

Feeling Small...and Believing It

Recently I journeyed to one of Florida's many "oases of joy" to revisit America's leading rodent and relive a single day of a month-long family vacation in 1988. While I couldn't get my son in town for the week, my daughter (who had just graduated from Duke) wanted to compete in a triathlon in central Florida, so at least one of the nestlings could be brought in tow. We were giddy with excitement and nostalgia as we remembered our last exploration of the mouse's world. I was champion of the world, determined to make the day at the park a perfect one and imprint that memory forever. That is, I was like virtually everyone else in the parking lot.

As my wife bought the tickets, the salesperson noted we lived nearby and began a litany of potential upgrades to the basic single day admission. One deal was particularly inviting, we were filled with the excitement of the day and opted for a four-day ticket with the bonus option of upgrading to a season ticket. During the day, I cranked up my imagination, and before I knew it I had grand plans for the entire summer. Soon I had wrangled a commitment from both son and daughter for a self-indulgent passage into the past. No small task since the three households covered Arkansas, Massachusetts, and Florida!

With grown kids assembled we arrived at the park ready to upgrade our tickets only to discover that the "imagineering" of our salesperson had surpassed that of management. The upgrades were three times more expensive than we were told and we were confronted with an unwillingness to fulfill the promise. "Too bad," said the little rodent's representatives while making it very clear they not only did not plan on correcting the situation, they were not going to investigate. I heard, "Yes, you can say whatever you want, *but I'm not listening!*" The upshot is, I felt angry, but the really destructive emotion was that I felt small. Not mouse small, but insignificant, worthless, a total waste of matter, naada! What

drummed into my head was “You don’t count, only your money matters. And I’ve got that, sucker.”

Mentally let’s move to another venue where nine academic deans and department chairs are having dinner at a leadership retreat. While discussing the “excitement” involved in getting portable classrooms wired to the internet, one chair began to recount her ordeal in getting her house wired for cable, to wit, she had no choice where the cable was to go, “Take it or leave it.” Another addressed the phone company, still another an insurance claim, and, before we knew, we had moved around the table several times with horror stories where the central theme was “I don’t care what *you* want, this is what *I* will give you.” The reader, from personal experience, can probably fill in the details necessary to totally reconstruct the dinner conversation. The group was not composed of the disenfranchised, the outcast, the targets of discrimination, or the recipients of life’s worst karma. These were talented, vibrant, intelligent people yet they easily recounted how they were reduced, at least temporarily, to anger, to alienation, and to feelings of insignificance. I wasn’t the only one who could be made small; it seems everyone could be made us feel small. Worse, none of the issues that made of feel small were actually very important. My thoughts wandered to those who really were disenfranchised, who were treated poorly in important endeavors, and who were the recipients of deliberate hurt and harm.

The point of these stories is not to vent anger on that silly mouse, the cable guy, the insurance man, or any of the other stereotypes that would make it into Dante’s *Inferno* if he were writing today. The point is that every living event, whether a nostalgic frolic to a theme park or the trip to have the car serviced, can pierce the fabric of who we are, change how we react to the world, and alter the way we treat others.

Of course, the phenomenon has a name: It is called rage. We have road rage, air rage, phone rage, cable rage, sports rage, and simply Going Postal. Aside from the potential death and destruction, rage simply makes the most wondrous of opportunities pale into nightmares of absurd proportions. Rage is a reaction to despair and powerlessness. Rage is an assertion of significance tainted by hostility and destruction.

By now, gentle reader, you may be wondering if you are actually reading the kindly JITP or has it too, lost hope? The answer lies in a bit of history. About three decades ago, a group similar to the one described earlier was concerned about the same issues. While they mostly were thinking of children, they universally *refused* to believe that anyone at anytime should be made to feel small, insignificant, or worthless. On the contrary, they celebrated the ability of all people to grow, to learn, to change from hurtful acts to helpful ones, and to celebrate the goodness thereby created. They also went one step further: They developed a notion that if they united, if they studied hard, if they struggled each day to be a role model, maybe, rather than being the problem, they could become the solution. The members of that little group who substituted resolve for resignation were the founders of Invitational Education.

During the ensuing years this little circle has grown and the ideas have become knowledge, the message has circled the globe, theories have been tested, and the world is a bit better for all their activity. This group's reaction to despondency thirty years ago has prompted not just an anecdote to life's hostilities, but also a vaccination to the horrible disease of despair. They called their ideas "inviting" and the process of getting others to be inviting they called "Invitational Education." We have inherited the rich treasury of theory and practice of that group's dedication. Combined with others' works, we are at a stage where we can establish powerful programs to counter the "being small" virus with its "believing it" debilitation. And many, like the authors in this journal issue, continue to add to the dream and reality of an inviting world.

This edition of JITP outlines programs and processes by which the inviting stance can be established in what at times may seem impossible situations. Ronald D. Williamson and Marie Schoffner compile and describe a practical action-oriented list of strategies for implementing a proactive inviting stance for the middle school transition period that seems to defy smooth sailing for so many adolescents. Sonja Beach peeks into the classroom of a preschool caregiver who fosters the natural resiliency of children to overcome the daily challenges by celebrating the efforts of toddlers and nurturing the persistence that accompanies success. Martha Ervin looks at the phone as an inviting tool as she examines the public school receptionists' practices and how they either invite or

repel potential school visitors. Collectively these articles illustrate the many vehicles that convey inviting messages and inviting behavior. I am sure the reader will be distributing copies of their ideas as we go about the work of building the caring world.

As for the mouse misadventure, it did have a warming outcome. No, the little rodent's agents didn't come through. They have whisked me off to the dustbin of the irrelevant, but that doesn't really matter. The bottom line was after the initial setback the family had a wondrous visit. By day's end we came to realize that the joy of those past days were not the result of the magic of a cartoon kingdom. Hardly. The joy was in the bonds of togetherness, acceptance, and caring. These practices have no admission fees because they are priceless.

So with this edition, I offer you one more collection of the wisdom that can turn any school, any workplace, and any home into inviting environs where belonging and acceptance is had without the asking.

Phil Riner
Editor