

# Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Mike G. Rivas

CSUN Fall 2006

*They fly because they believe they can.*

This was the caption under a picture of two birds flying above a majestically framed set of mountains. I first saw this poster when I was a junior in high school and I can remember using it as my favorite saying during an interview for a yearlong cultural exchange program. I did not get selected for this program, but those words have remained etched in my mind and have actually increased in depth and influence.

Some twenty-five years later, those words continue to impress me though I believe I have gained new insight into the context or environment in which those birds flourished. Though I must admit many have excelled by being the only one who believed they could do it, I am convinced the vast majority of us need an environment that is encouraging and nurturing to reach our full potential. People, children in particular, are highly affected by what can be called the “self-fulfilling prophecy.” An individual’s perception of what others believe they are capable of doing or not doing can play a significant role during moments when everyday choices are made. The expectations others place on a person can either be sensed consciously or subconsciously and can influence those everyday choices that can have life long consequences.

As I contemplate the effect a healthy, encouraging environment has on people, I am reminded of the studies that address the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy. These studies fall under the name the Pygmalion Effect. The term Pygmalion comes from an ancient myth from the tenth book of Metamorphoses. A sculptor named Pygmalion, while attempting to create the ideal woman, made an ivory statue that was so beautiful he fell in love with it. According to the myth, he was so enamored by his creation that he begged the goddess Venus to bring the statue to life, which she did. Thus, the common piece of material was transformed, by the vision and work of Pygmalion, into the uncommonly beautiful woman he pictured.

One of the classic depictions of the Pygmalion effect comes from George Bernard Shaw’s play aptly entitled Pygmalion. We know this work better in its movie release as My Fair Lady. In the movie, Professor Henry Higgins attempts to transform a common, spunky flower girl into a lady. Higgins argues that with simple, yet rigorous training by a “professional,” anyone can change his or her place in society. He was so convinced he could do this that he made a bet with Pickering, his trusted friend, to that effect and he began his experiment on Eliza Doolittle.

Eliza, the flower girl who was the object of the transformation, offers a different explanation about what she experienced. Her reflection differs somewhat with Professor Higgins assertion, yet still gives weight to the underlining premise. She says that who she is is dependent on how she is treated. She makes clear that to Professor Higgins, she will always be a flower girl because that is how he views her, but to Pickering she will

always be a lady because that is how he sees her. According to Eliza's explanation, what and who she is depends on the expectations placed upon her. In essence, both Eliza and Professor Higgins explanations are not really that different. They each are arguing that the people around you can have a dramatic affect on who you are.

In 1971, Robert Rosenthal conducted one of the most fascinating research projects on the Pygmalion Effect. Professor Rosenthal, a social psychologist at Harvard, designed an experiment that involved students and "super intelligent" rats. These rats were labeled as a highly developed strain that could run mazes quickly. Now, these were actually normal rats that Rosenthal separated at random and gave as two distinct groups to the students. He gave half the students the experimental maze-smart rats and the other half the control "non-enhanced" rats.

Rosenthal's results were quite interesting. First, the maze-smart rats improved their ability to run the maze every day whereas the other group did not. Second, the "smarter" rats also had a lower refusal to budge rate than the other group, 11% to 29%. According to Rosenthal, students unknowingly communicated expectations to their rats and the rats seemed to respond differently to both high and low expectations. Last but not least, was the finding that those students who believed they were working with the smarter rats liked them better in general and found them more pleasant to work with. In essence, the students had a stronger self-manufactured affinity for the smarter rats.

Professor Rosenthal was not satisfied with just allowing rats to be the subjects of his experimentation. He had a deep curiosity as to how high and low expectations would influence human actions. Rosenthal, along with Lenore Jacobson, devised a similar experimental design that could be used in a school classroom. In their search for an appropriate venue for their study, they chose a certain elementary school and found 18 classrooms that were willing to take part in their study.

Out of each of the 18 classrooms, they randomly selected 20% of the students and told their respective teachers that these specific students were "intellectual bloomers," that is the students were right on the edge of making a big jump in their intellectual ability. This corresponded to the students in the rat study being told that one group of rats were "maze enhanced." The researchers then charted the experimental and control groups academic progress as well as the perception the teachers had of their students.

The results from this study were just as astounding. The "bloomers" gained an average of two points in verbal ability, seven points in reasoning, and four points in overall IQ. Rosenthal concluded that the facial expressions, words, actions, posture and touch of the various teachers on these "bright" students had a dramatic effect on their intellectual performance. Interestingly enough, the teachers also viewed these advantaged children as more appealing, more affectionate, and better adjusted. It is important to note that even though some of the "non-experimental" children made less dramatic improvement in their intellectual ability, they were not viewed as appealing, affectionate, or well adjusted by their respective teachers. Somehow the initial preconceptions of the teachers involved not only affected student performance but also influenced the quality of the personal relationship between teacher and student.

Some valuable insights can be derived from these studies for all who work in close contact with others. Some of the most salient observations are:

- We must view and treat all we work with as potential “success” stories.
- We must convey high expectations and help team members develop tools to reach those expectations.
- We must help community members change the perceptions they have of themselves if those perceptions are of a limiting nature.
- We must not be afraid to use genuine, specific praise as a motivational tool.

As we build a community where each member is challenged with high expectations and is treated as someone with the potential to make their success story a reality, we must think of practical ways in which to address this issue. For the purpose of example, the school setting will be used but be aware that the affects of the self-fulfilling prophecy reaches families, businesses, and government as well.

For a school setting, some practices to be evaluated are the following:

- Where are high and low achieving students seated?
- How much and what kind of attention is given the students who know the answers and the students who don't?
- What kind of wait time is allowed for the various students?
- What are the parameters for the use of praise with high and low achieving students?
- When working with student responses, how and when do we choose to interrupt?
- What demands exist for each type of student?
- What level and kind of feedback is given each student?
- Is all student input treated with respect by the teacher and other students?

These are just a few of the areas of teacher-student and student-student interactions that must be thought about and acted upon as you build a healthy classroom community that uses self-fulfilling prophecy in a positive frame. A message is being sent and received regardless of whether you are sending it consciously or subconsciously. Therefore it seems like common sense that if we want to provide the optimal environment for the people we work with, we will want to examine the frame of reference from which that interaction is based.

One final thought comes from another childhood movie classic, “Pollyanna.” In one particular scene, Pollyanna, the main character in this Disney film, is explaining to her new pastor friend the rationale her father had developed for choosing his sermon topics. She said that, after many years of struggling with sermon topics, her daddy had come to the decision to look for the best in people. She went on to say that the reason he looked

for the best was because he discovered that whatever you look for in people you are sure to find. The truth Pollyanna's father found was that there exists within us all the potential to be the best we can be. And that best is easiest found when others are in the search as well.

Here is a story that has made the rounds but still epitomizes what is meant when the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy is discussed. In the story, Teddy experiences both the negative and positive influence of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Which one would you want for yourself or the people you work with? How about for your children? One of the greatest privileges we have is being able to choose how we will respond to any given situation. We can choose, through explicit and implicit behavior, how we will treat those around us and what kind of atmosphere we will develop in our specific community. In this story, Elizabeth learned to look for the best and work to help Teddy reach his best.

### **THREE LETTERS FROM TEDDY**

Work of fiction penned by Elizabeth Silance Ballard in 1976 and published that year in *Home Life* magazine.

Teddy's letter came today, and now that I've read it, I will place it in my cedar chest with the other things that are important to my life.

"I wanted you to be the first to know." I smiled as I read the words he had written and my heart swelled with a pride that I had no right to feel.

I have not seen Teddy Stallard since he was a student in my fifth grade class, 15 years ago. It was early in my career, and I had only been teaching for two years.

From the first day he stepped into my classroom, I disliked Teddy. Teachers (although everyone knows differently) are not supposed to have favorites in a class, but most especially they are not to show dislike for a child, any child.

Nevertheless, every year there are one or two children that one cannot help but become attached to, for teachers are human, and it is human nature to like bright, pretty, intelligent people, whether they are 10 years old or 25. And sometimes, not too often fortunately, there will be one or two students to whom the teacher just can't seem or want to relate.

I had thought myself quite capable of handling my personal feelings along that line until Teddy walked into my life. There wasn't a child I particularly liked that year, but Teddy was most assuredly one I disliked.

He was dirty. Not just occasionally, but all the time. His hair hung over his ears, and he actually had to hold it out of his eyes as he wrote his papers in class. (And this was before it was fashionable to do so!). Too, he had a peculiar odor about him, which I could never identify. His physical faults were many, and his intellect left a lot to be desired, also. By

the end of the first week, I knew he was hopelessly behind the others. Not only was he behind; he was just plain slow! I began to withdraw from him immediately.

Any teacher will tell you that it's more of a pleasure to teach a bright child. It is definitely more rewarding for one's ego. But any teacher worth her credentials can channel work to the bright child, keeping him challenged and learning, while she puts her major effort on the slower ones. Any teacher can do this. Most teachers do it, but I didn't, not that year. In fact, I concentrated on my best students and let the others follow along as best they could. Ashamed as I am to admit it, I took perverse pleasure in using my red pen, and each time I came to Teddy's papers, the cross marks (and there were many) were always a little redder than necessary.

"Poor work!" I would write with a flourish. While I did not actually ridicule the boy, my attitude was obviously quite apparent to the class; for he quickly became the class "goat," the outcast - the unlovable and the unloved. He knew I didn't like him, but he didn't know why. Nor did I know - then or now - why I felt such an intense dislike for him. All I know is that he was a little boy no one cared about, and I made no effort on his behalf.

The days rolled by. We made it through the Fall Festival and the Thanksgiving holidays, and I continued marking happily with my red pen.

As Christmas holidays approached, I knew that Teddy would never catch up in time to be promoted to the sixth grade level. He would be a repeater. To justify myself, I went to his cumulative folder and from time to time looked it over. He had low grades for the first four years, but not failing grades. How he had made it, I did not know. I closed my mind to the personal remarks.

**First Grade:** Teddy shows promise by work and attitude, but has a poor home situation.

**Second Grade:** Teddy could do better. Mother terminally ill. He receives little help at home.

**Third Grade:** Teddy is a pleasant boy. Helpful, but too serious. Slow learner. Mother passed away end of the year.

**Fourth Grade:** Very slow, but well behaved. Father shows little or no interest.

Well, they passed him four times. But he will certainly repeat fifth grade! Do him good! I said to myself.

And then the last day before the Christmas holidays arrived. Our little tree on the reading table sported paper and popcorn chains. Many gifts were heaped underneath waiting for the big moment. Teachers always get several gifts at Christmas, but mine that year seemed bigger and more elaborate than ever. There was not a student who had not brought me one. Each unwrapping brought squeals of delight, and the proud giver would receive effusive thank-yous.

Teddy's gift wasn't the last one I picked up, in fact it was the middle of the pile. Its wrapping was a brown paper bag, and he had colored Christmas trees and red bells all

over it. It was stuck together with masking tape. "For Miss Thompson - From Teddy" it read. The group was completely silent and for the first time I felt conspicuously embarrassed because they all stood watching me unwrap that gift.

As I removed the last bit of masking tape, two items fell to my desk: a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with several stones missing and a small bottle of dime store cologne - half empty. I could hear the snickers and whispers, and I wasn't sure I could look at Teddy. "Isn't it lovely?" I said, placing the bracelet on my wrist. "Teddy, would you help me fasten it?"

He smiled shyly as he fixed the clasp, and I held my wrist for all of them to admire. There were a few hesitant oohs and ahhs, but as I dabbed the cologne behind my ears, all the little girls lined up for a dab behind their ears. I continued to open the gifts until I reached the bottom of the pile. We ate our refreshments and then the bell rang. The children filed out with shouts of "See you next year," and "Merry Christmas!" but Teddy waited at his desk.

When they had all left, he walked toward me, clutching his gift and books to his chest. "You smell just like Mom," he said softly. "Her bracelet looks real pretty on you too. I'm glad you liked it."

He left quickly. I locked the door, sat down at my desk and wept, resolving to make up to Teddy what I had deliberately deprived him of - a teacher who cared. I stayed every afternoon with Teddy from the end of the Christmas holiday until the last day of school. Sometimes we worked together. Sometimes he worked alone while I drew up lesson plans or graded papers.

Slowly but surely he caught up with the rest of the class. Gradually there was a definite upward curve in his grades. He did not have to repeat the fifth grade. In fact, his final averages were among the highest in the class, and although I knew he would be moving out of state when school was out, I was not worried for him. Teddy had reached a level that would stand him in good stead the following year no matter where he went. He had enjoyed a good measure of success and as we were taught in our teacher-training course, SUCCESS BUILDS SUCCESS.

I did not hear from Teddy until seven years later when his **first letter** appeared in my mailbox:

*Dear Miss Thompson,*

*I just wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class next month.*

*Very truly yours,*

*Teddy Stallard*

I sent him a card of congratulations and a small package, a pen and pencil gift set. I wondered what he would do after graduation.

Four years later, Teddy's **second letter** came.

*Dear Miss Thompson,*

*I wanted you to be the first to know. I was just informed I'll be graduating first in my class. The University has not been easy, but I liked it.*

*Very truly yours,*

*Teddy Stallard*

I sent him a good pair of sterling silver monogrammed cuff links and a card - so proud of him, I could burst.

And now, today - Teddy's **last letter**.

*Dear Miss Thompson,*

*I wanted you to be the first to know. As of today, I am Theodore J. Stallard, M.D. How about that!!!!?? I'm going to be married in July the 22nd to be exact. I wanted to ask you if you would come and sit where Mom would sit if she were here. I will have no family there as Dad died last year.*

*Very Truly yours,*

*Teddy Stallard*

I am not sure what kind of card one sends to a doctor on completion of medical school and professional boards. Maybe I'll just wait and take a wedding gift, but my congratulations can't wait.

*Dear Ted,*

*Congratulations! You made it in spite of those like me and because of your hard work this day has finally come for you. You have taught me so much and I would be honored to be at your wedding.*

*God bless you.*

*Miss Thompson*

I went to the wedding and sat in the spot reserved for the one who, according to scripture, "hopes all things, believes all things, and endures all things." I will forever be indebted to Teddy Stallard for the lessons of love I learned because of him.