

April 15, 2016

“You’re A Good Man, Charlie Brown!”

Many years ago, I did a 2-day workshop for DSS folks that focused on helping students with learning disabilities. The central theme for the workshop was what could be learned about working with and supporting LD students from reading the *Peanuts* comic strip. I have never seen it confirmed in writing, but I am convinced that Charles Schulz, who penned the comic strip for 49 years, either was LD himself, or had someone close to him who was LD. The personalities of the *Peanuts* characters that we watched develop over the years are way too “on target” for it to be coincidence.

Not ALL the characters in *Peanuts* have learning disabilities (which is as it should be, since not everyone in the world is LD!). The characters like Frieda, and Franklin, and Marcie, and even Pig Pen are there to remind us that sometimes kids are just kids and, perhaps, that kids who are LD are more LIKE their classmates than they are different. These minor characters each have their quirks – e.g., Marcie insists on addressing Peppermint Patty as “sir” and Pig Pen simply CAN’T stay clean, even when he tries – but that makes them unique, not disabled. And, of course, there is Lucy’s little brother, Linus, who is probably the wisest and most well-adjusted character in the strip, security blanket notwithstanding (Linus always stays true to himself. He doesn’t care what anyone else says – he’ll give up his blanket when *he* wants to).

Lucy Van Pelt has an interesting role to play. When all is said and done – she’s a bully. She is often a benevolent bully, as she really does seem to care about the others, and sometimes goes out of her way to be supportive. But for the most part – she’s a bully! (I’ve often wondered if she was a role model for Miss Piggy, of Muppet fame!). Lucy is supremely confident of her own place in the world (“I make the world a better place. I am a positive force”), and thus truly believes that she SHOULD impose her view of the world on everyone else, because they will be better for it (and she only charges 5¢!). But she just can’t resist pulling that football away.

What about Snoopy? My daughter’s pre-school teacher nicknamed her Snoopy, because she said Snoopy and Cottie had so much in common. Cottie never said a word, was clearly smarter than all the other kids in the class, and led an active fantasy life. Of course, with all the recent chatter on our listservs and in professional exchanges, we recognize instantly the place of Emotional Support Animal in this discussion. I am just not sure whether Snoopy is Charlie Brown’s ESA – or the other way around! But there is no question that Snoopy is integral to the lives of those around him.

And then there is Sally, who is clearly LD. She cannot spell, she reverses letters and numbers, and she takes everything absolutely literally (I’ve always wondered if there is an auditory processing problem mixed in with her obvious dyslexia). There is Peppermint Patty, who clearly has a math disability, and perhaps some executive function problems (the word “organization” doesn’t seem to exist in her vocabulary). In

contrast, there is Schroeder, whose mania for order and whose panic when things are moved or out of order seems to border on OCD.

That brings us to Charlie Brown. Charlie Brown (whom Charles Schulz readily admitted was much like himself), isn't as obviously LD as his little sister, Sally, or Peppermint Patty with her math problems. It isn't the academic issues that come through with Charlie Brown. He is LD in "life." He has the classic LD personality. He makes the same mistakes over and over (think "kicking the football"), he is socially awkward (think "little red-haired girl"), he is trusting to the point of gullibility (remember that football?), and he has NO confidence in himself. The saddest part is that his personal estimation of what and who he is seems uncomfortably on target sometimes.

And, yet, the LD students we come in contact with at the college level would do well to remember that Charlie Brown has many traits and life experiences with which they can identify. He NEVER gives up – he keeps trying. He has friends who know him well – and who still love him! And while he questions whether he can truly achieve his dreams, he never gives up dreaming. Way to go, Charlie Brown!

I went looking for a list of "Lessons Learned From Peanuts," and I found a good one (<http://www.therichest.com/buzz/12-of-the-best-life-lessons-learned-from-snoopy-and-the-peanuts-gang/?view=all>). For your amusement (and edification?), here they are:

12. Good things happen to good people.
11. *(from Lucy)* Never underestimate your own brilliance.
10. Want a little, love a lot.
9. If in doubt, have a rest *(Snoopy and Woodstock, atop the doghouse, are thinking, "Learn from yesterday, live for today, look to tomorrow – and take a nap this afternoon.")*
8. If you don't like what you do, chances are no one else will, either.
7. For your own sanity, try to resist questioning everything *(Charlie Brown lies in bed thinking, "Sometimes I lie awake at night and I ask, "Why am I here?" then a voice answers, "Why? Is there somewhere else you would rather be?")*
6. Accept your human limitations. *(Snoopy, hugging Charlie Brown, thinks, "Many times he tried to be a good person. Many times, however, he failed. For after all -- he wasn't a dog.")*
5. What doesn't kill you makes a funny story. Every time you find humor in a situation, you win.
4. *(from Snoopy's Joe Cool)* Be yourself. No one can say you're doing it wrong.
3. Never underestimate the power of imagination.
2. It's not how you say it, but what you say.
1. Life is better with a dog.

THAT pretty well sums it up!

Janie

(Lucy and Charlie Brown are lying on the hillside, watching the clouds roll by)

LUCY: You know, Charlie Brown, on the cruise ship of life, some people like to face their deck chairs toward the back of the boat, so they can see where they've come from. Others like to face their deck chairs towards the front of the boat so they can see what is coming toward them. On the cruise ship of life, Charlie Brown, which way does your deck chair face?

CHARLIE BROWN: I've never been able to get one unfolded.