

J U N E , 2 0 2 4

Thinking on Things Letter

An indispensable letter that's better than a bagel with lox, onions, capers, cream cheese and an expensive caramel latte. Yup !!!!

The Founders Report

Hello Loyal Readers

Hello friends --- it's been a few months since the last installment of this mighty, impressive and wonderful letter. If you've suffered psychological withdrawal symptoms, I'm sorry and this issue of the letter will certainly eliminate the symptoms. I'll be better and write a letter more frequently.

Well -- lots has happened the last couple of months. I'll remind everyone that we published our second anthology of poetry at Founders House of Hope in July of 2022 and the book is titled My Voice Counts. You can download the entire book by going to my website and searching for it on the page titled Books by Dr. Levy. There are other books published by residents that are also available for you to read on my website. We also published an anthology of poetry at our other facility I visit called The Chateau in 2023. The residents continue to pursue goals that challenge themselves to discover more about their talents. We had one resident complete a certificate program to become a pharmacy technician at the ABC Adult School a couple of years ago. Other residents are considering attending Cerritos College and the adult school to earn their GED. I remain impressed with our resident's pursuit of academic and recovery goals with a purpose.

My contact information:

Elijah Levy, Ph.D.

Email: elijahlevyphd@gmail.com

Website : www.elijahlevy.com

Cell : (562) 230-3334

We're all good at Founders House of Hope. We have four residents working at Grocery Outlet and the co-owners are so impressed with their work ethic. They have been there for almost a year. The residents get on the bus, around 8:00 am and return to Founders after working four hours. We purchased a few laptops and other things for residents working on achieving their recovery goals. A few residents are interested in attending Cerritos College and we'll be taking them to the college to meet with academic and career counselors. So -- all is good at Founders.

The company I work for called Trucare has seven facilities and I visit all but one of them. They provide treatment for individuals with mental health conditions and I'm at the other locations one day a week. In January of 2022, the company established a nonprofit called Trucare Foundation for Mental Health Recovery. The purpose of the nonprofit is to generate funds to support the psychosocial rehabilitation program I operate at Founders and the other facilities. The funds are distributed across the other facilities and are dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for the residents. Finally, I want to mention our internship program at Founders. I established a partnership with California State University Dominguez Hills, California State University Fullerton and California State University Long Beach to have interns spend time with us at Founders. We completed the Spring, 2024 semester and had seven interns learning about psychosocial rehabilitation, recovery, how to co-facilitate skill acquisition groups and how to assess and write treatment plans for residents. It has been so gratifying for me to see these future clinicians learn and challenge themselves to pursue graduate work in social work and clinical psychology. I need to express my gratitude for having all of my senior center students from Norwalk Senior Center and Cerritos Senior Center eternally supporting my work at Founders. The material and financial donations you give me enriches the quality of life for our residents. All of you are sweet, loving souls making a remarkable difference in the lives of our residents. Your friendship means lots to me and the residents.

Knights of Columbus, Santa Fe Springs Council Supporting Founders House of Hope

Founders is blessed to be supported by The Knights of Columbus, St. Pious Church in Santa Fe Springs. One of the Knights named Renee Nault and his team of Knights have been supporting us for the last 20 years. These faithful, loving souls have donated material items such as televisions, laptops, clothes and tablets to our residents. Further, they have provided ice cream socials and snack items to support the operation of our convenience store called Founders Hut. Every X-Mas Renee loves to treat everyone to his homemade lasagna which he and his fraternity of Knights come to serve the residents. Each resident also receives several X-Mas gifts the Knights provide. The residents love to call Renee "The Lasagna Man." All of the men and women of the Knights are performing the Lord's holy work in the world. The women also come to serve meals and distribute gifts to the residents. We are truly eternally blessed and thankful to this charitable organization that only helps repair the world through their charity. Recently they began honoring residents who are veterans by surprising them with gift cards. The Knights of Columbus is the world's largest Catholic family fraternal service organization with 1.7 million members. It provides members and their families with volunteer opportunities in service to the Catholic Church, their communities, families and young people.

This and That

I have more wonderful news to report about Founders. Our relationship with the Grocery Outlet store near where I live in Los Alamitos has been a reservoir of endless blessings. Every week I am given a donation of products by Chris and Matt who own the store. These items include snacks, juices, candy and other products we stock in Founders Hut, a convenience store residents operate at Founders. However, our greatest gift is a \$12,400 donation we received from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Chris's daughter works for this foundation and we were eligible to receive this check by Chris and our nonprofit donating some money that was matched by the foundation. The funds will be used to enhance quality of life for our residents in all six of our facilities. Chris and his daughter made this possible for our nonprofit Trucare Foundation for Mental Health Recovery. You can read more about our nonprofit by visiting my website and navigating to the page: Trucare Foundation for Mental Health Recovery. My website is: www.elijahlevy.com

Founders Internship Program

We just finished the Spring, 2024 semester which sadly ended internships for our wonderful students. We had the following interns for four months: Shirin Sedehi, Susie Musselman, Robert Jones and Cynthia Deritis. I also had former students volunteering which included Christian Dergazarian, Thu Doan, Patrick Nolan and Marcus West. Additional volunteers include Melissa Camarena, Julianna Thrasher and Angela Hakobyan. These students are pursuing graduate degrees in psychology, social work, nursing school, medical school and physician assistant programs. I'm impressed by the strong, genuine commitment they've all made to becoming mental health/health care professionals in the near future. The clinical knowledge they gain being with us, in addition to learning how our psychosocial rehabilitation program provides capacity building and skill acquisition is invaluable to their development and promise to become valued health care providers. I derive so much pleasure knowing I can help these brilliant minds discover more about themselves by motivating them to ask the questions that matter most to their development and career choices. I also appreciate that Patrick volunteers his time to teach guitar lessons every week and Thu, who is a licensed cosmetologist volunteers to cut hair on Saturdays. These young, selfless adults appreciate the impact they make in our residents lives by making them feel like they matter. All of them have also purchased things for Founders Hut and donated items to residents. I am eternally grateful for having all of them at Founders helping us do our holy work which is restoring meaningful lives to our residents.

The Meaning of Life

I've collected what some of the greatest thinkers have to say about the meaning of life. Enjoy.

Abraham Maslow – Meaning is experienced by the self-actualized, growth motivated person who delights in using his creative powers for their own sake, and who can affirm himself and simultaneously transcend himself through peak experiences.

Paul Tillich – Man can choose to make his life meaningful by surrendering in faith and love to Jesus. By opening to Jesus and experiencing His acceptance and forgiveness, one experiences the joy and freedom of new being and the courage to be oneself.

Abraham Joshua Heschel – Man experiences his life as meaningful when he lives in G-d's presence—not simply by encountering G-d in the world, but primarily by serving G-d in everyday life, infusing every moment with the spirit of G-d and by dedicating himself to ends outside himself.

Rollo May – Meaning is experienced by a person centered in himself, who is able to live by his highest values, who knows his own intentionality, feels the power of his will to choose, and is able to love.

This Thing Called Work by Elijah Levy, Ph.D.

I'm going to try to write briefly about this activity called work which is a verb and a noun. Work is an inescapable activity people pursue to earn money to buy a pint of Ben & Jerry's when it's on sale – and you've got that Ralph's club card to get that deal. It inextricably involves mental and physical effort toward a meaningful and purposeful end. Right? Meaningful is open to interpretation though and it has to be because it's culturally and socially defined. Although we could explore this concept called meaningful much more, I need to limit this piece to one page. Let's agree that meaningful is a relative concept anchored in culture and society. Let's start by asking should our work mean more to us than just a paycheck? I'll answer for you and say yes. But --what's wrong if work is just a paycheck to us? Work is an indispensable activity for defining our self-concept. However, work alone does not pull for or engage our total self. It represents one dimension of our multiple identities from which we draw self-esteem; feeling worthwhile and valued. You know work influences how others see and think of you. We can say work is instrumental; a traditional American view, a consumerist perspective of work which may or may not fulfill our yearning for meaning and purpose in life. If we define work as an activity performed for financial security and sustenance, it is instrumental and a means to an end. In contrast, work that has its origins in a calling is an activity carrying deeper, inherent value for the individual. Here the individual sees clearly how their true work contributes to enhancing the lives of others or connecting to the larger community. There's also sacred work which, for example includes individuals in the clergy. Most of us we want to work, and we have a peculiar curiosity about what each of us does. Some people work, even if they don't need the money. The individual who works benefits by gaining self-worth.

How About Work Alienation: Work alienation is likely to occur when one experiences less control over the process and content of their job. Their job seems overly routinized, and the individual doesn't feel they are being utilized effectively at their job. The job denies this individual opportunities to be imaginative and alter how their work is performed and modifying the content of their duties. The job is simply rote procedures – habitual and unvarying in nature. The individual experiences a disconnect between their values and the organization's norms, rituals and values. Now this individual experiences futility. It's the same synchronized dance – day to day, week to week and month to month. This individual will likely describe their job as meaningless. Also – a natural extension of this idea leads to this individual not connecting what they do to the successful performance of the organization. Studs Terkel (1974, p. 557-558) describes the following blue collar worker's expression of his dissatisfying job:

After forty years of workin' at the steel mill, I am just a number. I think I've been a pretty good worker. That job was just right for me. I had a minimum amount of education and a job using a micrometer and just a steel tape and your eyes—that's a job that was just made for me... Bob (his son) worked in the mill a few months during a school vacation. He said, "I don't know how you done it all these years. I could never do it." I said, "I been tellin' you all your life never get into that mill."

Now we need to discuss connectedness. We need connectedness; where work provides deeper meaning, and one sees how their job brings value significance to their organization. Ideally – they see how their work makes a difference. It can be tough trying to determine how what one does makes a difference in some types of work. Obviously – it depends on the work. Know what I mean? But if you think about it enough, you'll discover this connection. It's a complex abstract activity. We need to see this critical connection because it has the potential to express our deepest yearnings for validation – and it suppresses the psychic angst about how one fits into the world. How we fit into the world is partly settled by knowing how the work we do brings value to the world.

The Search for Our Meaningful Work. So -- what should drive our search for meaningful work? Should it be charged by spirit; by a need that enriches our lives; that allows us to connect the work we do to ends outside of ourselves? Meaningful work is experienced when one finds a genuine connection between their work and how it adds to their purpose driven life. We have needs for validation; to know that our work brings significance and purpose to the world; that it enables you to discover additional meaning in your life. If you have it then you will experience clarity, direction and genuine and enduring happiness. William James said "I will act as if what I do makes a difference." Remember, you want to make meaningful contributions to the world—and you do this by clarifying the values that drive your life and aligning them to the work you do. I think true and fitting work is something you truly inherently value—it's work that pulls for the best in you; something that is intrinsically motivating, and it's work that is valued for itself. If one feels that his/her work captures their knowledge and creativity, then they will be passionate about their work. Passion comes from deep inside of us—it's charged by spirit, and it intrinsically drives us to perform at our highest levels.

Since childhood, our socialization process taught us we needed to be something; to become a nurse, plumber, lawyer, bus driver, firefighter, pilot, mechanic. The cultural problem though is that we're also reminded and reinforced to define our success in life by what we have which is called conspicuous consumption. There are individuals in America obsessed with flamboyantly expressing their possessions of status because of the competitive nature of society. In addition, people's shaky self-concept and insecurities drives the relentless pursuit of material possessions. There are individuals who need to present a public self that impresses others – and some embrace the idea that displaying their objects of status will enhance their public image and demand adulation. The individual who understands how they fit into the world through their work, family and private and public self resists the temptation for unrelenting recognition, attention and an enhanced social status revealed by what they possess.

The Arc of Heroism: Is Heroism Universal?

The work of Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst is mystical and mythological. Jung studied heroism, theorizing the hero represents an archetype that it is an element of the collective unconscious. As an archetype, the hero emerges in our dreams, myths, legends, fables and is symbolically present in all cultures. Jung called archetypes primordial images and they symbolized our motivations, values and religious elements which are all universal. It is composed of images that all human beings possess because of shared human experiences. Archetypes are universal and innate to human beings and include personality traits. Jung concluded that the desire or striving to become a hero resides in all human beings and is expressed symbolically in dreams and daily behavior.

Jung described the collective unconscious as part of the psyche that every human being inherited and it was universal, shared by all human beings. The archetypes he described emerged from the collective unconscious and were innate, unlearned and inherited. Archetypes reflect one's motivations, values and personality traits. For Jung, an archetype's expression is influenced by several factors such as culture and other unique experiences relative to the person. The hero's primary objective is to defeat enemies and overcome obstacles; slay the wicked dragon and monster. In mythological stories, the hero enters darkness alone and courageously returns unharmed and victorious.

Heroes are present in almost every culture of the world. In early civilizations, the hero may have been a warrior who went to battle and returned victorious recounting the number of enemy dead and sharing near death accounts in battle. Philosophers and psychologists suggest that human beings have an innate need to identify with heroes. The deep, powerful psychological need to identify with heroes serves us nicely inspiring us to overcome what seem like insurmountable difficulties in life. By internalizing—taking in the admired qualities of our heroes, we transform ourselves into our own heroes and imagine ourselves overcoming challenges.

Regardless of what culture in the world we examine we see heroism being lauded. Expressions of heroism are broad ranging from having superhuman strength to superior intelligence; to heightened intuition, magnificent talent to moral acumen and clarity. Courage in the face of daunting forces reflects true heroism in the raw—fearless and uncompromising. The hero welcomes the challenge and defeats it. This hero leaves an imprint on society—one whose valiant story is documented in history and whose legacy will retain staying power, a sort of death-defying immortality symbol. We don't forget heroes whose life and work made a significant difference in the lives of many. The arenas of heroic significance which impacts millions of lives may be political, social, religious, economic or cultural. An individual's heroic act may be single and event making, or it may be a sustained, lifelong dedication to a cause or ideal—such as in the life and work of Mother Theresa. Mother Theresa won worldwide acclaim and was elevated to heroic stature for her unswerving dedication to serving the destitute, dying and poorest of the poor.

What is a Hero?

In our culture hero is a construct characterized by noble traits. A hero could be a comic book character, superb athlete, humanitarian figure, actor, a race car driver or a protagonist in a novel. We can extend our definition of hero across many cultures and arrive at social consensus on the definition of heroism. A hero expresses virtues such as compassion, selflessness, courage and kindness to achieve a moral outcome. Additional traits include honesty, determination, conviction, moral integrity and self-sacrifice. The heroic act is voluntary, and one may risk their life. Their action is not motivated by material self-gain or to elevate their social status unless they are a cult figure such as David Koresh. The apocalyptic leader and prophet Koresh represented a cult figure worshipped by members who perished during the siege of their compound in 1993. No moral outcome resulted from the actions of Koresh on that fateful day of April 19, 1993 when 79 members died. Cult leaders like David Koresh intoxicate their followers with a promise of salvation because they are perceived as the ultimate knower, a supreme prophet who can restore sacred living.

A hero's actions may be extraordinary, directed toward the good of another, a moral act. It may be performed in a dramatic way and seriously jeopardize the life of the heroic individual. Imagine someone jumping off a pier to rescue a child that accidentally fell into the ocean. This illustrates in a dramatic way how heroic acts have a moral outcome. The moral objective is to save the life of another human being while risking your life. An act like this is the greatest and noblest behavior a human being perform in our society. A selfless, not necessarily heroic act may simply be about providing comfort to a less fortunate individual. This sort of act is one of goodness or kindness and is directed at reducing suffering which achieves a moral objective; providing food to one in need and it may preserve life. In our culture life is treated as sacred. Preserving life is considered a moral absolute. So, at any expense we should try to help keep each other alive so our civilization can survive and prosper. As long as all of us share this cultural value then we'll honor this understanding regarding the sacredness of human life. Virtue ethics, as an ethical theory explains that traits such as courage, loyalty and selflessness are central to living an ethical life.

The other idea I want to add to our definition of hero is related to the hero's power to influence your life. All of us are inspired by the lives of great individuals. Who are your heroes? Does someone inspire you to do good or express your virtue ethics. Is this hero selfless? Selflessness means thinking of others—doing for others. Does their humanitarian or noble work reduce homelessness, assists refugees or preserve rights of others. Are they unwavering in their work to assist the needy? So if you admire a noble quality in your hero does it mean that you will behave in selfless ways? Heroes performing humanitarian acts have an unwavering commitment to bring relief to the poorest in the world—like Mother Theresa. If you truly admire someone for their selflessness, courage and for everything their life symbolizes then this admiration should change your life.

Undoubtedly, heroes can influence more than just one person's life and can alter the course of history. Martin Luther King, Jr. is a wonderful example. Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez and Gandhi are great examples of how a life can influence history. Humanitarian acts abolishing unjust laws, exploitation and social inequality resulted in positive outcomes. A true hero's life has the potential to create major societal change. The lives of heroes leave us with a legacy to honor.

Why Study Heroism?

The study of heroism can be a revelatory journey investigating how morality, altruism, empathy, courage and hope drive its expression. It can illuminate the underlying motivation for why individuals act altruistically and morally. To what extent does empathy contribute to heroic motives? Empathy is one's capacity to take the role of the other or to think and feel your way into the heart and mind of another. The virtues listed above coalesce to motivate heroism. Heroic action need not exclusively result in historic change such as with Abraham Lincoln or MLK. One can volunteer at Meals on Wheels and serve meals to homebound elderly or donate time to a foodbank preparing baskets of food for needy families. Studying heroism identifies the motives individuals possess to activate their noble, selfless behavior and how it might inspire others to volunteer and help repair a fractured world.

I wonder if there is a hero gene, a predisposition that expresses heroic behavior. Is there a gender difference with regard to heroic action? Can and should we encourage individuals to act heroically? Research is underway to identify the hero genome and how epigenetics holds promise for understanding how to activate gene expression for heroism.

We know that life carries inherent meaning and value. Life is sacred, we assign it ultimate worth and the quest for meaning and purpose is pursued to ensure one's life counts and is used in ways that will outlast it. Assigning value to life explains why one risks their life to save the life of another. However, not everyone will risk their life to save another human being's life. We wonder what might motivate someone to risk their life by running into a burning building to rescue trapped people. Is it instinctual or does one do a quick calculation to determine the probability he/she will die or survive in the process? One might also ask who is in the building that needs rescuing? Is there time to access 911 and will they arrive on time? Am I fit enough to carry someone out of the building? Am I willing to die?

In almost every civilization, ancient myths honored heroes with magical powers and mystical qualities that distinguished them from ordinary people. The Greeks coined the term hero to honor individuals for their nobility, courage, wisdom and strength. Heroes were defenders or protectors and they may have possessed divine qualities if they descended from G-ds. Heroes are Roman G-ds, warriors and human beings performing acts of supernatural order. The combination of virtues like the hero's courage, actions and words adds to their veneration. Heroes are extraordinary and we are impressed with how one becomes a heroic figure in society.

Heroism is universal, most cultures of the world have heroes who stand above the common people and are admired. Imagine American culture without its event making heroes such as Abraham Lincoln, Jonas Salk, George Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jackie Robinson. In America, we anoint heroes, honoring their bravery and uncompromising conviction to do the right thing. The undeniable connection of morality to heroism suggests that the heroic individual exercises moral clarity, knowing how and when to do the right thing. In addition, heroic acts usually result in moral outcomes. Martin Luther King dedicated his life to abolishing unjust laws; giving Blacks the right to vote, ending desegregation, racial discrimination and abolishing unjust laws to establish and legislate rights for African Americans.

However, contemporary society can encourage our youth to adopt or idealize celebrities such as the Kardashian family or gangsta rap. Rap songs include violence and street gang activities, misogynistic themes, homophobia and honoring urban ghetto life. In some of the Muslim world, Osama Bin Laden is considered a hero and martyr, in addition to Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam who is a Jew hater, demonizing whites and preaching Black Separatist ideals. Neither of these heroic individuals are dedicating their life and work to serving the greater good. The greater good is defined as not using ideology in divisive ways to polarize the world. We need to create harmony and unity among all peoples of the world. Ideology creates antipathy and partisan animosity among people who disagree with each other's lifestyles including where they live, how they live and worship.

Heroes model for humanity pure, sacred motives driven by an unyielding commitment to provide the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The lives of Lincoln, MLK Jr and Mahatma Gandhi altered the course of history in unimaginable ways. Is there a more noble way to use your life than in a way that will outlast it?

Albert Einstein, aside from being the world's greatest theoretical physicist was also known for being poetic. He understood existence was temporal and pursuing meaning and purpose in life was an ultimate desire. Despite how absurd and strange life is, questioning why you are here, and will you ever claim to grasp your ultimate purpose in life, one must admit that we are here for the sake of each other. Einstein was gifted as a poet, and he captures the essence of how one negotiates uncertainty and absurdity of life in this illuminating and brilliant piece of prose poetry.

The Irony of Once

A shameful idea, urge finds refuge in my unconscious
It's safe and comforting knowing in conscious life it's only a vision
Its dim awareness begs me to know it
It can unwittingly, gently surface to consciousness
masquerading as raw, sensory euphoria
Just as a dam bursts –surrendering to a powerful, limitless reservoir of psychic energy
Yes --- limit this disgraceful impulse to a once thought
just the once you awaken to the realization of self-shame
but not once
The next once may be the act inviting agonizing remorse