

“Winners for Life”:
Transforming Traumas into Triumphs

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- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

It is a great privilege for me to be invited again as a fellow member to speak to my colleagues of Rotary #4. It is even a greater privilege to be able to do so on this day when we honor these students who are “Winners for Life”, who have overcome significant challenges in their lives, have been nominated by their school counselors, and are people in whom not only others believe, but in whom we Rotarians too believe. I dedicate my talk to you, the students, and invite my colleagues to listen in. We not only believe in you but know that there is much that we your elders can learn from you. So as I speak to you, I hope my fellow Rotarians will, while eavesdropping, be asking themselves how the experience of exceptional young people like you applies just as much to their own lives.

I take as my title “Winners for Life”: Transforming Traumas into Triumphs. What got me to this subject was thinking of the challenges of your lives and recalling a student at Seattle University, named Khaled, whose story I once told here at Rotary. The heart of the story is that at the age of twelve, while working in a family bakery, Khaled dropped an egg shell in the batter of pastry he was making in a very large industrial mixer. He reached in to retrieve the shell, but his hand got caught, was pulled into and mangled by the mixer as he passed out. His right arm had to be amputated. Seven years later at age 19 he was a listless, depressed young man, when some nuns invited him to come visit a school for traumatized children. Upon his entrance to the schoolroom, a little traumatized girl fled for fright of him under a table to hide. One-armed Khaled got down, crawled under the table, talked and played with the girl till she got over her fear, trusted him, and allowed him to lead her into the light. Khaled discovered in that moment a great gift he had and a desire to work with traumatized children, found an enormous compassion in himself because of his own injury for which before he had been feeling sorry for himself, came to Seattle University to develop his capacity to work with traumatized children, and now has given his whole life to that work. He transformed what was a trauma in his own life—the loss of his arm at age 12—into a triumph, a special capacity he would not otherwise have had, which came from his own woundedness and became a unique strength for helping others.

My belief is that something like this can happen for all of us—for we are all wounded—and that most certainly you, our “Winners for Life”, are transforming your challenges, struggles, and traumas into triumphs. It’s like what I am sure you have heard, that the oyster can only shape a precious pearl within itself, if it fashions it around a grain of sand with which, as it were, it wrestles. What seems negative in our lives, some central challenge or deprivation, can become the core of something beautiful we fashion, the development of a capacity we would not otherwise have if it were not for the sand, the grit, often a trauma in ourselves, in our early experience.

Another image of this is the greatest ancient Greek orator, the most famous speaker of his era, who was named Demosthenes. Demosthenes grew up with a speech impediment. In order to overcome this, he used to put pebbles in his mouth and force himself to speak clearly, distinctly, through the added impediment of a mouthful of rocks. That's how he became the greatest orator of his day: he transformed a trauma into a triumph, although in a somewhat weird way! We Jesuits, who are also weird, who studied far too much Greek, in our insider humor used to joke: "As Demosthenes once said, 'Garble, garble, garble!'" Jesuit humor! An acquired taste! Best not to acquire it!

You—our honored students—and you too our eavesdropping Rotarians—may not have had the experience of Khaled or of Demosthenes. Let me bring this more home to you with four stories of four Seattle U. students who are in the process of transforming their traumas into triumphs. Perhaps this comes closer to your experience. Just to make sure, I'll also tell my own story, a garden-variety type of trauma. I interviewed each of these students.

Rebecca

Rebecca is Latina. When she was eight her father simply disappeared, ran away, left the home, abandoned the mom and three daughters. For Rebecca this meant that she had a very hard time trusting anyone, because the father whom she trusted, inexplicably, was no longer there. When Rebecca came to Seattle U. she started working with high school students in the neighborhood, then middle school kids, then elementary, then pre-school, until eventually she worked with 1, 2, and 3 year old children at Childhaven. These were children who were abused or neglected. Rebecca focused on the neglected children. The children were unwashed, wore dirty clothes, often could not speak even after two or three years of age. But above all they could not trust. In them Rebecca had come home to her own trauma. She taught these children, just by playing with and being with them, how to trust, not to trust blindly, which she saw as dangerous, but only to trust a caring adult and to be able to know when an adult is trustworthy. When I looked at Rebecca while interviewing her—though I had a hard time getting beyond not staring at the rings on her nose and eyebrow—I saw a happy, bubbly, fun-loving, humble, young woman with a gift to help neglected children to trust. She climbed down the ladder of her childhood trauma to the place of the earliest trust in our lives, and stitched together anew her own ability to trust as she enabled the most vulnerable children to also do so. Rebecca was a "Winner for Life"; she transformed her trauma into a human triumph. How about you; how about all of us?

Andrew

The story of Andrew—another Seattle U. student—is a curious one, not as dramatic as Rebecca's, but just as instructive. Andrew is from San Francisco, Irish on his mother's side, Persian or Iranian on his father's. I don't know from which parent he gets his black eyes and his tight curly dark hair.

One day his Persian grandmother took him as a little boy into downtown San Francisco. They came upon some homeless people, living on the streets. Andrew was curious, intrigued, and tried to run up and talk to them. His grandmother pulled him back and in Farsi said to him, “Don’t, they’re dirty!” From that seemingly so small incident Andrew’s journey began. He was attracted by but afraid of the homeless.

When he came to Seattle U. he worked in a soup kitchen with other students. From the kitchen window he looked out and saw other students hanging out with, eating with, talking and laughing with the hungry homeless. For all his heart Andrew so wanted to be able to be among them, but he couldn’t bring himself to do so. He stayed in the kitchen and stared out, wishing he had the capacity to just hang with the homeless. He was afraid; he was traumatized. They were “the other”, and he couldn’t cross the boundary to them.

Andrew was helped by an experience of an immersion in Ecuador and by fellow students in a faith-based program called “Justice Walking”, a program in which students teach one another to “J-walk”—that’s capital “J” for Justice or Jesus—which has as its goal to break the laws written into us by patterns of class and separation, to jaywalk to others. Andrew began to cross the boundary to the other. He volunteered to work with Real Change, distributing bundles of papers to the homeless, who would sell them on the corners of Seattle. One day Andrew walked up from the harbor to the top of First Hill and was able to salute by name six homeless people selling Real Change who were now his pals. He then made friends with homeless teenagers and young adults on Broadway, not to do something for them but just to be with them as they were and as he was.

Andrew says that what the homeless want is not that we give them something but that we be for them the gift of presence, and he quickly adds—present with his dark eyes looking at me in my comfortable office—“That, Fr. Steve, is what we all thirst for, the gift of presence.” Andrew transformed his seemingly small trauma into a wonderful, wide triumph, developing from a childhood challenge a capacity for human presence with the other, even a university president. It really wasn’t about fear of the homeless, was it? It was fear of the person who is different from me. How about you? How about us? What’s our story? Rebecca and Andrew are two threads in a tapestry of a story common to all of us, the fashioning of something precious around the grit of our childhood, speaking clearly through the pebbles of our problems. What’s the thread of your story?

Tommy

We have a program at Seattle U. called “Fostering Scholars” for young people who “age-out” of foster care at the age of 18 and who have demonstrated their ability to succeed in college. This program provides a college education, a 365-days of the year home, health insurance, an ordinary college social life with classmates, and a very tough-love mentor. We have twenty-two Fostering Scholars right now and 18 have graduated. They beat the odds that only 2% of young people who age-out of foster care in America ever get a college degree. Tommy was one of them, has now graduated, and runs technology for an important institution.

Tommy, a happy carefree guy was the second of seven children. His mother was not able to care for them. For a period time she'd have them, then she could not pay for heat or food in cold Minnesota where they lived, and the children would be taken away by the state. He remembers the younger children screaming when the police took them away. Tommy, instead, would think, "What can I make of this?" He lived in as many as six states, in a dozen foster care families, in and out, and back in and out; one school, then another; one family, another; some families who took advantage of the foster care system for financial purposes; one state, another. Finally the family was removed permanently from his mom. He is only able to be in contact with two of his family; the other four were adopted out and he doesn't know where they are. At 16 he came to Seattle, was greatly helped by Treehouse, went to Rainier Beach High, then to Seattle Central, and with the help of a generous family to Seattle U. as a Fostering Scholar.

What Tommy transformed his life's trauma into was an amazing capacity to break any goal into smaller achievable goals. He had to move so often from one thing to another when he was young that he could never count on anything being constant, and could not have long-term goals. He made this into an asset by focusing on what can I do now, what can I learn in this one class, what can I do today? He knows how to make overwhelming goals into daily, even hourly, wins. Give him any challenge and he can break it down into small solutions. That's why he is happy and carefree and why his friends say, "Tommy thrives in chaotic situations." He is cautious of people helping him out till he knows they are genuine; he's wary of others putting too many hopes on him because these hopes of theirs can become pressures. He makes goals into games and awards himself with fun with his friends when he wins these goal games. When I talked with Tommy, seated in a leather chair opposite me in my paneled office, he broke down my big questions into smaller manageable ones. I'm sure he treated himself to a win with Fr. Steve!

I wonder if some of you, our "Winners for Life", have had any of Tommy's experience of come-and-go foster care or quite unreliable early backgrounds. I wonder if his transforming of his chaos into a triumph mirrors what you are already doing. I wonder if his experience of breaking all big goals into achievable, small goals speaks to the businessmen and women in Rotary, so that we too can learn from the Tommies of the world.

Yasmin

The last Seattle U. student I'd like you to meet has had the most brutal trauma of any of them. I learned of Yasmin, a second-year law student, from a front-page Seattle Times story about her as a victim of human trafficking. So I asked if I could speak with her. She's beautiful, and she's quick to point out that she's not as serious as the photo in the paper made her look to be. She's also quick to say that it's better to call the exploitation she suffered "modern day slavery" than "human trafficking", especially because it does not need to be international, but is any kind of total control or exploitation by others, even here at home

Yasmin and her family were kept captive on a remote farm in Gray's Harbor County with no contact with the outside world by a controlling, dominating father who abused the family physically, sexually and psychologically (though he did not sexually abuse little Yasmin). Her mother, whom her father brought from Bangladesh at age 12, and who could neither read nor

write nor speak English, was only 14 when Yasmin was born. Her father falsified all their documents, locked up all items of identification, and would only take two persons at a time off the farm under his close supervision. He did horrible things, nearly beating her uncle to death in the presence of the family, forcing him to dig his own grave. Finally, he was arrested and imprisoned when Yasmin was four, but she has vivid memories of almost unmentionable things that go back much earlier than that. She is shaped by those memories. But even more so she is shaped by realizing, “This is my father and I have to come to terms with that. And there are even some things I admire in this otherwise exploitative father.” From this background she has developed a passionate drive to understand complex, conflicted persons. No wonder she is a law student!

She has transformed her trauma into a triumph by seeking to understand everything in a three-dimensional, multi-faceted way. She knows that nothing is simple, especially people; nothing can be taken at face value. Because her early life was so traumatic, she just had to try to understand things around her from all sides—or she chose to do this. She sees oppressors and the oppressed both having their own traumas. She realizes that she either had to forget her childhood or to understand it. She strove to understand, developed a passion for books—perhaps both because her father was a scholar and her mother could not read—while others of her family chose to forget and rather than choosing books, they chose drugs.

Out of this understanding that people are multi-dimensional, Yasmin wants to give her life to create spaces for people to dialogue, to get beyond the images they create and put upon one another, and to find out why people are the way they are. She wants to confront all forms of human exploitation—of which human trafficking or modern day slavery is one kind—and see people not just as victim and offender but how they got into that and what more is there to them than that. She has a very big agenda from the huge trauma of a very small girl. If Yasmin can transform her trauma into that kind of triumph, what of whatever we experience can’t we transform into our own triumphs in life both for our own living and for the lives of others?

My Own Story

Sometimes when you give examples from the lives of others, they seem so large-dimensional or so different from your own, that they don’t come home to you and your seemingly ordinary, non-dramatic life. I’ve got nothing like Khaled, Rebecca, Andrew, Tommy, and Yasmin in my background, but I’ve got something like a trauma. It’s not worth writing home about, but it’s what my life was given to be, so it’s mine and I have transformed it into a small triumph you are witnessing right now. Let me give you my own example. Perhaps this will help our students and my fellow Rotarians consider more ordinary traumas of their own lives and what they have made of them.

When I was young, a boy in Juneau, Alaska, and even a teenager in Washington, D.C., I was almost pathologically shy and sensitive. I could not stand to be apart from my parents or else I’d cry. My four brothers and sisters could bring me to tears at will—though thankfully and lovingly they hardly ever did. I was so shy that at Boy Scout Camp—where I was dreadfully homesick the whole time but did not have the gumption to say, “I don’t want to go this year!”—I did not

have the assertiveness, while sitting with Troop 23 in mess hall, to reach out and take food from the platter of French toast placed in the middle of the table, but waited for it to be passed around, which it never was! I starved till Parents' Sunday when Mom and Dad would bring food: chicken, potato salad, and chocolate chip cookies, which I'd then hide under the bunk in our tent until bold rats and squirrels appropriated them! I needed a younger sister to invite her girlfriends as my dates for the mandatory school dances at my high school. I still remember painfully going totally blank barely into the recitation by memory of a piece in an elocution contest in front of the whole high school and needing to be called off the stage by the teacher after what seemed hours of silent, public humiliation.

My challenge as a child is nothing to write home about for sure. But what I believe I transformed this minor trauma into was an ability to go within myself in reflection, a depth of presence to myself, a drawing from a deep well within, a learning to speak from who I am and what I treasure interiorly, and the development of a life of daily prayer and poetry. That's my way of transforming a trauma into a triumph. I remember once saying in an offhand manner, as a sort of throw-away line in the middle of a 10-week college course on world religions I was teaching, "Shyness is the most personal of all human emotions; it is simply the shadow side of the perception of the preciousness and vulnerability of relationships." (Rollo May) On the last day of that course one college student, a 20 year old young man, came up to me and awkwardly said—for he too was shy—that this one sentence was worth more to him than the whole rest of the course! Someone had told him that being shy is not only okay but can be a feeling of sensitivity and of treasuring something precious. Shy people don't give themselves away easily in relationships; they've got too much to give and they realize the risk of the giving. That's my little story, my little triumph.

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I wonder if we all have some capital "T", or small "t" trauma in our past around which and from which we have spun a pearl of great price. Of course we can be trapped in our traumas, locked up in them, unable to shatter or break through them. Khaled teaches little children to release their traumas by dance, music, shouting, screaming, punching. But it's always more than that. It takes the help of other people. Khaled needed the compassionate nuns; Rebecca needed social workers at Childhaven; Andrew depended on fellow students to help him to "J-walk"; Tommy needed a final stable family and a safe college which he could call home and where he could have friends; Yasmin required rescue by police and great teachers and mentors; I needed the companionship of the Jesuits and the pebbles in my mouth of being asked by others to give lots of speeches. Some of you, our honored students, may have needed the gift of presence of Rotarians at the Rotary Boys and Girls Club or the friendship of so many Seattle U. student athletes who love being there with you.

When you look at what is the triumph which is won from a trauma, it is always the unique shape and flow and wonder of your own personal life, the person you were created to be now being released and coming forward. We honor you, our students, today as “Winners for Life”. May that life be nothing less and need be nothing more than your own true life, and may we your Rotarian friends and mentors be privileged to be some of the people by whom you are helped to transform your traumas into triumphs, so that you may be not only this day but always, “Winners for Life”.