard. I was rarely asked to join the older boy's teams (and was usually glad for it). Ransome caught the only baseball I ever hit toward the center field fence. He said I had the weakest swing of any kid in the neighborhood and from that day on, I never wanted to play baseball again.

Ransome was smart too. He knew facts about everything and always managed to correct me when I least wanted to be corrected. I remember telling a little girl (who I secretly loved) that several of the U.S. presidents were born in Europe. He

corrected me and called me an "idiot." In truth, *none* of the U.S. presidents were born outside of the United States. Ransome was right (again). I was wrong (again). On those occasions when I did know something of importance, Ransome always said, "I could have told you that."

I was jealous of Ransome. I tried to defeat him on the playing field but he was always one move better, one leg faster. I tried to defeat him in school, but he was always a little smarter. Ransome seemed one better at everything.

And then one day I visited Ransome's house in the middle of the afternoon. Ransome's mother was sitting in her night clothes on the living room sofa. She spoke of lewd things, awful things, dark things. It was clear she was drunk. She told Ransome that she was ashamed of him because he had forgotten to clean his room and that his father was a loser. I saw on Ransome's face an indescribable shame and horror. I saw his head drop and for the

first time in my life, I saw in his eyes defeat. From that moment on, I no longer wanted to defeat Ransome. I could see clearly that his competitiveness on the playing field and in the classroom was a way of avoiding his trouble at home. At a very early age, Ransome was trying to answer a question we all must answer: if I am not good at what I do, if I am not successful, will I be loved?

Another story.

I was asked to consult in a group home where a woman named Barbara lives. Barbara was described to me as a woman with a "bag" of challenging behaviors. She screams and tears paintings (and anything else hanging) from the walls. She is labeled as someone with severe mental retardation.

The group home manager, a woman named Mary, was said to have her own bag of challenging behaviors. People said she was too "bossy" (she had a Draconian management style). She

rarely listened to staff, and even less often to the people who lived in the group home. But in recent months, Mary had "loosened up." Her supervisor had taken time to ask Mary more personal questions than she had asked before. She asked Mary questions about her family, her job, her way of "seeing things." She did not pass judgement on Mary's beliefs, she simply listened and asked for clarification when clarification was needed. Mary told the supervisor that she was constantly afraid she would "screw up." It seems her father had expressed dissatisfaction with her since she was little (he had even told her he wished that she were a boy). Whenever Mary made mistakes, he scolded her loudly and she always felt shame. When Mary told this story, she cried a little, and then stopped. "I'm embarrassed about who I am" she said.

The supervisor spent more time supporting Mary in the months to come. She asked if I would help Mary figure out why Barbara screams and tears

down pictures. In our first meeting, Mary confessed that Barbara was not the *real* problem. "Barbara's sister is the real problem" she said, "She's coming to Barbara's IHP meeting this afternoon and I know she is going to get on my case about something. She'll say we haven't accomplished a goal or that the house is too dirty. She's never happy with us."

We talked a while longer and Mary told me important things about the sister. It seems that when Barbara's mother died, the sister was appointed guardian. The sister believed that Barbara's needs would be best met in an institution and she committed Barbara to one for almost seven years. On one of her frequent visits to the institution, the sister noticed a change in the way Barbara looked. Instead of looking directly into her eyes, Barbara's gaze was elsewhere. Barbara cried often, almost uncontrollably, and a psychiatrist said she was depressed. He gave her more medication. After months of seeing Barbara change, the sister learned

that Barbara and several other people at the institution had been sexually assaulted over a period of months. The sister moved Barbara from the institution to Mary's group home and vowed never to let her sister down again.

And so it is that two people -- a group home manager who is learning to "soften" her management style, and a sister who must never let her sister be hurt again -- come together and try to work it out.

We often fail to change people's thinking about a problem because we approach them as if the only thing they lack is "right" information. What we fail to recognize is that people who see things one way are often supported in that view *emotionally* as well as intellectually. It is far more than the logical organization of data that shapes what we *believe*. It is a complex mix of intellectual and emotional experiences that gives shape to the positions we hold. A new way of doing things, even if it is supported by a mountain

of data, may fail to change another person's thinking if we do not consider his or her emotional and intellectual history.

### **Conclusion**

There are some who would argue that punishment is an "indispensable last resort" for controlling challenging behaviors. I believe they are wrong and have been in numerous arguments where I have proposed that ample -- non-punitive -- alternatives exist. In a number of these arguments I resorted to a subtle (perhaps not so subtle) kind of violence to make my point. I hurled barbs and believed that my barbs were somehow different than the violence I was condemning. But surely I was wrong. *Being right* did not justify the use of pain. More pain does not lead to less pain (unless you believe what the proponents of punishment have been saying all along).

Gandhi stated that "the first principle of nonviolence is the refusal to participate in anything humiliating." He meant

this, I think, to apply to all people. It doesn't matter if the person has a disability or not, and it doesn't matter if the person is politically correct or incorrect. It is all the same. Humiliation, whether by shock rod or subtle dig, is a contribution to suffering.

In my heart of hearts, I know that one of the best ways to show people the power of positive approaches is to refuse to punish them when they most expect to be punished and to be supportive when they least expect to be supported. I know that positive approaches is far more than a set of treatment procedures. It is a way of life.

There are clearly some ideas, some ways of doing things, that are better than others. I abhor institutions, for example. They should be closed and the sooner the better. But we must not create "bad guys" out of the people who work in institutions or who advocate for their survival. They deserve our respect because they, like us, have a need to *belong*. It will be difficult

for them to change their minds if they believe that the elimination of institutions will mean "*not belonging*." We must find a way to end institutions together. Otherwise, ours will be a fight to be right and theirs will too.

Considering the opposition's interests is not the same as acquiescing to their point of view. It is quite the opposite. We must state our position clearly and with conviction. Having done so, we must invite the opposition to share and clarify their view. The important point here is to respect the other person, not to agree with his or her view. As Roger Fisher and William Ury of the Harvard Negotiation Project describe it, "Be hard on the problem, soft on the people."

Telling people about our interests and feelings is a key to resolving our conflicts. We should invite others to discuss their interests and feelings. If the other is too armored to express himself or herself (to lay down his/her weapons) then we must unilaterally disarm.

We must state our position without demanding anything in return. Then we must be prepared to listen *for* the other person's feelings because those feelings may be more important than the words they speak.

In the final analysis, we must ask, "How can true progress be made in the area of positive approaches unless we make a commitment to support and respect each other?"

#### **Notes**

(1). I am indebted to Deb Schmeding of Athens, Ohio for this insight. Deb pointed out that his addiction, like many others, requires a conscious and deliberate effort to overcome.

(2). Ginny Focht from Ken Crest Services in Pennsylvania pointed out that many people with disabilities hear the demon each and every day of their life.

(3). Norman Kunc, of Axis Consulting in British Columbia, Canada has described belonging as a

basic building block of wellbeing. "Not belonging," he says, leads to an array of problem behaviors. For example, he tells us that many children join street gangs *because* street gangs give children a sense of order, a clear expectation of who does what and when. Street gangs help children who are "misfits" to "fit." In this sense, gangs may be healthier environments for children than some of our homes or schools which reject children because they don't "measure up." When children are unable to find "healthy order" they will seek "unhealthy order." *I would be interested in any thoughts you have regarding this paper. Please write: David Pitonyak, 3694 Mt. Tabor Road, Blacksburg, Virginia, 24060. You can also visit my web site: [www.dimage.com](http://www.dimage.com)*