

Paying Attention to ADHD

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Mission Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation

April 6, 2014

Story: Michael Phelps

As the holder of 22 Olympic medals, by any measure Michael Phelps has had remarkable success in his chosen sport of swimming.

Michael took up swimming partly because he showed interest early on, and partly as a way to focus his boundless energy. But an inability to concentrate made him flounder in the classroom.

His mother Debbie Phelps says, “I was told by one of his teachers that he couldn’t focus on anything”. She consulted a doctor, and nine-year-old Michael was diagnosed with ADHD.

“That just hit my heart,” says Debbie. “It made me want to prove everyone wrong. I knew that, if I collaborated with Michael, he could achieve anything he set his mind to.”

Debbie, who had taught middle school for more than two decades, began working closely with Michael’s school to get him the extra attention he needed.

After Michael kept grabbing a classmate’s paper, Debbie suggested that he be seated at his own table. When he moaned about how much he hated reading, she started handing him the sports section of the paper or books about sports. Noticing that Michael’s attention strayed during math, she hired a tutor and encouraged him to use word problems tailored to Michael’s interests: “How long would it take to swim 500 meters if you swim three meters per second?”

Over time, as his love of swimming grew, Debbie was delighted to see that he was developing self-discipline. “For the past 10 years, at least, he’s

never missed a practice,” she said at one point. “Even on Christmas, the pool is the first place we’d go, and he’d be happy to be there.”

Debbie also made sure to listen to her son. In the sixth grade, he told her he wanted to stop taking his stimulant medication. It might seem strange that a stimulant can help calming children, but the evidence is that it does. Despite serious misgivings, Debbie agreed to let him stop — and he did fine. Michael’s busy schedule of practices and meets imposed so much structure on his life that he was able to stay focused without medication.

ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD, is characterized by bouts of hyperactivity, inattention and impulsivity that are more frequent than typically seen in one’s peers.

By Inattention, we mean such things as:

- Making careless mistakes or lack of attention to details,
- Lacking the ability of having sustained attention,
- Being a poor listener,
- Failing to follow through on tasks,
- Being poorly organized,
- Losing things,
- Being easily distracted, or
- Forgetting daily activities.

Hyperactivity might consist of:

- Fidgeting/squirming,
- Excessive running/climbing,
- Difficulty with quiet activities, or
- Excessive talking.

Someone with Impulsivity might:

- Blurt out answers, or

- Be unable to wait his or her turn

Can anyone here relate to any of the things on this list??

Perhaps you will be relieved to know that to have an ADHD diagnosis, the activity needs to be causing significant distress and impairment in a person's life, not just occasional quirkiness.

Diagnoses of ADHD have exploded in the last decade; in 2003 the rate was 7.8% and in 2011, it was 11%. Boys are much more likely than girls to be diagnosed with it. There is a distinction between adult and childhood ADHD diagnosis, recognizing that symptoms tend to fade with time. About half of children with ADHD will continue to have it as adults.

There is both a genetic component and environmental triggers that influence its expression. According to Stephan Hinshaw and Richard Scheffler in their book *The ADHD Explosion*,¹ core symptoms linked to ADHD became apparent to societies when children were made to attend school, sit still in classrooms and perform different tasks. It is related to the intense pressures for achievement and performance in an increasingly competitive world economy.

Of course, only a trained health care professional can diagnose ADHD, but I can see a lot of the traits of inattention and hyperactivity in one of my brothers, and guess that he might have been diagnosed with this as a child, if there was such an understanding then. As it was, my parents and his teachers had a trying time, not to mention the damage to his own self-image. Luckily, he out-grew these behaviors as an adult and has had a very successful personal and professional life.

I believe behaviors associated with ADHD can stand in the way of our being able to see the precious individual inside. And from them of seeing themselves as they truly are.

¹ *The ADHD Explosion – Myths, Medication Money and Today's Push for Performance*, by Stephen Hinshaw and Richard Scheffler, Oxford University Press, 2014.

Sally Patton

Sally Patton is a UU educator who has written the ground-breaking book: *Welcoming Children with Special Needs – A Guidebook for Faith Communities*.² She says that: “Children with attention-deficit disorder rarely have the opportunity to feel good about themselves, to follow their dreams, and to be appreciated for their strengths and gifts.”

“Because they are primarily visual, not auditory, learners, they become bored easily and begin to act out. Our schools are being flooded with right brained, visual/spatial children, but they continue to be dominated by a teaching style that has historically emphasized a left-brained, linear mode of learning. The more visual, right brained students have difficulty learning in this environment and are often labeled as non-learners or as having ADHD and/or learning disabilities.”

“In school, they are constantly asked to participate in activities that are difficult for them but are rarely asked to participate in activities that they can do well.

Imagine what this does to a child’s self-esteem and willingness to keep trying.”

When a child is told that he or she is disordered, broken, or a failure; a emotional and spiritual wounding occurs. This wounding can bring about all sorts of problems for the child, which can persist into adulthood.

Blessings of ADHD

Just listening to the list of inattentive, hyperactive and impulsive behaviors, one can see that a parent of a child with ADHD, or a teacher who has one in their class could be in for a challenging time. I know that many families agonize about the best treatment to use for their loved one, because some treatment methods are controversial, and different approaches work for

² *Welcoming Children with Special Needs – A Guidebook for Faith Communities*, by Sally Patton, Unitarian Universalist Association, 2004.

different people. I know some of you here have been through that difficult pathway to a decision about treatment for a child.

But, are there any blessings to ADHD?

Listen to a list of qualities of Creative people from an Olive Rue Design poster: ³

Creative people ...

1. Easily bored
2. Risk takers
3. Color outside the lines
4. Think with their heart
5. Make lots of mistakes
6. Hate the rules
7. Work independently
8. Change their minds a lot
9. Have a reputation for eccentricity
10. Dream big

Many of these seem to be suspiciously close to ADHD properties.

In an essay on the *Blessings of ADHD*⁴, Pastor Nathan Barnes, who has this diagnosis, lists the following blessings of ADHD:

The Blessing of Suspending Judgment and Starting with As Much Raw Material as You Can Find: He maintains that ADHD encourages him to do thorough investigation so that he has the most information he possibly can have. And it encourages him to check all his references, illustrations and facts.

The Blessing of Thinking Creatively: ADHD sets you free from the tyranny of linear thinking. There will be a time for worrying about making

³ From:

<https://www.facebook.com/oliveruedesign/photos/a.1523512644539813.1073741834.1521248631432881/1538517946372616/?type=1&theater>

⁴ *Blessings of ADHD* by Nathan Barnes, pastor at Vox Alliance, Barrie, Ontario, <http://justthinking.ca/blog/?p=161>

sure your thoughts flow logically from one to another, but when you're exploring is not that time. ADHD lets your mind wander and see what happens.

The Blessing of Using the Right Brain: It encourages one to be able to see solutions in unconventional ways. For example, one might get out the art supplies and start drawing to create a visual representation of what one's thought process is looking like.

The Blessing of Reading Widely: What some might see as flitting from one subject to another, might be an advantage for a person with ADHD who can become knowledgeable about many things, and as a result be able to come up with solutions to problems by combining them in creative ways.

All of these blessings have the characteristic that recognizes that sometimes that truth will show up in the strangest and most unexpected places. So a person with ADHD who has been to many places might have an advantage. After my sermon, in her homily, Mary Ann Davis will talk about some of the blessings she and her daughter have found.

ADHD in the church community

Having a person with ADHD as a fellow congregant or as a member of the Religious Education program, can be difficult for others to understand.

When I was an intern at the San Francisco UU Church, there was a family with two boys who had ADHD who had trouble concentrating in class. It would have been easy to tell the parents that their children couldn't be in the class with the other children. However, this is not who Unitarian Universalists are. Rather than exclude them, the ministers arranged to hire someone for an hour on Sunday morning to be there and interact with the child if they started having difficulties. This kept the children integrated with their classmates, and greatly cut down on disturbances. And, there was a minimal extra expense for doing this. And most importantly, they modeled the kind of relationships that they preached about and became an embodiment of who they seek to be as people in the world.

Here are some tips for a church community with regard to ADHD:

1. We can start with getting to know them. Talk about their strengths and interests. And then dive into what they struggle with.
2. We can brainstorm ways to implement their gifts and abilities into the body of the church. We might ask ourselves: Here's a person that can look at 16 things at once. How can we use that skill?
3. We can empower them when possible. For example:
 - If the person would focus better in a 1:1 setting, invite him or her to sit in the front of the church.
 - If they need to move around during the service, perhaps they'd enjoy sitting in the back of the church so they can rotate between sitting and walking.
 - Interactive lessons that use images, analogies and fill-in-the-blank worksheets will engage visual learners. The more senses you involve, the more learning styles you accommodate.
 - Maybe this person needs a buddy gifted with strengths that complement his or her weaknesses.
4. If a child can't always engage in the church school class, hire a person to help out, as the San Francisco church did.
5. The church can also take a lead in making spiritual practices that help people with ADHD. For example: Mindfulness.

ADHD and Mindfulness

Speaking of mindfulness, our Story for all Ages this morning was about mindfulness meditation.

I've been taking a *Mindfulness Meditation* class from Patt Saso for the past couple of months, and have found it very helpful to me. It occurred to me when starting to write this sermon that Mindfulness, where you pay attention to every action, is sort of the opposite of ADHD, where people might flit from thing to thing.

Even so, recent research shows that mindfulness training can be used for this condition and that it can improve concentration.

It has been documented that it improves the ability to organize behavior, plan things sequentially, hold attention on a task and follow it⁵, and create better interactions between parent and child⁶.

Michael Phelps' mother Debbie became the principal of Windsor Mill middle school in Baltimore, Maryland. In that job, she applies what she learned raising Michael to all of her students, whether or not they have ADHD. "All kids can fail us at times," she says. "But if you work with them, nine times out of 10, they'll make you proud."

Here's what I want you to take away from this: It's important to remember that all people have both strengths to contribute and areas of need. We need to listen for the blessings. The church is not complete without all of us regardless of our level of ability or disability.

So be it.

Amen

I would now like to introduce Mary Ann Davis who will tell us a personal story.

⁵ A study with direct applications for ADHD by Susan Smalley of MARC and Lisa Flook, Ph.D, research scientist at the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, examined an InnerKids program on mindfulness and effects on behavior and executive function in elementary school children.

⁶ Nirbhay N. Singh, a professor of psychiatry at Virginia Commonwealth University and director of the Commonwealth Institute for Child and Family Studies, Richmond, Va., and his colleagues performed a study at ONE Research Institute in Midlothian, Va.