

A Commencement Address at Harvard: Insights from J.K. Rowling

By Dr. Robert Brooks

Last week J.K. Rowling, the renowned author of the immensely popular Harry Potter series, was the commencement speaker at the Harvard University graduation ceremony. After reading excerpts of her speech in *The Boston Globe*, I was so touched by her words that I immediately downloaded her entire commencement address from the internet. I decided to devote this month's article to the lessons she conveyed to the graduates, lessons from which we can all benefit.

Similar to the thought-provoking commencement speech offered by Steven Jobs, founder and CEO of Apple Computers, to Stanford University graduates several years ago, about which I wrote in my January, 2006 website article, I was very impressed by Rowling's insights and the far-reaching implications of her stories and observations. Her words resonated with ideas I have advanced in my writings about resilience, especially in collaboration with my friend Sam Goldstein. Her message identified several of the main characteristics of individuals who possess what we have identified as a "resilient mindset."

Basic features of such a mindset include the capacity to learn from rather than feel defeated by mistakes and setbacks, to nurture relationships and contribute to the welfare of others rather than remain detached and isolated, and to live life in concert with one's interests and passions rather than engage in activities that bring little satisfaction or joy. Rowling captured these features via significant events from her own journey in life.

At the beginning of her presentation, she pronounced, "I have wracked my mind and heart for what I ought to say to you today. I have asked myself what I wish I had known at my own graduation, and what important lessons I have learned in the 21 years that have expired between that day and this. I have come up with two answers. On this wonderful day when we are gathered together to celebrate your academic success, I have decided to talk to you about the benefits of failure. And as you stand on the threshold of what is sometimes called 'real life,' I want to extol the crucial importance of imagination."

As we shall see, Rowling's definition of imagination was not what I had anticipated; however, it was one with which I was very comfortable. But first let us contemplate Rowling's thoughts about facing hardship and following one's passion. She related that while her dream was to write novels, her parents who came from "impoverished backgrounds" and had not attended college did not view writing as a career that would provide her with financial security. She did not say this with resentment towards her parents but rather with understanding, accepting the world from which they came. She stated, "I cannot criticize my parents for hoping that I would never experience poverty." She added that she never went out of her way to tell them she was majoring in Classics. "Of all subjects on this planet, I think they would have been hard put to name one less useful than Greek mythology when it came to securing the keys to an executive bathroom."

Rowling continued, "What I feared most for myself at your age was not poverty, but failure.... Ultimately, we all have to decide for ourselves what constitutes failure, but the world is quite eager to give you a set of criteria if you let it. So I think it fair to say that by any conventional measure, a mere seven years after my graduation day, I had failed on an epic scale. An exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded, and I was jobless, a lone parent, as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain without being homeless. The fears my parents had had for me, and that I had had for myself, had both come to pass, and by every usual standard, I was the biggest failure I knew."

"Now I am not going to stand here and tell you that failure is fun. That period of my life was a dark one, and I had no idea that there was going to be what the press has since represented as a kind of fairy tale resolution. . . . So why do I talk about the benefits of failure? Simply because failure meant stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all of my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me."

Rowling next offered a profound lesson. "You might never fail on the scale I did, but some failure in life is inevitable. It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all—in which case you fail by default."

Rowling acknowledged that she gained knowledge from her failures. "I discovered that I had a strong will, and more discipline than I had suspected; I also found out that I had friends whose value was truly above rubies. The knowledge that you have emerged wiser and stronger from setbacks means that you are, ever after, secure in your ability to survive. . . . Such knowledge is a true gift for all that is painfully won, and it has been worth more than any qualification I ever earned."

I reflected upon Rowling's perspective. While we are all aware that learning from mistakes and failure is easier said than done, the alternatives of wallowing in self-pity or avoiding risks are not very attractive. Couched in her advice is a message I often include in my workshops, namely, that we are the authors of our own lives and that we have the capability to choose our attitude and direction in the face of adversity. While few, if any, will achieve the magnitude of success experienced by Rowling, we will never know what we might accomplish if we retreat when confronted by setbacks. In my clinical practice I have seen many adults who sadly express the belief that for years they have expended great energy in the quest to avoid mistakes, only to recognize one day that they have lived a life of emptiness and dissatisfaction.

In contrast to these unhappy adults, Rowling was determined not to abandon her dreams, but instead to engage in her passion for writing. Little did she know that her seven Harry Potter books would sell more than 375 million copies by April, 2008, be translated into 64 languages, be embraced by children and adults alike, and receive literary acclaim. I can appreciate the popularity of this series, having read all seven volumes. I can also understand why some children who typically would prefer to play a computer game than to read would put aside the game to immerse themselves in a Harry Potter book.

After sharing her beliefs about failure, Rowling turned her attention to the topic of imagination. When I initially read the word *imagination* I assumed that she would highlight the salutary effects of imagining possibilities that did not exist in our lives at the present moment. In addition, I assumed she would remind her audience that stories and fantasies could serve as powerful sources of enrichment. These assumptions were not correct. Instead, Rowling tied her definition of imagination to a concept that appears in all of my writings and workshops, namely, empathy.

Rowling poignantly described "one of the greatest formative experiences" of her life that occurred shortly after she graduated from college, namely, doing research at Amnesty International's headquarters in London. "There in my little office I read hastily scribbled letters smuggled out of totalitarian regimes by men and women who were risking imprisonment to inform the outside world of what was happening to them. I saw photographs of those who had disappeared without a trace, sent to Amnesty by their desperate families and friends. I read the testimony of torture victims and saw pictures of their injuries. I opened handwritten, eye-witness accounts of summary trials and executions, of kidnappings and rapes."

She described victims of torture that she met personally, prompting her to become more grateful "to live in

a country with a democratically elected government, where legal representation and a public trial were the rights of everyone. . . . Every day I saw more evidence about the evils humankind will inflict on their fellow humans, to gain or maintain power. . . . And yet I also learned more about human goodness at Amnesty International than I had ever known before."

It was at this point in her speech that Rowling wedded the concepts of imagination and empathy, encouraging the graduates to strive to comprehend the experiences of others and to display the courage to be compassionate and to provide aid for those in need. "Unlike any other creature on this planet, humans can learn and understand, without having experienced. They can think themselves into other people's minds, imagine themselves into other people's places."

Rowling added, "Many prefer not to exercise their imaginations at all. They choose to remain comfortably within the bounds of their own experience, never troubling to wonder how it would feel to have been born other than they are. They can refuse to hear screams or to peer inside cages; they can close their minds and hearts to any suffering that does not touch them personally; they can refuse to know. . . . I might be tempted to envy people who live that way, except I do not think they have any fewer nightmares than I do. . . . I think the willfully unimaginative see more monsters. They are often more afraid.

"What is more, those who choose not to empathize may enable real monsters. For without ever committing an act of outright evil ourselves, we collude with it, through our own apathy."

She then challenged the graduates to consider the paths they would take in life. "If you choose your status and influence to raise your voice on behalf of those who have no voice; if you choose to identify not only with the powerful, but with the powerless; if you retain the ability to imagine yourself into the lives of those who do not have your advantages, then it will not only be your proud families who celebrate your existence, but thousands and millions of people whose reality you have helped to transform for the better. We do not need magic to change the world. We carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better."

J.K. Rowling has led a remarkable life and her books have produced enjoyment for millions. As I read her commencement speech my hope was that through the internet her words would reach people all over the globe. Her message deserves a wide circulation. It is thought-provoking and insightful and offers an optimistic view of the potential goodness and resilience in all of us. I could not help thinking that if Harry and his friends were at the Harvard commencement; they would join with the graduates in heartily applauding what Rowling had to say

Dr. Robert Brooks is one of today's leading speakers on the themes of resilience, self-esteem, motivation, and family relationships. Dr. Brooks welcomes your comments and questions. To contact him you can send him an email at contact@drrobertbrooks.com, call him at (781) 449-3392 or write to him at 60 Oak Knoll Terrace, Needham, MA, 02492.

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