

Roger P. Weissberg

Today, I lost my collaborator, colleague, mentor and friend for the ages, Roger P. Weissberg. Roger died after a long battle with pancreatic cancer—a battle his doctors didn't expect him to be able to wage. But like others who came before, those doctors were wrong to underestimate Roger Weissberg.

I should know because 35 years ago when I first met him, I underestimated him too! When I was asked by the superintendent of the New Haven Public Schools, Dr. John Dow, Jr., to lead an effort to reduce drug use, violence, and dropout among our students, I was thrilled by the chance. Then, I was told to meet with a new professor from Yale who could help. "A professor from Yale," I thought to myself; "that's the last thing our students need." I reluctantly agreed to meet. (Actually, I was told I had no choice!). My life would never be the same.

Roger introduced me to his pioneering social problem solving skills curriculum—the first set of resources I'd ever seen that could actually empower students rather than scold, punish, threaten and label them. Within days, Roger had taught me stress management skills, feelings identification exercises, active listening lessons, and more. Within weeks, our entire school district was reviewing his new curriculum that offered 6th graders and their teachers and parents a whole new approach to self confidence, relationship building, and purpose. Within a year, we were embarking on a k-12 reform effort with Roger's framework at the center. And within a decade, the field of "social and emotional learning" (SEL) was born.

But Roger was so much more than a scholar, a psychologist, a teacher, and a scientist. He was the rare leader who loved to be on a team; the rare leader who loved to empower others to lead; the rare leader who found his joy in the joy of others. He left working on his own curriculum because he thought he could help others develop and strengthen theirs. He left the comfort of the ivory tower to help teachers tackle their most difficult challenges. He left the classroom to create a collaborative of thousands of scholars, policy makers, and educators dedicated to a shared vision of education, grounded in science but soaring in wisdom and relationship and goodness. He co-founded The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and was quick to point out its signature principle: "I love to collaborate with others," was his frequent refrain.

And it made all the difference. A collaborative of scholars and educators defined the field of SEL with a book that reached over 100,000 readers. A collaborative of scholars and educators designed the CASEL "wheel," the most cited and popular framework in the world. A collaborative of scholars and educators designed the studies that revealed that effectively implemented SEL could improve behavior, health, and test scores too. In Roger's painstaking attention to evidence, his endless patience with dozens of opinions and inputs, and his boundless intellectual talent, he was quietly leading it all.

I spoke to Roger at least once a week for 35 years. If I had an idea, I asked Roger if it was valid. If I had a presentation, I asked Roger for his slides. If I had a meeting, I asked Roger for a plan. If I had a challenge with my life—my own kids, my career, my role in the field, I asked Roger. I put his stoplight problem solving poster on the walls in my house. I included it in every presentation I ever made. I asked him to lead CASEL. I asked him to co-write any articles I thought worthwhile. He never let me down—not once.

I last saw Roger on September 1 as he decided to enter hospice care. I planned to stay in his hospital room for 30 minutes, but we talked for 5 hours! We covered everything—the rare chance for friends of almost 4 decades to take stock, to tell stories, to share everything before it's too late. I thanked him over and over again. He teared up. So did I. We laughed about grant applications, about our many disagreements, about how many times we almost ruined everything. We talked about the Beatles, Tom Petty, the Everly Brothers, and Fiddler on the Roof. He sang happy birthday to me. "My big joy is the new Journal of Social and Emotional Learning and the Weissberg scholars," he said. "And please make sure we do a good job with the CASEL awards. Rosa DeLauro, Eric Moore, Ed Gordon, Keith Matheny, Tia Borders and Linda Darling-Hammond deserve them. Make sure, ok?" And then later, "when I fade into sleep and come back out of it, I just can't believe how much we accomplished."

Those were not the words of a man who wanted to brag but rather a man in awe of life and grateful for all it gave him. He knew his mission from an early age—to help kids and families develop positively--and he held the post his whole life. Somehow, he knew at the end that his work was done. When the nurses disconnected his antibiotics, he barely flinched. He was ready.

"Trust and Friendship. That's what we had Tim," he said in our final minutes. "Nothing's more important than those. I was blessed over and over. I had loving parents, financial wherewithal, a meaningful purpose. My wife and kids are amazing. My friends have loved me beyond my wildest expectations. Cancer has been terrible, but I've been given so much through it. I'm really proud and grateful."

I'm not sure what will happen without Roger Weissberg. In his final minutes, he coached me as he often did. "Unite is great Tim. It will take a long time. I hope you stick with it...Find great people. They're a ton of them out there... There's so much work. Don't worry about who gets credit. Who cares after all? The joy is in helping make life better."

Roger and I didn't talk religion, but he had a bold and endless faith. He told me he loved the "glory glory hallelujah" at the end of "Inherit The Wind" so I watched it. I could almost feel his voice in it, rising to glory, his truth still marching on. At one point, he closed his eyes: "When I get to heaven," he whispered, "can you imagine all those great thinkers who will be there? Folks we worked with like Donald Cohen, Ed Zigler, and Seymour Sarason." I laughed imagining him at a great faculty meeting in the sky. "They won't know any more about kids and schools than you Roger." "You're right," he grinned.

Travel easy good man. Thank you for everything.

Tim Shriver

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