Creating a Web of Energy Without a True Spider

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While in Las Vegas for the Nevada Occupational Therapy Association meeting, I planned with the occupational therapy audience gathered at one of the meeting rooms in the casino how best to dramatically illustrate the importance of spinning these connections among practice, education, and research. In Houston, I demonstrated to the AOTA audience the idea that had won the most votes: I put on a red cape made up of spider webs and paraded up and down the stage like I was in a Vegas show. Then I said, “To borrow from the art of the Vegas showgirls, what do you think? Notice that this red and very showy cape is not one spider web in its design. It is made up of many spider webs linked together to produce a fabric that is spun with threads coming from all directions. This cape is symbolic of how we must link together! Okay, maybe I’m just looking for a rationale to be outrageous—and you would expect nothing less from me! We need to laugh even when our work is so serious and thus we need to be role models in living life to its fullest” (Figure 1).

In preparing for my presidential address, I began reflecting on my name’s (Penelope) meaning, particularly because of the metaphor in the title of creating webs. In Greek, pené means “threads, especially the wool,” which in weaving are those threads running across the fabric. In Homer’s epic The Odyssey, Penelope was the “weaver” because she would weave during the day and pull out the woof threads at night to fend off suitors who tried to convince her that her husband Odysseus was killed during the battle of Troy (Bassett, 1923). She had agreed to remarry only when the weaving was completed.

I resonate with my name’s meaning of “dream weaver” as a part of my role in leading us toward the Centennial Vision (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2007). I am not a weaver who uses only vertical and horizontal threads. I spin a web of energy to link practice, education, and research. I am a connector of people and action. But, consistent with my emphasis upon leadership being the task of everyone, we are all weavers of...
possibilities. Better yet, we are a multitude of spiders who simultaneously create the glistening and singularly spun webs linking with the webs of others. Thus, the resulting larger web exponentially spreads out, fashioning an infinite network of power in pursuit of our goals. We all need to be dream weavers! To be connectors! To be the spider! And like the Penelope of mythology, especially during these tough economic times, we need to keep weaving even though we are under great pressure!

Throughout my visits to state occupational therapy association conferences this past year, including speaking in Las Vegas at the Nevada Occupational Therapy Association meeting, I talked about the idea of involving each of us in personally weaving together practice, education, and research. I described how practitioners need evidence cultivated through research and require ongoing education for continuing competence. Educators draw from practice and research to build our profession’s capacity through the development of budding practitioners, scientists, and academicians to meet society’s growing demand for occupational therapy. To guide relevant research, scientists learn from practitioners about important clinical questions and the pragmatics of practice. Scientists gain knowledge from educators who have the investigative know-how for demonstrating the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of occupational therapy.

This theme of spinning connections guides me as I start my third and final year serving as your president of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) and as the chairperson of your leadership team. I have operated with one guiding principle about membership: We are all AOTA. There is a web of energy that connects us. We need each other to implement the Centennial Vision. The Vision is no longer a promise but rather energy and action through several initiatives such as advocacy, the Blueprint for Education, branding, outcomes research, development of science capacity, and strategic partnerships—to just mention a few of our efforts.

However, no one spider can be responsible for any of these projects. A single web excludes the variety and diversity of perspectives needed to enact our Vision in a way that changes society for the better. We are all interconnected as we strive to meet the occupational needs of society. To tackle these important needs, we must weave occupational therapy into a “powerful, widely recognized, science-driven, and evidence-based profession with a globally connected and diverse workforce” (AOTA, 2007, p. 614).

We have made significant progress towards the Centennial Vision under the leadership of our outgoing vice president, Dr. Florence Clark, who I would like to recognize for her ongoing commitment—one I know she will continue when she assumes the office of AOTA president-elect. She will tell you that we are spinning an ever-expanding web known as our Centennial Vision and that we have less than 8 years to achieve our objectives. It is important we stay productive in this time of uncertainty and economic crisis. Society needs occupational therapy services now more than ever.

Our branding slogan “Living Life To Its Fullest,” which was unveiled at last year’s conference, didn’t appear out of thin air. When asked through our market research, the public described us as serving people to support their efforts to live life to its fullest. Think about this brand and what it means to us and our clients. Think about the promise inherent in the phrase. We must have the science, the evidence-based practice, the highly trained practitioners, and the dynamic educational programs to achieve client outcomes associated with living life to its fullest. In response to the public, we have set our standard high. We cannot and will not let them down! Each one of us represents the profession in its quest to affect society through facilitating people to live life to its fullest. You might say we are all spiders, spinning beautiful webs on three levels: (1) personal, (2) organizational, and (3) professional.

Personally Spinning Webs

We personally spin a web by surpassing the limits we impose on ourselves. If left unchallenged, these limits collectively slow the growth in our profession and ultimately interfere with our clients’ ability to recover or find health and live life to its fullest. If we are to enable our newest occupational therapy practitioners to be ready for the future, we must examine our entry-level education. We have to think beyond the standards for accreditation and contemplate the pursuit of excellence in an environment in which practice, science, and education are constantly changing and in a society that expects more from its professionals. The Model Curriculum Ad Hoc Committees have completed their work, which will guide occupational therapy program directors and their faculties through the steps of developing or revising a “model curriculum.”

As a second phase, the Blueprint for the Future of Education Ad Hoc Committee is identifying curriculum content and expected student learning outcomes in order to meet society’s needs in the 21st century. An additional focus on educational excellence is the launch of our voluntary Fieldwork Supervisor Certificate Program. The first trainers are learning how to conduct this course so they can begin offering training opportunities throughout the country.

We also know that to maintain our existing positive reputation as a profession and to enhance our ability to
facilitate people to live life to its fullest, we must personally address our continuing development and professional needs. Remaining updated should be taken seriously as an ethical responsibility that only the individual occupational therapy practitioner can assume on behalf of clients, students, and research participants.

If you are a spider, though, you will also spin a web beyond yourself and your internal development. You will cultivate a community of learning made up of students, practitioners, educators, and scientists to extend your reach. We surpass limits when we surround ourselves with people, including various health care professionals, scholars from other disciplines, and clients, who push us toward our full potential and remove the barriers that stand in our way. In this learning community, each person holds the other accountable not only for knowledge management but also for the creation of new knowledge that is important to society and that concerns how people can live life to its fullest. Through these larger networks, we gain knowledge about the complexity of daily living and translate this information into effective interventions for the areas of mental health; children and youth; productive aging: rehabilitation, disability, and participation; work and industry; and health and wellness.

We have the technology available to support these learning communities through OT Connections, which is linked from our master AOTA Web site. OT Connections is a collection of discussion boards, blogs, forums, groups, photo sharing, and event information that lets AOTA members and nonmembers easily connect with each other. We also built pages on comparable social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. However, communities of learning are for more than posting discussions like we currently do. Communities of learning are about groups spontaneously forming to tackle the tough issues in our practice that limit our clients’ abilities to live life to its fullest. Imagine the creative potential harnessed through virtual interactions where innovation is deliberately cultivated.

OT Connections has the potential to be even more than a collection of learning communities. It can provide occupational therapy practitioners with greater opportunities for contributing to the governance and leadership of the organization and influencing the direction of the profession. Choosing not to participate, however, limits not only your personal and professional power but also the power of AOTA as a whole. When we do not take part in AOTA, loss of commitment shrinks the web of energy because we are essentially abdicating our “cool spider powers” to those who have traditionally been the true spiders or elected leaders. Loss of input from the members places a heavy burden on the few. Yet when troubling situations or new possibilities occur, often occupational therapy practitioners ask, “What is AOTA doing about this issue?” We forget that we are AOTA and to ask, “What can I do to help solve this problem or position us well for this opportunity?” Or better yet, “Here is what I can do.” Remember, you’re the spider!

To examine the participation of members in AOTA, I have appointed an ad hoc committee, co-chaired by our incoming vice president, Dr. Virginia Stoffel, and one of our past leaders of the Representative Assembly, Kate Lucas. The data and results from surveys, telephone interviews, and focus groups will indicate how you wish to participate in the decision making of the organization. Imagine the power of a web of professional activity that truly generates itself with not one true spider but many spiders actively connecting their webs of interest to each other! I am asking you to be the spider by personally accepting these challenges:

• Educate yourself and your colleagues in your workplace and develop strategies to manage knowledge for determining applicability to practice, education, or research.
• Start groups of fellow practitioners, students, educators, scientists from occupational therapy and other disciplines, and consumers to discuss evidence, identify project ideas related to the need for more evidence, and create strategies to implement them.
• Speak to community groups to share the scientific evidence of occupational therapy’s impact on people living life to its fullest.
• Cultivate relationships with leaders in the community to support the development of occupational therapy health and wellness and chronic disease prevention programs that facilitate people to live life to its fullest.
• Contact the media to ignite public interest in the services we provide that focus on people living life to its fullest.

There are occupational therapy practitioners taking on this personal spider challenge. Because it is the 50th anniversary of the founding of occupational therapy assistants, I would like to highlight the work of Terry Olivas-De La O, founder and CEO of Family Success by Design. Her community-based organization uses occupational therapy and occupational science to promote and maintain health and wellness for children who struggle to find their place in life, often because they have few positive role models and environments in which to play and engage in leisure. The foundation’s goals are accomplished through mentoring and events such as the Latino Young Men’s Conference and the Black and Brown Youth Summit. Promoting careers and higher education is one of the purposes of these programs.

AOTA is also supporting a number of efforts to increase diversity of our occupational therapy practitioners. For instance, we added “Diversity in Occupational
Therapy” on the “Prospective Students” page of the AOTA Web site. We have posted biographies of practitioners who have diverse backgrounds, such as African–American, Hispanic, Asian–Pacific Islander, and Orthodox Jewish, and of practitioners with disabilities.

Additionally, AOTA is focusing on recruiting diverse students through membership and participation in the American School Counselor Association, National Association for Advisors for Health Professions, and Health Occupation Students of America.

To assist us with the personal challenge to be the spider, much like Terry Olivas-De La O, AOTA is serious about the term widely recognized in our Vision. The branding initiative launched at AOTA’s 2008 Annual Conference & Expo is producing the tools you need to work with the public and to be the spider expanding your web of influence. Two new items are available: (1) a guide for how you can be an emissary for your profession every day and (2) a brochure to explain the promise of the brand to consumers. A poster for “Living Life to Its Fullest” was distributed to members via the January 2009 issue OT Practice. We challenged all of you to tell us the stories about the persons in the poster and how occupational therapy was a part of their goal to live life to its fullest.

Danielle Diglio posted the following on my blog found on OT Connections:

I believe that the reason the people are smiling is because of how they are treated by the occupational therapists. I have been fortunate enough to see various fieldwork sites during my time at Quinnipiac University. While at each site, I heard at least one client say “I can’t” and each time the therapist would assure the client that “they can.”

Molly Haling Jensen blogged about how her knowledge as an occupational therapy practitioner helped her in her own family story:

The face in the middle of the poster is me, smiling, because I know what is true for my child and me, and I have a voice in the medical decision-making process. The young school-age boy in the poster could well represent my daughter, wise beyond her years in being able to know what is healthy and unhealthy for her body, and having courage to make decisions to live for her own health. We are now able to “Live Life to Its Fullest” because we are empowered in making choices that influence our overall health. In turn, we are leading more productive and fulfilling family, educational, and social lives.

In addition to these projects, AOTA launched a “Living Life To Its Fullest” consumer education podcast series found on OT Connections. To date, over six episodes have been recorded, including ergonomics, improving U.S. veterans’ care, stress management, low vision, fall prevention, and Alzheimer’s disease—to name just a few—resulting in more than 600 downloads.

Furthermore, AOTA is raising the profile of our profession through increased media coverage. Having this visibility should assist you in working with your local media. The AOTA Web site lists many of these stories and interviews for your review. You will be amazed at the frequency the media considers occupational therapy knowledge to be important health information for consumers. During the past year, we’ve had stories in such outlets as USA Today, The Los Angeles Times, U.S. News & World Report, The New York Times, and Retirement Living TV. What’s more, the annual National School Backpack Awareness Day garnered coverage in 35 local newspapers and 40 local TV stations across the country. All of these stories ensure that consumers get the message—We can help you live life to its fullest.

Organizationally Spinning Webs

Now, how do we bring this knowledge creation into the organizations for which we work? How do we organizationally spin our webs, thereby empowering ourselves to practice authentic occupational therapy that is no longer inappropriately constrained by system boundaries, arbitrary insurance rules, complex policy issues, bureaucratic red tape, and undue pressure to reduce costs to the point of sacrificing quality? By asserting our role on the health care or educational team and the colleagues with whom we work, we can bring our unique body of knowledge to the shared goal of improved health or well-being for our clients and populations. Our perspective, evidence-based practice, emphasis on organized collection of occupational therapy outcomes, political advocacy, and relationships with other organizations and governmental agencies are powerful tools.

We can use positive changes in advocacy and development of evidence that AOTA has brought about to add strength and capacity to the organizations for which we work, whether that is a school system, hospital, skilled nursing facility, or private practice. To improve our influence on organizational change, AOTA’s e-mail newsletter, the 1-Minute Update, has published 24 Evidence Bytes, such as Evidence for Injury Prevention, Evidence for Traumatic Brain Injury Rehabilitation, and Public Health Interventions. In addition, six Evidence Perks were published in OT Practice. This regular feature of the magazine helps practitioners learn about available and accessible sources for evidence. The topics have included
• Using the Institute of Medicine Reports To Inform Practice,
• AARP’s Online Research Databases, and
• The Institute for Work and Health: Evidence for Occupational Therapy.

AOTA continually develops new practice guidelines for your use within your organizations. Just last year we published the evidence-based Practice Guidelines Adults With Stroke (Sabari & Lieberman, 2008) and Children and Adolescents With Autism (Tomcheck & Case-Smith, 2009). Several other new Practice Guidelines are in process, including
• Individuals With Work-Related Injuries and Illnesses (Kaskutas & Snodgrass, 2009),
• Adults With Alzheimer’s Disease (coming in 2010), and
• Adults With Traumatic Brain Injury (Golisz, 2009).

AOTA’s work on outcomes couldn’t be more fortuitous because of an emphasis clearly coming from Washington and President Barack Obama on health information technology (IT) and comparative effectiveness research. Significant government funding has been set aside for the development of standards for health IT and the education of professionals in using electronic health records. Talk about organizational change! We must take a leadership role in how occupational therapy will be documented in the electronic record as a beginning step in controlling the way in which our effectiveness will be measured and determined. To clearly differentiate occupational therapy interventions from those of other services, we will be developing templates for electronic documentation to assist occupational therapy practitioners in accurately describing their occupation-based practice.

Additionally, AOTA has endorsed the Boston University Activity Measure for Post-Acute Care (AM-PAC™) as a measurement tool for occupational therapy functional outcomes. We are collaborating with CREcare, an organization established to assist clients in developing and implementing programs to measure and monitor clinical outcomes, to promote data collection with the AM-PAC for inclusion in a larger occupational therapy database. This is a necessary first component for studying and tracking our outcomes. It is the government’s plan to determine those interventions that work and to stop paying for those that are not effective. AOTA’s efforts to begin data collection on outcomes and to design documentation materials put us ahead of the curve and are crucial for our profession’s future.

Being able to strengthen the organizations and the systems in which we work is partially dependent on AOTA’s expanding web of influence generated through collaborative partnerships. For example, we continue to have a strong relationship with the National Association of Home Builders, with whom we are collaboratively working to design an advanced course as a part of their Certified Aging-In-Place Specialist program. We’ve established a new relationship with the International Council on Active Aging in which they will help improve knowledge among AOTA members about older adult wellness. In turn, we will help educate their members about occupational therapy and its role in the emerging discipline of older adult wellness. Likewise, we are evolving in reputation as serving older drivers, preventing falls, and working with children. The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration awarded AOTA a $150,000 grant to distribute minigrants that encourage driving rehabilitation program development.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) included occupational therapy in a national meeting on collaborations for injury prevention. The CDC presented at our 2009 Annual Conference & Expo on the topic of falls prevention. In terms of working with the federal Office of Special Education Programs, AOTA staff members were presenters at the national early intervention conference for partners of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004.

We can convene all the meetings, publish all the evidence, and form all the partnerships we want, but none of those efforts will go very far unless we are constantly advocating for the profession at the federal and state levels. The organizations for which we work directly benefit from AOTA’s expanding web of influence generated through advocacy. The battle over the therapy cap for Medicare Part B persists, but we continue to win in explaining to Congress our concern for clients who require more services. During summer 2008, the therapy cap exceptions process was extended for another 18 months. And I am proud to report that a bill to repeal the therapy caps once and for all was introduced on the first day Congress was back in session in January 2009!

AOTA is also advocating for the Medicare Home Health Flexibility Act of 2009. The bill would allow occupational therapists to open Medicare home health cases and to conduct the initial comprehensive assessment when occupational therapy is on the physician’s order. This legislation raises our profile as a Medicare-funded home health provider and promotes our capabilities to meet the needs of clients in their own environments. Our whole approach to health care is validated by this bill that emphasizes the importance of the occupational environment and is a stepping-stone in occupational therapy becoming a fully qualifying service.

Sometimes these bills take many years and sessions of Congress to pass. The Paul Wellstone Mental Health
and Addiction Equity Act of 2007 is an example of such a bill. Named for the late senator from Minnesota, the bill requires insurance companies to treat mental health the same as physical health. It finally passed in October 2008 after a 12-year struggle. I am so proud that AOTA was part of the coalition fighting for its passage. Now we must work to make sure occupational therapy is a recognized provider of mental health services.

**Professionally Spinning Webs**

We have talked about ways occupational therapy practitioners, educators, and scientists can implement the *Centennial Vision* through making personal changes and leading improvement within the organizations for which they work or provide services. The other method of accomplishing the *Vision* is through the professional web that is AOTA, the American Occupational Therapy Foundation, and our state associations. How do we become an effective and skillful spider within our professional organizations?

Think about the spider web spun on the porch or in the doorway. On the one hand, it is so dainty and light. And yet, when bad weather comes, it somehow manages to stay intact. Looking at the web after the rain, you will see a spider that may be a little worse for the wear, but because of its strong web it did not blow away.

I do not need to remind you of the seriousness of the current economic storm, which truly is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for our nation and the world. Our profession will not be spared the pain that every other sector of the economy is experiencing. Although the demand and the need for our services at this time remain high, we cannot become complacent as this economy begins to affect health care and educational service providers. Now that the health care reform policy debate is here, we, with your help, are ready to tackle the challenges and opportunities that await us.

Clearly, the real strength of our web comes from the number of spiders spinning! Although economic times are tough, AOTA membership is increasing. We gained more than 1,000 members last year, and we are not stopping there. Now in our second year, the AOTA National Partnership Program with Genesis Rehab has been a great example of AOTA finding new ways to collaborate. We have worked with Genesis Rehab to support emerging practice areas like our older driver initiative and to create continuing education (CE). Our first CE collaboration, *Seating and Positioning for Productive Aging* (Chew & Pierman, 2009)—a product that benefits practitioners throughout the country—was recently released. Genesis Rehab and AOTA are continuing to expand this web. We have also begun a new partnership with RehabCare and plan to further develop these important employer relationships, which not only promote membership, education, and quality of services but also add to our growing power in meeting the needs of society.

I am especially excited about the implementation of our Member-2-Member campaign. There are resources on the AOTA Web site that enable each of us to reach out to nonmembers and tell them about what we are doing and accomplishing. Why should you spend your time on AOTA member recruitment? I will be straightforward and simple here: There are too many nonmembers. For each one of you who supports the organization, there are four people who are willing to let you pay for the benefits they receive. Benefits like representation on Capitol Hill and with Medicare. Benefits like setting standards for what you do and protecting the quality of your services. Benefits like promoting the profession to the media and through our brand.

AOTA is our only voice that accurately represents the issues of occupational therapy practitioners and their clients in the national debate on health care and education reform. AOTA and your state associations form the only network protecting our profession in state regulatory laws and scope-of-practice challenges. AOTA is the only organization on the national stage that speaks for you with a voice steeped in our history and potential for the future.

AOTA’s web must become bigger. In this economy we can no longer afford for 40,000 occupational therapy practitioners and students to subsidize what ultimately benefits 140,000 practitioners. We must all pay the price, not only with our membership dues, but with our actions to protect and advance our practice so that society will have access to our services. I am counting on each member to reach out to nonmembers with their webs of encouragement to inspire greater participation in the *Centennial Vision* so that we can truly attain the goal of people living life to its fullest.

I am proud to say that our students understand the importance of AOTA’s role in advocacy. They know their future practice depends upon this advocacy. As an example, the Student Conclave resulted in more than 600 students gathering outside of Chicago for a mix of business, education, and networking. Or, in other words, they were creating those spider webs upon which they will build as they grow to become outstanding practitioners, potential educators, or future scientists. It is imperative that we impress upon the next generation of practitioners how important it is to be involved in national and state associations. I want to invite all students to join me for the 2009 Student Conclave in Baltimore! We will even take the short ride down to Washington, DC, to visit our legislators on Capitol Hill!

None of our successes at the federal level would be possible if we were not working to elect candidates who are
friends of occupational therapy. What an exciting election year 2008 was for our country! Regardless of the party or candidates you personally supported, it was inspiring to see so many people take an active role in the process of government. The role of providing an important vehicle for AOTA members to be politically active is exactly what our political action committee, the American Occupational Therapy Political Action Committee (AOTPAC), does. Through AOTPAC we support congressional candidates, regardless of party, who champion our positions on health care, education, research, and workforce development. In 2008, AOTPAC supported 126 candidates for federal office, and 119 of those won election or reelection—a 94% success rate! AOTA members also vigorously supported AOTPAC by contributing $260,000 in 2008.

Our AOTPAC fundraising is an assessment of one aspect of how serious we are about making sure we truly assume the mantle of being powerful. According to the Centennial Vision, being powerful is necessary to address the occupational needs of society. With this economy and because this is not an election year, it will be more difficult to raise the money. We need to support candidates for congressional office in 2010. I know that it is not easy to give, that not everyone can do so, and that one may not be able to give as much as in the past. As members of AOTA, please do what you can. In 2008, we raised $60,000 at the Annual AOTA Conference & Expo alone. I am optimistic about what we can accomplish when we work together regardless of the challenges. Encourage your occupational therapy colleagues back home to become AOTA members so they can give to AOTPAC as well. The greater the number of AOTA members who give, the less any one member has to give. Membership and donations to AOTPAC are the basic expression of our profession’s power.

To give you clear examples illustrating the important work of AOTPAC, we had a presence at the Republican and Democratic National Conventions, the U.S. congressional swearing-in ceremony, and the U.S. presidential inauguration. At all of those events we were able to speak with policymakers, leaders of other health care organizations, and elected officials to further raise the profile of occupational therapy.

Conclusion

The work of AOTA—that is, our work in web creation—never stops, regardless of what happens to the U.S. economy. Each day brings us one step closer to celebrating the centennial of occupational therapy in the year 2017. The opportunities within this tough economy include becoming laser focused in carefully spending our resources on those activities thought to have the most impact on achieving the Centennial Vision. These times challenge us to look for new ways of doing business that are more cost-effective, participatory, productive, and skillful. If we take advantage of the opportunity to be laser focused, we will be like Penelope of mythology in her effort to keep weaving to achieve the future she wanted. We cannot let up. Each and every one of you has to embrace your role as a spider. You must continue to make our webs connecting education, research, and practice strong. If each person does his or her part, we will achieve our Centennial Vision.

According to William James, an American philosopher of the 1800s, “If you only care strongly enough for a result . . . you will almost certainly attain it” (James, 1899/2008, p. 78). It is important that everyone promise that we are together weaving this web, one without a true spider, interconnecting to achieve our Centennial Vision. Do you promise? I’ll bet you’ll look at spiders now in a whole new way! Go be the spider! And live life to its fullest.

References


