I am passionate about occupational therapy and I have persevered in that passion for some 65 years.

I am passionate that occupational therapists must be competent in helping people maintain themselves and experience gratification in their daily activities (Fidler & Velde, 2002). We must be competent in knowing how to develop relationships with others, to be intimate, to allow others to do for us when necessary, and to enjoy the exchange of ideas, feelings, and responsibility. We must be competent in understanding occupation, and we must continually seek to explain how motivation is triggered and sustained when the unique characteristics of a person match those of an activity (Fidler, 2000). I am passionate that we must use our study of activities to make vital contributions to society by providing programs of wellness, prevention, and lifestyle counseling; of community planning and design; of organizational and institutional design and operations; and of restorative interventions and rehabilitation (Fidler & Velde). Above all, we must strive to embody the highest standards of professionalism, building our practices on the study of activity, its impact on human behavior, and its historical, sociological, cultural, and psychological dimensions and performance imperatives (Fidler, 1966, 2000).

So it is that I am most passionate about education (Fidler, 1966, 2000), as I believe that the most critical element of whether occupational therapy fails or succeeds will lie in how we develop new knowledge about human activity, how we transfer that knowledge, and how we coach and mentor those who follow us. Our students must be provided with opportunities to engage in critical thinking and problem solving in real-world settings throughout the educational process. In particular, educators need to be concerned with helping learners develop abilities to anticipate the most important questions, to find and critique currently available answers, and to perform independently in newly emerging environments where neither the client nor the setting remains consistent from one day till the next.

So, is my passion for activities? Or is my passion for education as a means of promoting curiosity and reasoning that could further the cause of understanding activities and their potential to alter human behavior? My answer is this: My passion is to engage people in critical thinking toward the exploration of activity and its ability to shape human behavior. For some 65 years, I have been in search of dialogue that could shed light on the question, “What influence, if any, does an activity have on human behavior?” This question led me to occupational therapy school and it is the question that remains, for me at least, unanswered today. Here, then, are my understandings of some of the forces that shaped my career of passion and perseverance in occupational therapy.

Forces That Shaped My Career

After spending a few summers working on the playground that my father supervised for the town recreation program, I recognized that certain activities, presented at the right time, seemed to have the power to change behavior dramatically. Certain children who were “loners,” or those who were hostile, or those whose developmental skills were lagging, seemed to be able to find joy in life when the right activity with the “just right” challenge was presented to them. When it came time to go to college, I chose occupational therapy as the profession most likely to provide the answers to my questions.
But entering occupational therapy school is when the perseverance became necessary. Strangely, the field and its educational programs seemed to provide "answers" but not learning experiences that went beyond the established, and always unchallenged, "answers." It became obvious that what I was really seeking was the opportunity to ask questions in pursuit of the truth, not to receive answers that had neither been substantiated nor subjected to critique, revision, and exploration. Questions, which I've always been full of, were put down as being impertinent if not also irrelevant. There were ways of doing things and, yes, using activities to effect change in behavior was the mechanism of choice. But questioning, examining, studying, researching, and critiquing these forms of inquiry were not in vogue. From my perspective today, these forms of inquiry are still not YET sufficiently in vogue in occupational therapy.

I am a Libra, one who needs to have things in balance. Identifying and exploring questions helps to create a balance. However, should things ever appear to be balanced, a Libra must then also "unbalance" them so as to go on with the search for what's right in order to identify better solutions and greater truths. To go in search of truth requires a willingness to engage in debate, which in my case has meant to continue to challenge my profession to improve its professionalism and educational traditions.

Also, my father taught me never to lose an argument. Each night around the dinner table we were challenged to debate the topic of the night, and you had to be prepared to defend your position, no matter how you had arrived at it. You needed evidence, factual material to back your position; you needed perseverance and the ability to tolerate the slings of others who disliked or disagreed with your view. My passion was also shaped by the need to be the best I could be in whatever I did. If I were to be a professional, then I needed to be the best professional I could possibly be. If occupational therapy was to be the object of my efforts, then it seemed essential that my work be focused on the educational processes that would ensure the success of the profession, using the soundest possible evidence and argument.

Although I have chosen to work in a variety of settings, my favorite interactions with students or, for that matter, learners of any age or any discipline, were always in settings where there was open give and take, questioning, and debating of all kinds. Most particularly I have enjoyed being provocative, especially challenging all-too-firmly held beliefs. Though we may not have had adequate research or theory on which to build our practice, I have wanted us not to settle into a state of compliance built around earlier but unexamined beliefs and myths. For I believe that there are no right answers. I therefore believe as well that each and every guiding assumption must be continually reexamined and challenged anew.

These were the forces, then, that shaped my passion and prompted my perseverance in a profession devoted to human service.

Conclusions

My passion has been for the study of activity as it is a mediating force in human behavior. There have been many obstacles in the path I chose to follow. Some of these were long-standing patterns of organizational behavior that deterred the development of research and education, so essential to develop a young profession. Too often my provocative questioning left others shaking their heads, wondering why the questions never stopped! But question and challenge we must, and the study of activity as a powerful tool for use in shaping healthier, more productive lives, must become the focus of the research efforts of the profession.

I have persevered through many years to help prepare occupational therapists to earn a meaningful role in providing health care to those whose lives are in turmoil. My passion has been expressed through the world of education, as a means of helping to prepare practitioners for the roles and responsibilities that rightfully should be those of our profession. I believe that eventually we will conquer our self-doubts and learn to structure all of educational programs to graduate therapists who are competent to provide services to those whose lives lack meaning, and for whom activity has the potential to reshape their lives and infuse them with a new purpose. But for now, a great deal more perseverance is required, on the part of our leaders, if this goal is to be met in the 21st century.

References

