

The Mechanic

By: Dr. Leah Adams

I was in the mechanic shop the other day having work done to my car and I started thinking (correction, hopefully I always think so I guess I should say “I continued thinking”). A car is comprised of many parts. Some of these parts need replacing or repairing due to overuse. On the other hand, if you leave a car undriven for a few months, some of these parts need replacing or repair due to underuse. Some work is simply termed “maintenance”, it is preventative and addresses those parts that would need care due to expected, normal, use. Some work, on the other hand, involves the repair of something broken. At the extreme, another type of work involves emergency response to situations that involve using every tool and every mechanic in the shop, including the tow-truck and the boss.

Let’s go back in time, to an era before automobiles, to learn a new skill that we can apply to our car analysis. In a town called Zietil (which is now Belarus), in the year 1740, the Dubner Maggid was born. He achieved fame as a master of parables, often converting deep, complicated ideas into understandable and absorbable stories. He was ever using the experiences of the everyday man’s life as an opportunity for learning and growing. When asked how he managed to match his parables with their lessons, he answered, of course, with a story. He saw a boy in the forest whose arrows were planted perfectly in the center of the bullseyes drawn on each tree. When he asked how the boy succeeded in always being on target the boy responded, I shoot first and then draw the target where the arrow has landed. While the Dubner Maggid died over 200 years ago, his lessons are timeless. Sometimes in life we hear a story that we convert into meaningfulness in our own lives, and sometimes we know the lesson and are looking for an easier way to digest it. In this case I leave you as the reader to decide how to use my parable.

Our emotional lives are very much like the car in the shop. This analogy is used as well in the children’s story CD entitled “The Tzadik’s Image” by Rabbi Fishel Schachter. In this story the father character explains to his son that our overreacting can be likened to honking our horn too loudly. Our Mashal, as explained on the simplest level, can be used to say sometimes we feel like an old clunker and sometimes we feel like a well running, sharp looking Porsche. Notice I used the word “feel” not “look like” because we know that our perceptions are not always accurate reflections of reality. The question is, how do we deal with the different emotional situations in our lives and how does our parable help us achieve this? In our parable we use the terms maintenance and repair. According to the thesaurus one is the perpetuation of something and the other is the restoration of something to its previous level of functioning. With those definitions in hand, let us continue our “drive” and see where we end up.

There is a children’s book called “Super-Completely and Totally the Messiest” written by Judith Viorst and illustrated by Robin Preiss Glasser. It is a story of two sisters, Olivia, who has total control of her environment and whose belongings are kept in the most immaculate and organized manner, and Sophie, whose personal affects are in

such total disarray that you'd have to see the illustrations to believe it. Generally we strive for a life that is somewhere in between these two extremes. A life that is predictable and controllable although it needs some maintenance and a life that requires the repair help of the tow-truck that appeared in the beginning of this article.

While the parable of the car may be a new idea to you, many of you are already involved in emotional maintenance through various activities to which you might not even be attending. First of all, hopefully, a yearly checkup with a physician is part of your routine. Maintaining physical health is imperative in maintaining emotional health. This includes eating properly and getting adequate sleep. I would throw in the need for vitamins and exercise, but I hesitate to preach that which I somehow never manage to practice. Other activities that help maintain mental health are regular involvement in religious rituals such as Davening. Spiritual health and mental health have a strong link attested to not only by our Religious leaders but by secular researchers as well. We are taught the importance of spirituality by the One who wrote our owner's manual! Making the time to talk to our spouses, children, therapists and friends also go a long way in maintenance. The concept of an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure follows through here as well. If we invest our time and money wisely in emotional maintenance, we can save time, money and heartache in the future.

In session I sometimes discuss a patient's hobbies or interests. In one case, a patient who had been injured in a car accident lamented that she used to love to dance but has become afraid to go out since her accident. In her case, dancing is part of her maintenance, it was a regular part of her routine which kept her in good spirits. The importance of helping her return to dancing was very important in helping her maintain mental health. You may well have other interests and hobbies that help you stay in emotional shape. Often times our lives are too hectic to pursue these rigorously, but trying to devote even a half hour a week to something that we find particularly enjoyable is beneficial. Just like the car that can actually develop problems from not enough use, our brains and other experience receptors need to be stimulated as well.

Now let's deal with the need to repair or restore part of our functioning. In our periods of regular maintenance life is relatively calm. Part of normal life, however, is a little more explosive. It involves dealing with others who aggravate us, getting angry and feeling hurt. In our analogy we would say that our gas throttle needs modulation so as not to rev the engine too much, our brake pads have worn out and need replacing and our raw parts need lubricant. Since we are mortals, however, and not machines, the repair work usually takes more than just a few hours in a secluded spot. The first steps in repair involve recognizing that there is a problem and accepting that this problem is part of normal life. Many of the steps discussed above are helpful when repair is needed as well. Additional steps can include behavioral techniques such as relaxation training, correcting our distortions such as in cognitive style therapies, and couples' or family therapies that help ensure that our systems are in sync and that everything (and everyone) in our emotional "car" is calibrated correctly.

We have just traveled from Rte 59 to Belarus and back home. We have traveled in time from 1740 to the present. We have used navigational tools ranging from the original “owner’s manual” to the modern day CD. We didn’t have time in this article to discuss emergencies so let us hope you won’t need that too soon. Where you park your car and what condition it will be in when you get there is up to you. If you need directions, call me, I’ll put it into my GPS (General Psychological Service) for you. Happy and safe driving!

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