



Changing Old Messages

By Dr Bill Webster

It's finally caught up to me.

No, I'm not talking about the police or any questionable illegal or immoral activity. How many of you remember a song sung by the Beverly Sisters (by gum, lad, you are aging yourself there!) It expressed the sentiment that "it's illegal, it's immoral, or it makes you FAT." Well, it's the latter that has grown to be a problem. So I'm going into hospital to have my gall bladder and the gravel pit therein, (which someone graphically described as 'Hastings Beach'!) removed. By the time you read this, a part of me will be missing. But life will go on!!

As a counsellor, I operate under the premise that "every behavior makes sense to the person who is doing it." So I've been trying to understand why I could have allowed this formerly slim, trim, reasonably fit body into the quivering mass you see before you today. I've come to a typical psychological conclusion.

It's my mother's fault!

By way of explanation, I was a post war baby, one of the earliest baby boomers. I can still vaguely remember my mother using ration coupons to get food, and while, as a little child, I don't recall we really suffered any, nonetheless, certain messages came out of these circumstances.

"Eat everything on your plate" was one message which was frequently repeated to me as a small child. I was taught to be grateful, for there were so many "starving people" in the world who did not have what we had. And I WAS grateful. But "don't waste food" was a powerful message which impinged my thinking from an early age.



All through my life, therefore, I have been a good little boy and done what my mother told me to do. When I think about it, I always eat everything. Sometimes, at a buffet, my eyes are bigger than my stomach. (No comments, please!!!) But, encouraged by my mother's message, I eat it anyway, even after I am feeling full. Earlier in my life, I could get away with it. I played sports, swam and had a reasonably active lifestyle. But then fifty comes, and you become a bit more sedentary, and before you know you have put on 20 pounds, your clothes don't fit, and you're having problems.

What have you done to me, mother??

What I am learning through this experience is how powerful these childhood messages can be. People like Scott Peck and Stephen Covey, picking up on some of the psychology of Carl Jung, talk about "road maps" by which we live our lives. What is scary is that many of these directions or messages are delivered and received by the time we are 8 or 9 years old.

Think about some of the messages that YOU got when you were a kid. Perhaps a teacher told you something about your intelligence or lack thereof, and that message has followed you throughout life. Perhaps the messages had to do with your appearance. If you were teased about how you looked, or about wearing glasses or braces, made fun of because you didn't do well at something, or made an embarrassing faux pas, the scorn and mockery you took was seared into your memory.

And the messages are not always BAD. The premise of "not wasting food" is a good one, EXCEPT when it means that you overeat to the point of health concerns. Actually, I am pretty lucky, only having to contend with gall bladder, because it could have led to diabetes or heart disease or something worse. So I can joke about it, because I have the opportunity to do something about it.



My doctor, another authority figure interestingly, has given me another message. “Lose weight, or else!” I’m listening to that message, not because I have to this time, but because I recognize it’s for my own good.

Yet these messages we learned early in our lives can be so very powerful. They can become the pattern by which we see ourselves and direct our actions, even through adulthood. But here is the problem. While my mother’s message, lo these many years ago, was fitting and right at the time, it may no longer be appropriate.

All of us need, from time to time, to take a look at the messages we understood back when we were younger, examine them, and see if they are still applicable. Most of the time they are not.

I am very grateful to my mother and all she did for me, even for the value system which she imparted. But it has changed. It was relevant then, but there may be other factors that need to be considered. Sorry, Mom, but I can’t obey you anymore

Yet one of the hardest things we ever have to do as adults is admit that our parents and the adults who influenced us as children, may not always have been right. Times have changed. I have changed.

Sometimes we need to take a hard look at those messages and road maps and see if they are still, or indeed if they ever were, relevant. Then, if not, we need to change our direction. Change the way we see ourselves and understand our actions to see whether or not there is a better way.

Get the message?