Wilfried Kriese

HALF-TIME

To Turn One's Weaknesses Into One's Strengths

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The motto of Mauer Verlag since 1992
“Everybody wants to tear down some wall in their lives.”

Inhalt

FOREWORD

In 1991, being only 27 years old, I published my autobiography. That is to say: only a part of it. For on the one hand, I lacked the courage to write in detail about my life since I did not want to publicly praise or criticize the people around me. On the other hand, I just lacked the courage to write about myself. Besides, there was not so much to write about then. Furthermore, I was not sure how much I wanted to reveal about myself. Obviously, a biography is something deeply personal.

When I wrote my first biography, I was, as I mentioned, just 22 years young, and you do not normally write a biography at that age. You do that when you are 60 or 70, after having accomplished something in life. Generally, only those people will write and, above all, publish their life's story, who have accomplished something special in terms of career. Usually this group of people will include politicians, athletes, actors, scientists, musicians, etc. But why should that be the case actually? Are not the lives of people from certain social backgrounds sometimes as interesting as those of famous people?

In the chapter "Extracts from My Life" from my first book Für die Behindertenintegration, ein direkt Betroffener informiert [For the Integration of the Disabled – Information by a Directly Affected Person], I wanted to prove that a person who had been given up from a psychological as well as medical perspective, and who therefore would have been confined to an institution for disabled people for the rest of his life, is well capable to develop the means to lead an independent life. I was in a position to point at myself as living proof. For in spite of all the doubts from some experts, integration did work out for me, and that was surely something to write about.

But then I asked myself why I should write a book, me, a former cognitively handicapped pupil who had been confined to a special school partly because of his weaknesses in the German language. I asked myself why I had actually learned to speak, read and write, and with utmost effort and difficulty at that. So I could cope better with life? Surely that was the prime reason at first. However, I was not satisfied with that one answer and this is how, thank God, my first book came into existence, a book which brought unexpected aspects into my life. Maybe it was also due to the fact that then my book was the first book by a former cognitively handicapped person, so that I found myself filling a gap.

After the publication of my first book and some political efforts, it became clear why somebody like me, however young, should not only write their biography but also publish it: for the people found that my way of addressing the public is more credible and authentic than some studied experts' lecturing about minorities. After publishing the book, I was totally overwhelmed by the quite favorable response I got from experts as well as from laymen. All this encouragement made me carry on despite my strong doubts and inferiority complexes. Many more books followed as well as political and social commitment, lectures and the foundation of my own publishing company. At the same time, I was taking adult evening classes in rhetoric, German and English, as well as several correspondence courses.

Of course, there was also my private life. I earned my living regularly and in 1988 I married my wife, who has been a great advisor to me to this very day. Oh well, and since this is the proper thing to do for a Suabian married couple, we bought an old apartment that needed renovating.

As the years went by, I became more and more known. While at first only few perceived me on a regional level, I am on my way to national publicity today.

I never dreamt of getting that far before I started going public.

I am getting more and more positive letters and encouragement by people from the most varied social strata who want to express their admiration. Indeed, for many I have already become a "role model," a realization which virtually scares me. Me a role model? Am I actually living up to it? Do I deserve it?

Finally I realized that basically I am not doing anything else than many other people: I am trying to cope with life as well as I can with all my weaknesses. I am just lucky to have found something that brings extraordinary joy to me and which happens to be interesting to a part of the public.

Today I am referred to in the media as a self-made man and a successful person, which of course I am glad to hear. But what bothers me is that many of the people who crossed my path and who I got the chance to know, accomplish quite a lot, too, but do not receive real recognition. For it is hardly noteworthy when somebody who belongs to a minority group or who has a tough initial position in society, leads a so-called normal life, despite the fact that this can only be accomplished with a lot of effort and strength.

So I got to know a lot of people for whom I have deep respect, because it is harder to build up a civil life under tough conditions than to pursue a career without really feeling what actual accomplishment in life means.

So for me, too, many little things that are trivial for most people, have been indescribable obstacles that had to be overcome.

This is why in this detailed biography I want to give some examples of people who I met in the course of my life, who have accomplished pretty much considering their lives' circumstances, and who I therefore too regard as "successful persons."

So fortunately, my biography Half-Time, to Turn One's Weaknesses Into One's Strengths will additionally make sense to those people with their lives' half-time ahead of them or behind them, and help them find the courage to accept their own weaknesses and follow individual paths, so as to define the concept of "SUCCESS" anew.

For me success means "to turn one's weaknesses into one's strengths and to master one's own path of life."

I want to close this foreword with an essay by a pupil who went to school with me. I discovered the essay in an old school magazine. Thank God that as a Suabian one learns from early on that one must not throw away anything because one may want to use it some day.

Plans and wishes of a school-boy in the 9th grade for his life after school

After I finished school, I want to be trained as a car mechanic. Then I will buy myself a car, and I will also buy up old cars, fix them and sell them again. I will also fix my friends' cars, if they want me to. And later on, I will try to pass my final exam, so that in case I should enter the military, I can start right away to work in the garage.

Maybe I will be able to have my own garage and fix cars there.
And when I have become master mechanic, I will also employ workers.

Later, when I have earned enough money, I will build myself a house and treat myself to a vacation and a hot sportscar, around 130 horsepower.
Then I'll be able to say: I'm fine.

This is how far I, too, had gotten after my training and I continue to have deep respect for somebody who has advanced that far. But I just was not able to find any rest, and so I simply carried on from there, if one can call that "simple"...

MY DEAR PARENTAL HOME

I have one brother and two sisters who were born two years apart from one another. So in 1963, 4x2 = myself, since I was the youngest of them. Just like my siblings, I was born in Schwenningen. Since my parents had already begun to construct a house in Bästenhardt near Mössingen in the district of Tübingen in late 1962, I only lived in Schwenningen for two years. In June 1963, we moved into our finished semi-detached house. This is where I was raised. Our neighborhood was a genuinely working class housing area consisting predominantly of apartment blocks. In our street, however, there were only semi-detached houses with garages and gardens. At the time, that was the dream of every Suabian with a low income.

In terms of citizenry, our family home was fully intact, just like millions of others, too. Our father was earning money as an electrician and our mother took care of the family's well-being. My three siblings were quite regularly developed children, who stepped out of line only once in a while, just as is usual with children.

One thing, however, which was not quite normal, or maybe it was, was that my father was a war victim. World War II had left him a souvenir. He was not able to move his left knee for the rest of his life. In other respects, too, war had severely damaged his health.

Oh well, and me, I was a healthy child, too, one all parents wish for. I had full sets of fingers and toes, my teeth were growing normally, which caused my parents many a sleepless night. And I learn to crawl, walk, talk, just like the other neighborhood children, and I was even blond and had blue eyes.

THE SHOCK

On March 25, 1965, my childhood, which had not even begun, changed abruptly. But on that dreadful day, the lives of my mother and my three siblings changed as well. Almost exactly 20 years after the end of World War II, my father died of the effects of his war injuries. From that day on, we did no longer belong to your normal, average family. A new and tough phase in our lives began. All of a sudden, my mother was left alone with four little children. But there was one good thing about it. Since my father had died of the consequences of his war injuries, we received a war orphan's allowance. This is why my mother was able to dedicate herself fully to caring for our well-being.

After my father died, I did not get a new father or some kind of father in the shape of uncles, as a substitute. I did not miss that either for my mother became a stand-in for the role of my father. To this day, I am still glad about that, for during my school years, I got to know many children who suffered because of their fathers. Later I often asked myself if men really are pigs after all, but as I got older I decided simply not to be a pig, and that settles the question for me.

From that moment on, my life was to be different compared to the lives of healthy children. My father's death caused a shock for me, which had the consequence that my so-called normal development suffered a setback. The language I had learned so far went dumb and did not come back for many years, and then quite inarticulate. My behavior, too, was disturbed. Today, however, I am convinced that a large part of my behavioral disturbance, as doctors and pedagogues called it, had not come about due to the shock alone, but because of the fact that a child who is not quite normal is likely to be met with laughter and scorn and exclusion, which may all too often cause aggression. It is alarming that even today it often happens that people who do not correspond to socially fixed norms are excluded. In my opinion, this a clear case of discrimination.

After our father's death, we got to understand how prejudiced a much too large part of the people is against a single woman and her children. Here, I would like to point to the fact that during the 60s and 70s it was not usual for a woman to be independent, as it is now. Only after all the divorces and Women's Lib did that become less unusual in the ensuing years.

Today I have deep respect for mothers who raise their children on their own and who do not enter a new partnership forcedly, maybe chasing an illusion called "family idyll." (Was there ever such a thing?) I had to witness the terrible consequences that this generally brought for children of my social background too many times. Even today among the divorced pairs that I know I can discern the hope that "surely everything will be better with the next partner." In my opinion, changing partners frequently will often cause more suffering on the part of the children than on the part of the grown-ups, and much damage will be done to the children's social life. But I do not want to condemn those who look for harmony through a relationship, since we all are striving for that after all.

Since the days my mental impairment began, I got to feel all kinds of prejudice against me. All too often I was categorized as an idiot. That happened in the most varied ways.
Although in my neighborhood I was tolerated simply as Wilfried with his peculiarities, and therefore, thank God, did not experience much disastrous discrimination, this does not mean that I was not the object of ridicule. For instance, as a child I had a friend called Andrea. Even as a 6 year-old that name was unpronounceable for

me. So I always called her Abaea. Almost every time I went to pick her up to go playing, her mother, as soon as she saw me, would cry out “Abaea come,” laughing her head off. That hurt me terribly. Today I know that her mother never meant that as an insult or even an act of discrimination; she just behaved according to her kind.

But during my time in kindergarten, in school and in my apprenticeship, I often got to feel what it is like when other children were explicitly told not to make friends with people like me. Through these horrible experiences, I became aware of the fact that I was different from the other children. Later these experiences helped me tell a friend from a “friend”.

MEMORIES OF A CLINICAL YOUTH HOSPITAL

When I was four years old, I was sent to the Clinical Youth Hospital of the Child Psychiatry in Tübingen for two months. There they examined where my mental disturbances came from, in order to determine their origin; although it was quite clear that from the moment of my father's death nothing in my mental development was normal anymore.

Today I ask myself if the doctors' task was to find out something which was already evident, or whether I was more of a guinea pig. Well, anyway, my staying in the clinical youth hospital became compulsory, as it were, since one important issue was which authority or department would pay my necessary treatment in the future.

Unfortunately in 1967 it was far from clear which authority, i.e. which department was obliged to pay for necessary treatment in a case like mine. At that point, far too little was being done for the handicapped. Improvements of all kinds for mentally and physically challenged children, adolescents, as well as grown-ups were not introduced before the 70s.

After much progress, many of the accomplishments are being annihilated today, something which politicians justify as social reforms. In health matters generally, much wrong is being done to needy patients. I often ask myself whether this current tendency can still be called normal or whether those who are responsible have simply gone mad. I get so overwhelmed with anger that I would like to forget my general non-violent attitude and punch some of them in the face. For, if one does not see a chance in the necessity of investing money in the future of the people who need support, one should not be surprised if more and more people become dependent on the welfare state. For success can only ensue if a person, regardless of their level of education, is properly supported.

When I entered the clinical youth hospital, I had to separate from my mother, my siblings and my usual surroundings for the first time.

The hospital had different groups. And as it was usually the case then – as it partly is now – boys and girls were separated. I had to share a dormitory with seven children, every child having their own mental disturbances. For me it was a nightmare to share the room with completely unknown people without any preparation. Furthermore, there were some children among them who were ready to do insane things. For instance, one of them was absolutely sure that he was able to fly, so that all the window handles had to be removed. Another had a tendency toward rebellion and would occasionally strike out wildly with his arms. The rest of the children, who were between 4 and 10 years old, were more or less behaviorally disturbed so that, being a child, I could not make out what was actually wrong with them.

Our daily routine was to get up early, wash, dress and to prepare for breakfast. After that we went to the kindergarten, which was situated on the hospital premises. There at least 30 to 40 children were taken care of by only one old kindergarten teacher. But nevertheless I liked going there because the teacher was incredibly gentle and obliging toward the children and always had a smile on her face.

At noon, we had lunch. After that we had to take a nap for around 2 hours. I can well remember that these two hours were a nightmare for me because there was no way I could fall asleep. After that nap, we were kept busy and analyzed by the pedagogues in our group until dinner. After dinner a nursery teacher told us a good night's story (television was not very widespread then). And then it was lights out.

We were not allowed to plan our day ourselves; or rather, the daily routines were dictated to us every day anew. Since my stay in the hospital included loads of examinations, probably for the other children as well, my homesickness was not the only unpleasant thing.

There was one examination which I can recall so well today that it seems to have taken place just an hour ago. One morning, while I was still in my pajamas, I was taken by two nurses to an examination room next to the dormitory. There I received, for whatever reasons, several injections directly into my back and my spinal column. For the first time in my life I learned what real pain is. Since I was screaming like mad, all the children came to see what the matter was. They kept watching through a glass pane until they were chased away by the staff. If I remember well, I was not able to get up after this examination for three days because of the pain in my back. Every time I tried to get up from my bed, I immediately broke down screaming with terrible, stabbing pain.

During the two months, there were countless examinations that only proved to the doctors and authorities what had been evident from the first: that my speech defect as well as my behavioral disturbance had been caused by a shock, my father's death.