

Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham

Is purpose backward and forward-looking?

Featuring William Damon with Stanton Wortham (host) and Howard Gardner (commentator)

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Stanton Wortham 0:05

Hello, everyone. Welcome back to another episode of Pulled Up Short. This is our first episode after the holiday break. Welcome back. We'll have five more episodes this semester to finish up our second season.

Today, we're very excited to have with us: Bill Damon from Stanford University and as our discussant, Howard Gardner from Harvard University. Bill is going to speak with us about human development and whether or not one needs to look backwards in order to move forwards when dealing with difficult or traumatic issues that have happened in our lives. So Bill, thanks very much for being with us.

Bill Damon 0:42

Thanks, Stanton, I am delighted to be with you and to be with Howard as well. I was recently pulled up short by a revelation that first came about dramatically in my personal life, but also made me think about human development in a somewhat different way. It didn't exactly cancel out a lot of my previous assumptions, but it added something significant to it. That had to do with how we can think about the past in a way that is a resource to us - drawing on kinds of information and memories that we have, which I had not really focused on in my previous work.

When my own career in developmental psychology started, I entered the field when the field had already gotten past the psychoanalytic, Freudian perspective of thinking about how early experiences of certain kinds needed to be uncovered, how things that might be repressed needed to be dug into. It was that heyday of the Aaron Beck movement of cognitive-behavioral therapy, where there was much more of a focus on the present -- on how to think about life and think about problems in a way that controls your thinking, that gives you a sense of hopefulness in the present. Throughout my own career, I took a great interest in forward-looking concepts. My research, especially in the last twenty years, has focused on purpose, which is a forward-looking commitment to accomplish things that may take years, to transform our sense of who we are according to our aspirations of what we are hoping to accomplish and what we're hoping to contribute to the world. This fit right into other contemporary trends in our field, most notably Marty Seligman's work on what he calls prospective thinking, which is the idea that we're drawn into the future by our dreams, our aspirations, and our sense of who we want

to be. I love this point of view. I still do, because it gives us a lot of agency over our lives. It does not imply that we are stuck in the past or that we were formed or determined by things that have happened to us. So I've enthusiastically participated in that in my own work, my understanding, and my teaching and psychology.

But as I said, my very recent thinking on the value of the past has added another dimension. It hasn't taken away from my conviction about how important agency is, how much control we have over our present thinking, or how important our future aspirations are. But I realized that I was somewhat wrong in thinking that there's a danger in getting stuck in the past if you think too much about it. I always had a kind of 'don't look back' perspective - both in my personal life as well as my professional life - and worried about the dangers of either the romantic thinking about the past in a nostalgic way that is just kind of pointless, or thinking about it in a regretful way - in a way that just gets us more deeply embroiled in our resentments or our lack of confidence about the future or about ourselves. So my thinking and my work in most recent years has been aimed at integrating the way we think about past, present and future. And of course, this raises the question of how can we think about the past in a way that it is a resource, that it is productive, that does not get us embedded in either aimless nostalgia or depressive kinds of thinking about all the things that went wrong and that didn't go the way we want them to go? In other words, how can we think about the past and avoid an approach that zeroes in on the mistakes we've made? Everyone's made mistakes. Everyone has regrets, and you certainly don't want to get hung up on them.

But what I've been working on is an approach that comes not from my own work originally, but from the work of a great psychiatrist, Robert Butler, and other people that have done work in what's known as the 'narrative identity approach' to human development. It's an approach that says, there's a systematic way and intentional way of thinking about the past: thinking about both the high points - the things that you've done that have been purposeful and have given you gratification and satisfaction - and the low points - the mistakes you've made, things that have happened to you that you regret and wish didn't go that way. There is a way to think about them in a way that allows you to actually make use of them, so that they can contribute to the kinds of forward-looking aspirations that you have. So it's a bit of a different view of human development than I had before. As I said, it was triggered by a personal revelation that I felt compelled to investigate in my own life, but at the same time on a parallel track. Since I am a professional psychologist, I also revised a lot of my thinking about the relation between past, present and future. So that was my pulled up short experience.

Stanton Wortham 7:01

This is a very interesting topic. So you're saying that as we move forward in our present lives, we face a choice between looking backwards and engaging with positive or negative aspects of our prior lives as a way to imagine what we're going to have to do or what we might want to do moving forward. Or we can look forward and try to be pulled toward purpose or aspiration. Initially, it seemed to you this was an either-or, but now you've come to a more complex view of it, where you think we have to look backward in order to move forward. I've certainly gotten this advice from people over time: Stop obsessing about the past. Don't be trapped in the past. In some

ways, it seems like good advice, but you're saying there's a positive way to look backward, that still allows us to move forward productively?

Bill Damon 7:55

That's exactly right. Let me say, Stanton, that I shared with you a 'don't look back' perspective myself. I think it's even a significant part of the culture: the idea that I quote in the book from Frank Sinatra who says, "Regrets I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention." There is this kind of plucky attitude: Don't look back. If you just forget or don't get too hung up on the things that went wrong or mistakes you've made, it gives you a much more positive and confident way forward.

But the point that I realized is that you can't actually escape the past so easily. It's a lost cause to think that it will never be a part of your thinking. In fact, I quote Faulkner as well, who said, and I think he was absolutely right: "The past is not dead. It is not even past." It's part of who we are: our past influences are what have shaped us, and the past memories that we have give us signals and information about both the things that we have to learn (in other words, mistakes we've made that we need to learn from), and also things that we've done that maybe we've forgotten, that give us signals about the kinds of talents we have, the kinds of interests we have, and the kinds of successes that we've had. I realized it's another way of thinking about what a lot of psychologists and educators recently have committed themselves to, which is the idea of a growth mindset. That's well accepted now in the field of education.

When we're educating young people, we want them to think about failures that they have in the sense of: What can I learn from it? Not what it tells me about myself - that I'm a failure - but rather, everyone has failures. Everybody, when they run into a challenge, has difficulty with it and may not get it right. But this can be a bonus. It's an opportunity to learn something.

I realized that that's true all through life. Even as we get on in years, we can look back at the things that didn't go right for whatever reason - either because we didn't do it right, or because the world was not kind to us - and allow ourselves to learn from them in a growth mindset sense. We can use that information to bolster our forward-looking aspirations and to become the kind of people we want to be and accomplish the kinds of things that we want to accomplish. You're absolutely right. It's not an either-or situation.

Unfortunately, I do think that the culture and even our field has posed it as an either-or choice, and I had bought into that. But to use one of Howard Gardner's recent memes, synthesizing, it is really a very productive goal. I am making an attempt to synthesize the whole story of human development, which includes past, present and future. My point is that there is a way to think about the past that is productive, and there are ways to think about the past that are not. That's the part that I borrowed or learned from the great psychiatrist Robert Butler, who developed the method of a life review. His whole point was that we tell stories about our lives all the time. We always look back. We can't avoid it. But if we do it in an haphazard, self-defeating way, it can lead to problems and certainly not make the best use of it. If we do it in a systematic, intentional way - to learn the

lessons that we need to learn from the things that did not go right, to focus on the things that did work in a way that gives us information about what we're able to do, and what potential we have to contribute to the world and develop ourselves to be the kind of people we want to be - we can make great use of the past as a resource and contribute to our efforts, which we ought to always have, to build ourselves a hopeful, confident, purposeful future.

Stanton Wortham 13:00

Okay, so two possible positions on the past. As you said, we all make mistakes. We all experience traumas of various kinds (some more than others, of course), but in response to those mistakes and traumas, one position is: we should avoid obsessing about it. We have to take control of our lives, pursue our dreams, and try to leave the past behind us. The other position tries to get us to work through our issues to focus on the mistakes and the difficulties as a way of trying to process them, and somehow that sets us up for the future. So one is forward-looking; one is backward-looking. You're saying that you can have your cake and eat it too. In other words, you're going to get the best of both of these positions. So you're going to be able to look backward and engage with the past in ways that push you forward productively into the future. So can you give me a sense of why we can get the best of both in this situation?

Bill Damon 13:54

Sure. The way I would put it is that you can look backwards in a forward-looking way. In other words, you look at your past experiences and your memories with a purpose. You do it in a purposeful way, rather than in a nostalgic way or in a regretful way that you may not even intend to do. I guess this is probably a good point where I can give an example and also talk about how I got induced into doing this myself.

I had, myself, a childhood that was not easy for a lot of reasons, and the main reason is that my father disappeared from my life at birth. For the first 20 years or so of my life, all I was told was that he was "missing in World War II." He was in Germany serving in the army during WWII, and he didn't come back. I did find out later when I was in college that he had survived, and he had his own life, which meant that he simply abandoned me and my mother. At that point, I took this attitude that is common, which was, "I don't want to know any more about this. I'm doing alright on my own, I don't want to get embroiled in a lot of emotional issues." I certainly don't want to identify with someone who must have been an irresponsible, no account scoundrel to abandon us. And so I looked the other way every time any clues ever arose, and I was really determined not to think about this at all.

I would say that this was not a huge problem for me. I went on to have a life that I'm grateful for - a good run in life in both the family sense and my work. But when I turned about 60, my daughter got curious about what happened to this father of mine, this grandfather that she never met. She came up with an online document about him that had lots of information that just fascinated me. This is the point that I'd make here - I had a couple of different reactions. One was that I got fascinated by this. I decided to do some research myself on who this guy was. He was dead at the time, but I was able to reconstruct his life in a lot of ways and meet some of his

friends, who were at that point in their 80s or 90s, meet his relatives, his younger sister. I discovered that I had two half-sisters, his daughters from his second marriage. I was fascinated by this. It wasn't a grim, catastrophic investigation that required me to work through a lot of difficult emotions.

But at the same time, as I was fascinated by it, I also learned that I had been living with some resentments and regrets for a lot of my life that I did not even allow myself to recognize. That, I think, was an opportunity for me to, first of all, get a more authentic sense of how I came to be the person I am. I learned a lot about the things that my father contributed to my life that I didn't even know about. For example, he went to the same school I went to, and my mother sent me there knowing that. There were a number of other realizations that I had, but I also realized that the best way for me to deal with those resentments and regrets was to recognize them and to think about how my life has worked out in the absence of a father that provided me with certain strengths that I didn't have, to realize that he actually had a productive life that was admirable in some ways. It gave me a path to respecting him and even forgiving him, even though not absolving him of the total irresponsibility of abandoning my mother. But it gave me a way to create positive feelings about my own childhood, about my ancestor, in a way that did prepare me to revise, in a positive way, my sense of self, and to think about the future in a more confident way.

That was my personal experience, and it was pretty natural for me then to apply that to my profession, which is exactly about human development through the lifespan. I even did some psychological exercises that gave me a lot more peace of mind than I had thinking about my past. I'll just quickly tell you one of those incidents, because it was the title of the book that I wrote about this. The book is called *A Round of Golf with my Father*. Of course, I never had a round of golf with my father because he was dead before I even figured out who he was, but one of the things I found out about him was that he was a great golfer. As soon as I realized that, waves of resentment passed through my mind, because I thought, "Why didn't the guy ever come around, even once, to teach me how to play this game that I love to play?" I realized that I had been living with this resentment. So in my research, I found an old scorecard of his from a golf course in Massachusetts, and I went and played on that golf course with his scorecard. In that experience, I imagined that he was there with me playing a round of golf, and it gave me a pathway to get a sense of who the guy was, of having a kind of a psychological relationship with him that did have some positive elements. I could see how well he played, and I thought, "Well, you know, I respect him for that." It was symbolic.

I found out a lot. Golf is only a game, and of course, it was completely irrational that that would be the thing that I would feel most resentful about right away, among all the other things that he did not provide me with as a father with a son. But that was the thing that emotionally triggered my reaction, and so it gave me a signal as to what I could do to enter into this whole world of trying to recreate this relationship with the father I never had. I found out a lot of other things about him that were much more significant about his courageous career in the war, like postwar testifying at a war crimes trial. He was an advocate of civil rights. He did a lot of things in the US Foreign Service that were admirable. It gave me a way of respecting this man, who I had always just assumed was a no account scoundrel. It's always good to feel positive about people that are close to you in your life. It's

always good to find a way to forgive them. It does you more good than them in a lot of ways. It gave me a way to feel a sense of affirmation, about how I became the person I became, which leads to a sense of gratitude. All of these are positive capacities that many people these days are writing about, and they're right. You know, these are very important perspectives to develop, not always easy if you've had a hard time early in life. That is exactly the journey I went through: to think about how I can go back into this past - which had some resentments, regrets, and difficulties - and salvage the positivity out of them. That's what I was talking about when I said there are ways of thinking about the past that are productive. That's the way to integrate and synthesize past, present and future.

Stanton Wortham 22:47

Well, that's quite a story. I'm sorry to hear about that experience from your childhood. I guess, from one of the traditional perspectives, you could imagine someone saying to you, "Well, that's terrible about your father abandoning you, but you have to get over it, Bill. You need to look ahead. You need to have a purpose in life, and just leave that behind you." You're saying that, that really won't work. It's there in you, whether you like it or not. The other traditional approach would be to look backward toward this past and to focus on it, deal with it, process it, and engage with it in ways that might cause you to spin your wheels and never really start moving forward. But optimistically, you are saying that, in your case, you were able to do the best of both. You were able to look back, engage with it, research your father, learn things about him, even participate in this virtual or imagined way with him in playing a round of golf with him, and thereby engage the past and recognize some of your resentments, but do it in the service of moving forward. That seems like a productive approach. Could you leave our listeners with a summing up? In their own lives, how could they manage to get the best of both the past and the future, so that they can look back and use it to move forward productively, as you're saying?

Bill Damon 24:10

You've said it exactly right. That's exactly what I discovered, that this is possible, I'll add another dimension to this, which is that it was actually a lot of fun to do this. In other words, it wasn't a dreary enterprise that those other approaches that you mentioned feel like to me, where you go back and you assume you've got all these problems you've got to dredge up and so on. What I found is that the the past can be a treasure. It can be an opportunity to find out things that are amazingly interesting about yourself and your ancestors, and to find out even things that you originally thought, "Gee, I wish this hadn't happened." But you find out that "Well, I am the person I am now. Because these things happened, I became this person." You're finding out a whole other dimension about what has led to your present state of existence and what leads to your future possibilities. So it's more than just a way of solving a problem, it's actually a way of opening all kinds of new opportunities that are delightful, interesting, and fascinating.

To answer your question about how people can do it, I can only say the things that I discovered that were valuable. One message is to have the conversations with the people that are around and that can enlighten you about what your life and your ancestors' lives are like. Have those conversations before it's too late. Again, I had made another mistake that I had learned to regret, which is I never had that difficult conversation with my

mother. I had avoided that. I talked to her for about one minute during my whole life with her about my father. She revealed almost nothing. I ought to have done better than that. I should have forced myself to have a difficult and even uncomfortable conversation with her, which I think would have opened up this whole treasure a lot earlier in my life. That was another regret I had to learn from. So that's number one: have the conversations with your loved ones and other people before it's too late. These are diminishing resources over time.

The other is... I write a lot in my book about memory and how to think about memory. It's not a snapshot. Memory is a construction, and I discuss how to think about your memories in a way that gives you signals about what is important to you and what kinds of things may be distorting your thinking in the present as well as the past. You can check that out by then doing some research, by going back and talking to some of the people that you knew earlier in life, or some of the friends of your parents, or your parents, if they're still alive. I went to my school and found old school records. I went to my father's school, which happened to be the same school as I went to, something I had never known, and I dug up his old records and compared them with mine. That was amazingly fascinating and revealing. In his case, I dug up his military records. A lot of it took extensive research, but as I said, it was fascinating. I traveled to England and to the British War Museum where I dug up some of the service in the UK that he had done for the U.S. Army. I talked extensively to, even to his second wife, an amazing woman who was a French ballerina. She was very open and warm. She talked to me about him and even sent me a video of information that she had about him. So it's a bit of a research project, but it's a research project that I think every person should do.

Everybody has something in their past that may be mysterious, that they don't understand, or that is just fascinating, that they would be interested in learning more about. This is all part of a process called The Life Review. As I said, Robert Butler was the one that developed it. In fact, Stanton, you've done work on narrative identity too, so you got into this a lot before I did. But it's an approach that I think has not been recognized as much as it should, in terms of how valuable it is for our present and future psychological well-being. That's what I hope I am contributing in my current work and in the book about golf with my father. That was really the case I made. I write about The Life Review; the work of Dan McAdams, who's done amazing work on narrative identity; and the value this has in our understanding of human development and our understanding of ourselves.

Stanton Wortham 29:27

Great. Thanks very much for sharing with us these ideas about how we don't have to choose between focusing on the past or looking to the future, but we can use the past as a resource for working productively toward the future. So at this point, I'd like to ask Howard if he would come in and ask Bill a couple of questions.

Howard Gardner 29:47

Sure. It's always a pleasure to hear Bill speak and to converse with you, Stanton. I should say that Bill and I have known each other for a long time, and I've read the memoir more than once. But I'm going to try myself in the place of a listener, who just turned this on and knew nothing about things before. So this listener is somewhat

skeptical. He or she says, "Well, Dr. Damon's this world-known successful scholar. He has a lot of resources at his disposal, and he found out that, in fact, his father, who he dismissed, actually had a quite admirable life. Why should I, as somebody who has some skeletons in my closet, take the risk of doing this and discovering that my biological father was much worse than I thought? I don't have many resources to resource things." Help convince me, Bill, that this is something that isn't just for people who are on this podcast.

Bill Damon 30:56

Well, what I found is that everyone loves to tell stories. I've never met, in my personal life, a person that doesn't naturally tell life stories of one kind or another. They may be very small stories about a trip they took to Europe or a shopping day, or a traffic accident they were in, but people spontaneously talk about their lives all the time. I would be the last person to say people should force themselves into uncomfortable parts of their lives that they just don't want to think about at the moment. But what I would say is that everyone can make better use of the stories that they tell if they think about the meaning of what the stories are, in relation to where they want to go in life, what their goals are, and what their purposes are. So if someone would come to me and say, "Well, what can I do that might prepare me for a productive storytelling kind of enterprise?" I would say, "Well, think about the message that you would like to pass along, not just yourself, but to your children or your friends, about the kind of experiences that you have found valuable in life and the kinds of experiences that you have learned from. What could be more hopeful as a storytelling guide than that?" People love to tell stories anyway, why not make the best use of them? They're right out there in your memory, awaiting to be used. So I would say it that way, rather than say, "Well, you know, force yourself into an uncomfortable, risky, emotional drama." I don't think you have to think of it that way. I think you can think of it as, you know, "Life is pretty interesting. It doesn't always go well. What's the best use I can make of the experiences I've had for myself and for people that I'm telling the stories to?"

Howard Gardner 33:15

That's very helpful, but it also says to me that you're giving a lot of agency to me as the spinner. We all know that we know how to ask people questions, and we know who to ask to get stories that we want to hear. And vice versa. In fact, you know, as a professor, I've often heard students say very nasty things about me. And I said, "Well, I'd like to know whether this is from students who actually know me or not." So I think what I hear you saying is that you should try to make this a positive experience, but you need to be somewhat of an architect and craftsman, lest you find yourself going down a hole. I mean, my parents were in Nazi Germany, and they didn't about it. While I have some curiosity about it - they got out in time, many relatives didn't. I think we probably were wise not to go into it. So I think there's a lot of curating involved in doing this, in the sense to make it a positive, rather than erroneous or bad experience.

Bill Damon 34:21

Yeah, I think that's very well said. In reading how you told your story in your book, *The Synthesizing Mind*, I mean, you do exactly that. I mean, there were some catastrophic things that happened in your family life. And yet, as I read the way you wrote about it, it's still a great story of coming to America, to your own life which has

been so productive and positive, and your parents who took great pride in you. I think that every life has that kind of possibility. I don't want to at all make light of incredibly tragic and catastrophic things that can happen to people. There are occasions in life that you really just need to begin by mourning, having grief for, and having the courage to suffer through them because they're so awful. So I'm not saying people should take a glib view of, "Well, it all turned out for the best" or something like that. But I do think that for a lot of things, even most things in most lives that we look back on, there is a perspective that says, "This is kind of amazingly interesting. Lots of people have mysteries in their lives that they weren't even aware of." You write about that yourself, Howard in your book, too. It's just amazingly interesting to uncover those mysteries and find out about them. These life stories that people tell spontaneously can be enhanced by this kind of approach. Basically, the approach can be summed up as thinking about the past in a purposeful way. I mean, that's really the message.

Howard Gardner 36:13

Let me ask you just one more question, Bill, because this relates to both our lives but also to the lives of many people who may be listening: what's the relationship of The Life Review to what goes on in a fairly standard therapeutic context? You and I both talked about somebody who had great influence on us, Erik Erikson, who had a great theory of human development, though didn't confront things in his own life, which it probably would have been better if he had. Can you talk a bit about The Life Review versus a more standard kind of therapy?

Bill Damon 36:47

Yeah, and I'm really glad you asked that, because I want to be clear that Robert Butler developed The Life Review as a therapeutic technique. He was dealing with the problem of depression, especially in aging patients. He believed and found (and psychiatrists following his lead have done work on this) that the depression all came about from people thinking about their pasts in the wrong way - in a way that just created a cycle of further and further misery. He developed The Life Review as a way to say, "Look, here's how to do it systematically, and think about the high points and think about the purposes you've had." He was also big on purpose. I am not a clinician. My book is not about depression or any clinical condition. What I did was that I adapted The Life Review for normal circumstances - for non clinical issues or populations, for education, really. And the idea is that in a therapeutic situation, you have a guide - a psychiatrist, a clinician, or a social worker - who is guiding you through this. This is not what I'm writing, but I'm writing about people doing it themselves, in their own idiographic way, their own particular way. Everyone would do it differently. Follow the lead of what's interesting to you. Follow the lead of what kinds of talents and interests you've had in the past, of what your ancestors have been like, what you might share with them, either because they raised you or because there were genetic connections. Follow your lead and follow your interests in it.

My book is not a clinical book. My approach is not a clinical endeavor. It's an endeavor to really broaden and enhance people's lives and add a rich new dimension to them, which as I said, can bolster the present- and future-oriented approaches that I believe in, if they are synthesized in the right way and if they're integrated. So it's really an integrative approach. I'm glad you asked that. It's not a clinical approach. It does not require a

counselor or a guide or somebody that is in charge. This is the other thing, and it's very important: it puts agency right back into the individual person. To me, the great psychologies are the psychologies that recognize human agencies. That, by the way, Howard, is also what you do when you write about the mind. You are saying that people are not determined by their biology, by their culture, by past traumas - people have minds. They can think. That gives them agency. I think the truest kinds of psychologies are the ones that embrace and recognize human agency.

Howard Gardner 39:54

Thank you so much.

Stanton Wortham 39:55

Great. Well, thanks very much. We appreciate your contributions, Bill Damon and Howard Gardner. Thanks for being with us for this episode of Pulled Up Short. Thanks to all of you for joining us. We hope that we'll have you back here next week with us where we'll have Mark Freeman talking about whether or not dementia can give people access to some aspect of reality and some aspect of mystical experience. Thanks.