

# Discomfort vs. Disorder

## *Making Sense of Adolescent Behavior*

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**Jewish Education Project**

**March 16, 2017**



*Wisdom begins with knowing  
what you don't know*

*Socrates*

# *The Lens of the Telescope*



# *General Coverage*



# *A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK*



Most of the matters that trouble adolescents and their families have their origin in the same matrix of issues, concerns, and dilemmas...

# *A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK*



There is much more that links than separates adolescents, no matter the extent to which their behavior is healthy or worrisome

# *Fernando Pessoa*



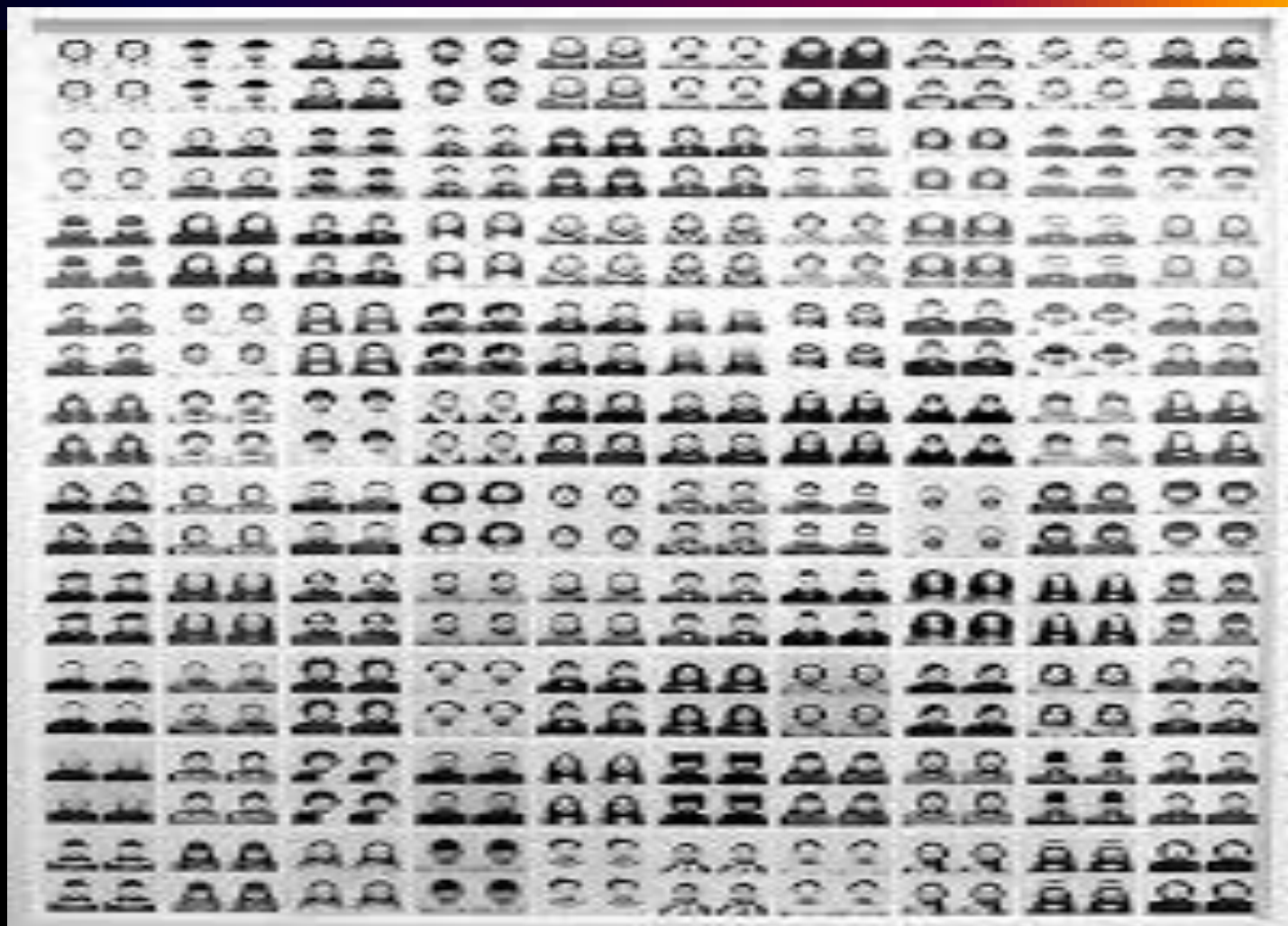
*Fernando Pessoa*



*“All classifications  
are false”*



# Tomoko Sawada: “ID400”



# *Sawada (detail)*

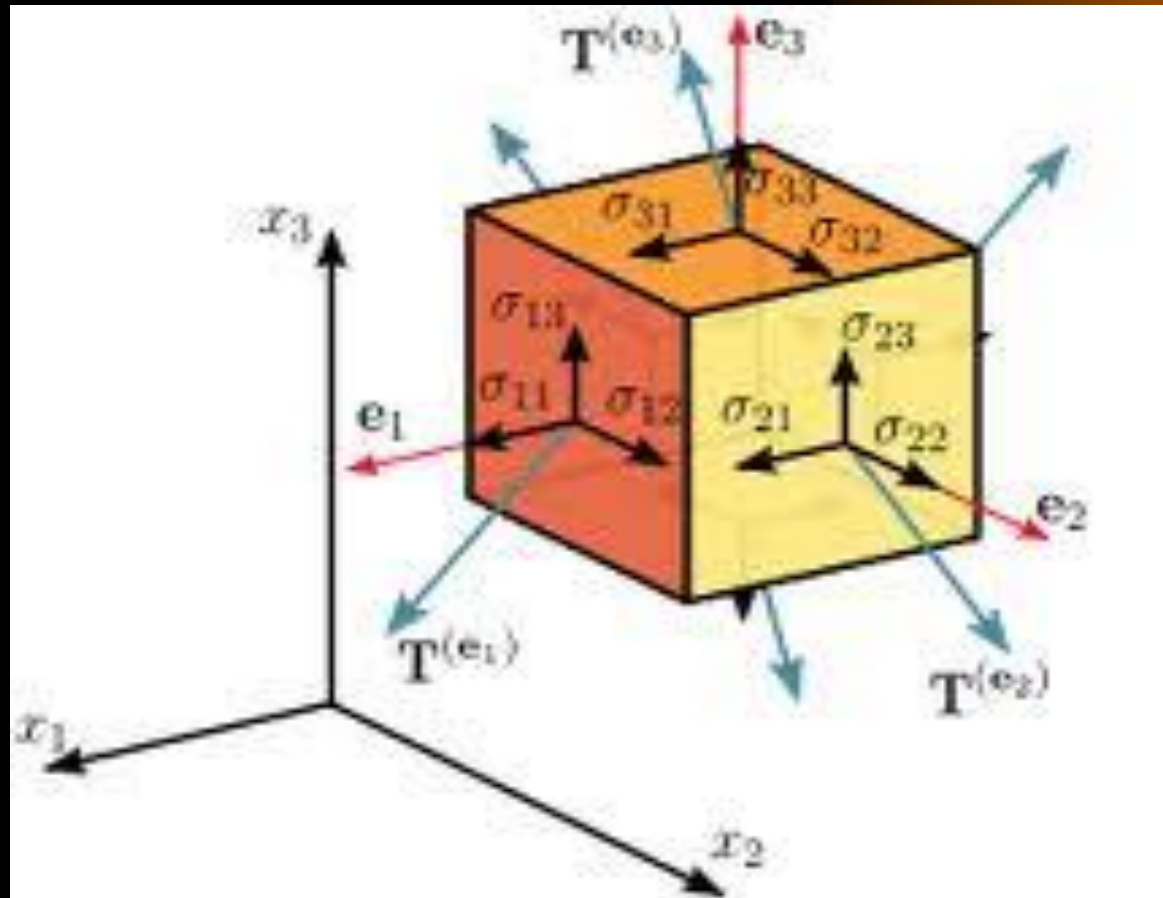


*Effective Adults ...*



Connect with the teen's  
*humanity* rather than  
his/her problems

# *Stress (Mechanism)*



# *Stress (Organism)*





# *This is what it has come down to ...*



*“Yes, I have taken my medication. Have you taken your medication?”*

*The True Attention Deficit*



We over-pathologize

but

We under-psychologize



# The Diagnostic Dragnet



*“Evan has a syndrome where he cheats on me and does a lot of recreational drugs, but I forget the medical name for it.”*

# *Mental Patient or Philanderer?*



# *Aldous Huxley*



*Aldous Huxley*



“Medical research has made such enormous advances that there are hardly any healthy people left.”

# *The Challenge*



Distinguishing between:

- 1) Lag in social/emotional growth
- 2) Mismatch between child and environment
- 3) Reactivity in parent-child relationship
- 4) Challenging personality trait

and an

**Emotional Disorder**

*When did....*



...shyness become Social Anxiety Disorder?

...sorrow and grief become Major Depressive Disorder?

...inadequate large muscle/gross motor stimulation become ADHD?

*What we have lost...*



- 1) Healthy sadness/depression
- 2) Healthy mania
- 3) Healthy hysteria
- 4) Healthy hyperactivity
- 5) Healthy introspection

# *The Diagnostic Dragnet*





*We see things not as they are, but  
as we are....(The Talmud)*





*"Be afraid to try new things!"*

# *Typical Teen Behaviors*



- Distractibility
- Forgetfulness
- Problems with follow-through
- Not listening
- Talking excessively
- Fidgetiness
- Difficulty waiting for others

# *Typical ADHD Behaviors*



- Distractibility
- Forgetfulness
- Problems with follow-through
- Not listening
- Talking excessively
- Fidgetiness
- Difficulty waiting for others

# *The Diagnostic Dragnet*



# *The Diagnostic Dragnet*



# *The Diagnostic Dragnet*



# *The Diagnostic Dragnet*





# *The Diagnostic Dragnet*



## *Some Symptoms of Depression*



- Irritability
- Lack of Motivation
- Flattened affect
- Lethargy

# *Some Symptoms of Marijuana Abuse*



- Irritability
- Lack of Motivation
- Flattened affect
- Lethargy

# *Some Symptoms of Poor Nutrition*



- Irritability
- Lack of Motivation
- Flattened affect
- Lethargy

## *Some Symptoms of Inadequate Sleep*



- Irritability
- Lack of Motivation
- Flattened affect
- Lethargy

# *Some Symptoms of Technology Immersion*



- Irritability
- Lack of Motivation
- Flattened affect
- Lethargy

## *Our Failure...*




We are failing to take into account the *context* of symptoms, and thus failing to distinguish *disorders* from the *discomfort*—

## *Our Failure...*

...and thus failing to distinguish *disorders* from the *discomfort*—

*The sometimes painful and problematic (but not mentally ill) response to loss, grief and unreasonable expectations*





We need to spend *less time*  
naming the problem, and *more*  
*time* looking at the climate that  
creates and maintains the  
problem

# *Oppression vs. Depression*



# *James Baldwin*



## *James Baldwin*

*You know, it's not the world that was my oppressor, because what the world does to you, if the world does it to you long enough and effectively enough, you begin to do to yourself.*

## *The Distinction*



Not all pain or  
discomfort results from  
illness or disorder

# *Childbirth*



# *Broken Bones*



# *Revealing Comments*



“My son is ADHD”



## *Revealing Comments*

“My husband keeps expecting our son to clean up after himself and put this things away, but he doesn’t understand that Colin can’t do that, he has ADD...”

## *Revealing Comments*



“I filled out a checklist on the Internet and learned that my daughter is definitely Bi-polar.”

## *Revealing Comments*



“My son’s Bi-polar Disorder really flares up when he doesn’t get to do what he wants to do—that’s when he has a meltdown...when things are going his way, he’s usually quite pleasant.”

## *Revealing Comments*



“I was told that my daughter has a chemical imbalance.”

## *Revealing Comments*



“The school tested my son and said that he has ODD.”

# *Revealing Comments*



*(To a teacher)...*

“My mom told me to tell you that I don’t have to work in class today because she forgot to give me my medication.”

## *Revealing Comments*



“Dr. Sachs, could you write a note to the school excusing my daughter from attending because she’s depressed?”

## *Revealing Comments*



“My son is self-medicating  
with weed...”



# *Revealing Comments*

“Does your son take any medications on a regular basis?”

*“Yes, Zrytec, he’s got allergies.”*

“Anything else?”

*“No”*

“Does he take any vitamins or supplements?”

*“Yes...he takes a multi-vitamin and Adderall”*

## *Revealing Comments*



“The medicine  
stopped working...”

## *Revealing Comments*



“My son needs more  
Serotonin...”

## *Revealing Comments*



“I saw an ad for a medicine on tv the other night and I want that medicine...”

## *Revealing Comments*



“My daughter needs  
some medicine to help  
her control her anger.”

## *Revealing Comments*



“My son needs some ADD medicine so that he’s more motivated.”

## *Revealing Comments*



“Maybe one day we will find the gene that deludes us into thinking that everything is genetic”

*Distinguishing Between...*



Discomfort

And

Disorder



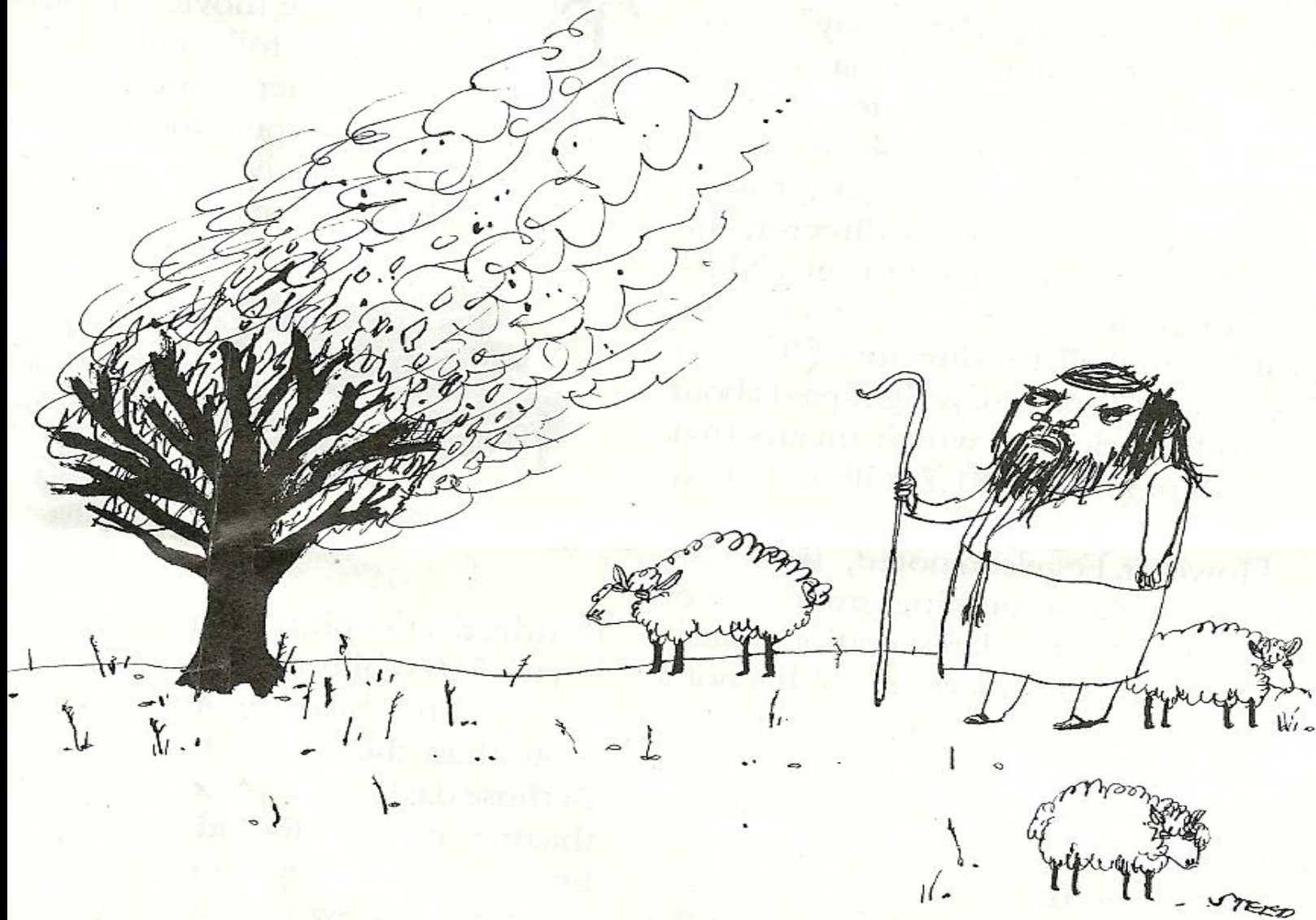
# *Advantages of Making the Distinction...*



The pathologizing of normal conditions may cause harm, and the avoidance of such pathologizing may decrease harm  
*(self-fulfilling prophecy)*

# *Internal Malfunction Hypothesis*





*"Yeah, I could walk all the way to Egypt. Or you could just free them yourself using magic."*

# *Advantages of Making the Distinction...*



Appropriately empowers parents,  
teens, and other caring adults  
(teachers, mentors, clergy, etc.)  
and keeps everybody

*accountable* and *responsible*

## *The Liabilities of Screening*



What is the strongest predictor of “depression” in a large national sample of adolescents?

# *The Liabilities of Screening*



Recent break-up of  
romantic attachment

# *The Liabilities of Screening*

Followed by:

- *Arguments with parents*
- *Perceived betrayals by friends*
- *Not being selected for chosen activity*



*How Long Do These  
Conditions Last?*



# *The Liabilities of Screening*

- Most adolescent high-scorers on depression inventories change their status when re-tested soon after
- Only about 1/3 of those identified as “depressed” remain “depressed” after 1 month

# *The Liabilities of Screening*



- Most adolescents who report mild symptoms of depression report a year later that their symptoms are minimal or mild—their symptoms have remained the same or decreased

## *The Liabilities of Screening*

- Most adolescents who initially report severe symptoms of depression report after a year that their symptoms have decreased rather than remained severe, with or w/o treatment

## *The Liabilities of Screening*

- When the same questions about suicide potential are asked at 8-day intervals, only about half of students who provide positive answers at one time also score positive just a week later

# *The Liabilities of Screening*

- A third of teenagers diagnosed with bipolar disorder are no longer diagnosable as bipolar by their mid/late 20's
- 75% of ADHD children have outgrown their condition by the time they reach their mid-20's

# *The Liabilities of Screening*



Identification of a teen as having a major mental disorder and in danger of further deterioration or suicide, which reconceptualizes the nature of that teen to him/herself, parents, school, and society

# *The Liabilities of Screening*

- Distort reactions to the natural experience of sadness in normal adolescents
- Disrupt the constructive features of normal sadness

## *Our Limitations*

- There is no test for depression or ADD or Bi-polar Disorder
- There is no convincing evidence that any mental disorder is a discrete disease with a single cause



*MAKING SENSE OF  
ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR*



*CHILD/ADOLESCENT DIFFICULTIES  
ARE OFTEN AN ATTEMPT  
TO SOLVE A PROBLEM*

# *Anais Nin*



## *Anais Nin*

*“...and the day came when the risk to stay tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”*

# *UNDERSTANDING*

How Our Teen's Problems Are Actually

*Solutions to their Problems*

Physiologically-based problems

Socially-based problems

Emotionally-based problems

Family-based problems

Identity-based problems

Separation-based problems

# Solving the problem in problematic ways...

*It's important for me to be seen as helpless so not too much is expected of me and no one has to move on*

*I can't stop acting self-destructively or everybody will think I've forgotten all the terrible things that have happened to me*

*I cannot do what is being asked of me because I won't feel like, or appear like, I'm my own person*

*I will no longer recognize myself if I give up my maladaptive behavior, difficult as it may be for me*

# *(Solving Problems...)*

*If I can't solve a problem on my own, it doesn't count*

*I'll feel humiliated if I choose to improve, and everybody tells me, "I told you so," and "There now, isn't that better?"*

*Doing things differently means admitting that the adults were right and I was wrong*

*Making improvements means leaving my family behind*

## *(Solving Problems...)*



*If I become too successful, my parents will think that they're no longer necessary*

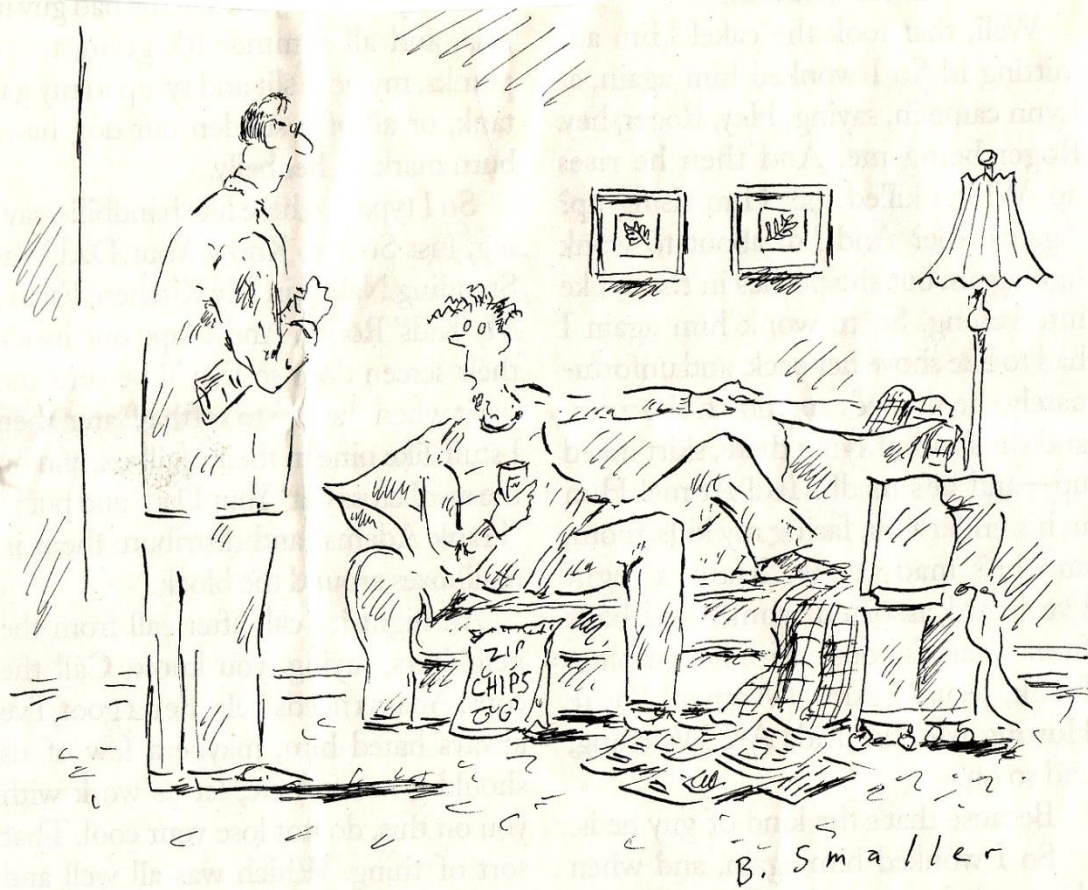
*I'm still too angry at my parents to make them proud of me and give them a chance to brag—I can best punish them by punishing myself*

*If I make a change in the right direction, I'll have to experience the pain of not having done so before*



## (Solving *Problems...*)

*If I fail, that means I'm a failure, so I must protect myself by not trying—I can't lose a race if I never enter or finish a race*



*"I'm trying to avoid the missteps of early success."*



“NEVER HAVE A  
FAVORITE WEAPON...”

*Miyamoto Musashi*

*16<sup>th</sup> Century Japanese swordfighter*

# *COMPASSION*



Compassion is the capacity to remain fully in the presence of, and courageously bear witness to, the anguish and suffering of others, without succumbing to fear and its manifestations (withdrawal, exoneration, blame, etc.)

# *Interventions*



# *Interventions*



# *Intervening*



From

*“What Is Wrong With Him/Her?”*

To

*“What Is S/he Trying To Say?”*

# *Martin Buber*





# Connecting



Looking for:

- *What sparks his/her interest*
- *What s/he can relate to*
- *What is intriguingly different about him/her*
- *What s/he is touched and moved by*
- *What s/he is frustrated by*

# COLLABORATION

(with teen)

*“The answers to your struggle lie within you, not within me, but perhaps by talking together we can find some of these answers, and give you a reason to feel more hopeful”*

*“You will be the driver, I will be the navigator, and I have taken trips like this many times before, although every trip is different. Let’s see where we go and how far we can get.”*

*Intervening*



How We Talk,  
What We Say...

## *Pot Dialogue*



I'm not happy to tell you this, but I was in your room while you were at school and found a bag of weed.

Why were you in my room?

I was actually cleaning things out

You shouldn't go into my room when I'm not there! I've told you this!

## *Pot Dialogue*

We can discuss the issue of privacy later, but I believe what we need to discuss at this point is the fact that you're still smoking weed, even after all of the trouble you've gotten into

I wouldn't get into trouble if they would legalize it—you know that soon it's going to be legal everywhere, don't you?

## *Pot Dialogue*



Well, it may or it may not be legal one day,  
but right now it's not—and I don't want this  
to turn into a discussion of our legal system

Why not? It's all so hypocritical! Weed is so  
much safer than alcohol. Nobody ever dies  
from pot, so why is weed illegal and alcohol  
isn't?

## *Pot Dialogue*



I am interested in your thoughts on this matter at some point, but, as I said, I would like to talk to you about the choices you are making, not about the fairness of our justice system

No you don't—you don't want to talk to me about the choices I am making, you just want me to make different choices!

## *Pot Dialogue*



Is there a way that we could have this discussion without you thinking that I'm trying to change who you are?

Yeah—by not having it!

Is there a way that we could have this discussion without you thinking that I'm trying to change who you are?



# *Pot Dialogue*



## *Silence*

I would really like to know more about why you smoke weed...we've established the fact that I don't think you should and you think it's perfectly okay, but I've never taken the time to find out what appeals to you about it.

# *Pot Dialogue*



You really want to know?

Yes, I really want to know

*Silence*

Yes, I really want to know

Ever since I started smoking weed, I don't  
worry as much

How does that work?

# *Pot Dialogue*



I just feel like a weight has been lifted off of me...like I'm okay just being me...I don't have to do anything, I don't have to be anything...I'm just me when I'm high

It must be a tremendous burden to feel like it's not okay to be you

Yeah...

# *Pot Dialogue*



When did you first start feeling like it wasn't okay to be you?

*(Pauses...)*

Middle school, I guess...I guess at the end of middle school, like 8<sup>th</sup> grade

And what was that like?

It sucked...it really sucked...

# *Pot Dialogue*



Would you be willing to tell me when you first tried weed?

(Pauses)...9<sup>th</sup> grade...

And how did it feel when you tried it?

The first couple of times, not much...but then I tried it once and it was this great feeling, like I was okay again

## *Pot Dialogue*



What a relief that must have been...to feel  
like you were “okay again”

Yeah...yeah...

So do you ever feel “okay” when you’re not  
high?

*Silence*

Do you worry that you need to be high to feel  
okay?

# *Pot Dialogue*



I don't know what I'd do without it...but that doesn't mean I'm addicted, you know...you can't get addicted to weed.

I'm not interested in evaluating you, I'm interested in your experience...what do you *think* you'd do without it?

I don't know...I've actually tried to go without it at times

# *Pot Dialogue*



And what happens then?

I start to miss it...I start to feel like I want that “okay feeling” again...do you know what it’s like to not feel okay?

I believe I do

You do? Because you certainly don’t act like you do, you always act like you know what you’re doing, like everything is fine



## *Pot Dialogue*



I know enough to know it's not very  
pleasant...I know enough to know that it's  
hard work getting to the place where you  
feel like you're okay just being  
yourself...I'm actually still working on it

I don't think I'm very good at it

Maybe you haven't given yourself enough of  
a chance

# *Pot Dialogue*



Maybe I don't deserve a chance...

How did you come to the conclusion that you don't deserve a chance?

I don't know, I don't know...now I don't know what to do

That's always a tough spot to be in...

# *Pot Dialogue*



This is when I feel like getting high...right  
now!

## *Intervening*

“It’s not that s/he *can’t*  
*change*, it’s that it’s  
harder than s/he would  
like it to be to change.”

# *Rabbi Hillel*



*Rabbi Hillel*



If I am not for myself, who  
will be for me?

If I am not for others, what  
am I?