

## MEETING LIFE'S CHALLENGES—STRATEGIES AND STORIES: A VIEW FROM THE FAR SIDE

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### INTRODUCTION, Judith E. Favell, Symposium Chair

This manuscript, by Dr. Beth Sulzer-Azaroff, was originally presented as part of a special Symposium at the Association for Behavior Analysis in Orlando, FL, 1999. This special event was organized by a group of women who are distinguished behavior analysts. They were asked to share their views on how behavior analytic principles and methodology had been instrumental in helping them meet the professional and personal challenges they had faced throughout their careers and lives.

Topics ranged from identifying and achieving professional goals to facing personal crises, such as illness or death of a loved one. It is this last issue that Dr. Sulzer-Azaroff addresses in this article. It is a brave and inspiring personal story as well as a highly instructive lesson in not only espousing behavior analysis, but also living it.

One of maturity's greatest gifts is recognizing that we are not forever. As friends and family increasingly depart, we slowly begin to shift our perspectives. "I'll do it one day," becomes, "I'd better do it soon." Then "I'd better do it soon" converts to, "I'd better do it now, or it may never get done." Then we are shocked into the sudden realization that, "If I want to do it, and if now is the time, how can I do it all?" Then follows, "Guess I'd better set some priorities, concentrate on the really, really 'have to's' and 'want to's' and forget about the 'shoulds,' 'mights,' and 'oughts.' If I haven't done them by now, probably I never will."

What is a "really *have to*" from a behavior analytic perspective? Those are the actions we need to take or restrain ourselves from taking in order to attain powerful long-term reinforcers, such as maintaining a reasonable quality of life and/or avoiding powerful punishers such as pain and severe deprivation.

What about a "really *want to*"? These are behaviors we must engage in to gain powerful reinforcers. However, here a choice factor appears to be involved. In my case, do I prefer writing a book or paper, or playing the piano? Teaching or watching TV?

As I observe the behavior of my cheerier contemporaries here in Florida I suspect that, whether or not they are aware of it, such factors are influencing the course of their actions. We treasure quality time so much that we no longer

permit ourselves to indulge in foolish pursuits, such as repeatedly reminding ourselves of past hurts, struggles to attain the unattainable, worrying about what our parents, neighbors, or our high school buddies might think. Instead, we choose our activities and companions based on how much fun they are and how good they make us feel.

I can hear you now protesting, “But you’re in a different place. I’m so up against it sometimes I don’t know where to turn. Who has choices anyway?” As a matter of fact ***you do***

That’s what this paper is all about. We’re here to describe some of our challenges over the years and how behavior analysis has helped us to face and overcome them. Presumably, the idea is for you to select and apply the rules and images we conjure up to govern or serve as discriminative stimuli for your own behavior. So, reverting to Florida vernacular, “Listen up, heah.”

“Uh oh,” I can hear you saying, “Sounds like my parents. ‘Mother/Father knows best.’” (However, I’m willing to bet they didn’t use the jargon or logic of behavior analysis.) But, to invoke a couple of other forms of contemporary jargon, if we (and they) had been there and done that, why should ***you*** reinvent the wheel?” Truly, our experiences probably are not as different from yours as you might think. Perhaps they vary in form or drama, but they do constitute the “stuff” of which our shared experiences are made.

Take the personal experiences involving choosing or avoiding long-term relationships or having children? Our roles in nurturing and supervising their development? Our social concerns, such as contributing to society, finding and maintaining friendships? Our own health and well-being and that of our families? Handling calamities? Here’s one person’s account of the way behavior analysis helped her to weather a storm.

I’ll go back to the early 60’s: the place was Minnesota, and my husband, Edward Sulzer—a clinical psychologist—had joined the medical school faculty while our two sons, David and Richard (ages 3 and 5), and I spent our time enjoying our lakeside home in Vadnais Heights. We did all the things that good mothers and their children did together: craft projects, museum trips, stories, gardening, swimming lessons, baking cookies. My husband and I had dinner parties, played bridge, formed art groups, took dancing lessons. But time weighed heavily on my hands (for the last time, I might add). There I was—fretting over washing our picture window yet once more, as I had been doing everyday for months. Given the combination of my own impatience (yes, I found myself losing my temper with those rambunctious boys!) and feeling as if my brain was beginning to atrophy, I decided to enroll in a course at the university.

The subject that appealed to me was clinical child psychology, both because it might help me understand and do a better job with my own kids and because it was a continuation of the coursework I had already taken elsewhere in the two previous school psychology programs in which I'd been enrolled. (Good wives agreeably accompanied their husbands in those days, and Ed had transferred from graduate school to first one and then a second faculty position). The next thing I knew, once again I was enrolled as a full-time doctoral student.

I shall "fast forward" here. Five years later, amidst great trials and tribulations—sick children, family disasters, and despite my own poor study skills, marginal grades, and so forth—miraculously (and with lots of hard work and determination on both our parts), I completed my doctoral work. By that time, our third child, Lenore—an early graduation present selected by both of us—had arrived on the scene. Shortly thereafter, I joined the faculty half-time at Southern Illinois University where Ed had taken on the role of Director of the Behavior Modification program—the first in the country.

Ed had become deeply committed to the behavior analytic viewpoint of looking at psychological issues. He and several of my professors at the University of Minnesota had helped me to gain my own enthusiastic acceptance of this approach. That common viewpoint permitted us to build on our deep mutual affection. It enabled us to share our perspectives on child-rearing (no wonder our children are well-nigh perfect!) while bonding us more closely as friends and working associates. Probably, the most important lesson behavior analysis taught us was how to analyze and change our own behavior.

Four years later, as Ed lay dying of cancer, he turned to me and voiced his concern for our family's future. I was able to reassure him that I felt we would do fine, largely because of the strength I had gained from my education and experience. And, apparently, that was true. I am not saying that this experience was not the most painful one in my life, but I am saying that we were able to carry on.

Basic behavioral principles allowed me to understand the grieving process. (No science or clinical specialty in death and dying existed at that time.) The anger and depression the children and I felt were a normal response to the extraordinary punishment and extinction conditions in effect. I also knew it would be temporary, which helped a great deal. I realized that recognizing and availing myself of alternative reinforcing choices would hasten the recovery process. Of course, there were things I *had* to do and things I *wanted* to do.

Under the "had to's" were

- Feed, clothe, and shelter the family

- Maintain our health and psychological well-being

The “want to’s” included

- Feel comfortable about managing our finances
- Provide for our children’s higher education
- Spend quality time with the children
- Continue to encourage their physical, intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and interpersonal development
- Help them to have fun
- Gradually begin to enjoy my own life again

What all this meant was that I had to begin, as we do in applied behavior analysis, to set some priorities, determine and then select the most critical ones, determine some objective ways to measure them, and tap into feedback and reinforcement. (I didn’t have to wait the many years some of my contemporaries did to learn the value of setting priorities and pursuing these.)

Feeding, clothing and sheltering one’s family and oneself is no simple act. Basically, it is composed of many heterogeneous chains:

- Determine necessary expenses
- Determine funds available and forthcoming
- Find ways to minimize the former and maximize the latter
- Plan for a bit extra for emergencies

So, the first thing I did was buy an accounting book. Then I recorded our regular monthly expenditures. After paying all our bills and realizing that our bank account was empty, I tallied up all our assets and income sources. These included my salary, Ed’s retirement fund, and his social security and Veterans Administration (VA) benefits. While there appeared to be enough to maintain us in our current lifestyle, there was little to spare.

I invested the funds from our modest insurance policy in no-risk treasury notes, earmarking the principal for the children’s college education. I would not touch that principal but would use the interest for emergencies and “want to’s.” Keeping the books enabled me to see the monthly totals, and I achieved a reasonable comfort level on that score. The first and second “want to’s” could be checked off as a consequence. (I believe it is the not knowing that creates anxiety.)

Probably, this explains why so many employees seem to appreciate specific feedback about the way they are performing their jobs.

I pursued the other “want to’s” as well. It wasn’t as easy as I had anticipated—no simple matter of specifying the objective and applying reinforcers when the behavior moved in that direction. As any applied behavior analyst today recognizes (but I failed to at that time), identifying reinforcers is not simply a matter of asking people what they would like and want. Rather, we need to monitor what they do. Insofar as I was concerned, I assumed I knew my reinforcers: interacting and playing with my children, teaching, researching, writing, reading, gardening, playing the piano, socializing.

However, the experience of losing my husband must have functioned as an establishing operation, changing the value of some of those presumed reinforcing activities. While some persisted, gardening and music dropped out entirely. I found it punishing to do things not requiring my full attention, because such activities then permitted me the opportunity to recall the horrendous events of the past year. So, I needed to find other activities to take their place and wondered how I could keep up with the rest.

I realized I would have to dispense with anything not on the list, and that included restricting newspaper reading to Sundays, expanding our babysitter’s duties to allow her to cook, clean, do the emergency shopping and help transport the children. Most community activities, TV viewing, and other such non-essentials were eliminated. As much as possible, I also restricted my job-related work to the office and to times when the children were asleep. I spent the rest of my time with the children in family outings, attending their plays and concerts, playing with and reading to them, helping them with their homework and school projects, and the like.

As a single parent I became very sensitive to my need to survive, remain healthy, and find as much enjoyment as I could under the circumstances. If I permitted myself to get sick or to wallow in misery and self-pity, my children would suffer. I gave up smoking and began to exercise regularly—a pattern that has persisted ever since.

Months later, it took a tremendous effort to get myself to participate in the social life of our tightly knit university community, but I knew it was the right action to take. Some of our old friends shunned me (for whatever reason), but many were especially understanding and helped to introduce me to others. I could use my cognitive-behavioral skills to keep a lid on my ruminations and anger and to promote coping statements. One favorite such statement was, “I am strong. I am woman. I can do it.” Another, when I began to date about a year later, was, “If

it's good for you or doesn't hurt you, the children, or anyone else, the heck with what anyone thinks!"

Apparently the financial planning and other self-management procedures paid off, because I was able to send the children to summer camp and the university. There were also funds to travel to Europe a couple of times and to cruise the Caribbean.

This was when I met Leonid Azaroff. We hit it off right away and were married a few months later. I wish I could say, ". . . and we lived happily ever after," but that would be a gross exaggeration. Amalgamating families with separate, distinct backgrounds, values, and behavior patterns is no picnic. Also, health and other challenges have faced us many times.

But, just as I had known when reassuring Ed, the behavior analytic tools were there to help us through these challenges. Now, 28 years later, the children are grown and accomplishing wonders. Lee and I reside in our chosen locations, living a life as close to ideal as we could imagine.