Als [Sic] Well That Ends Well

Yvette Blanchard, Sacred Heart University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/yvette_blanchard/21/
I never have sprained an ankle or broken a bone, so my decision to become a physical therapist (PT) did not come from personal experience with physical therapy. There were no PTs in my hometown in northern New Brunswick, Canada. Rather, my sister’s roommate in college was a PT student, so my sister suggested I look into it as I was wrestling with my career choice. I liked what I saw.

But this really is the story of why I came to focus on a specific area of physical therapy. After graduation, I returned to New Brunswick and started our local hospital’s first physical therapy department. Based on my clinical affiliation in pediatrics, I knew I wanted to work with children. And I did, as well as with people of all ages. My next job was at a pediatric rehabilitation center. Being in my 20s, I was restless, though, and still searching for exactly what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

At that time, I had never visited a NICU (neonatal intensive care unit), or seen or held a premature infant. I was an avid reader, though, and I particularly loved to read textbooks and scientific literature. Given my interest in children, I contacted the University of North Carolina and asked specifically about their research involving children. This was before the Internet, so I sent a handwritten letter, listing the articles I hoped to receive. I waited for weeks, wondering if my letter even had reached the right hands.

Finally, a package of literature arrived. In 1 scientific paper, Harvard University research psychologist Heideline Als, PhD, described her synactive theory of premature infant development, which provides a theoretical framework for understanding how infants’ behaviors signal their needs for support and efforts at self-regulation. My life changed forever. I decided at that moment that this was what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

After obtaining my master’s degree at the Université de Montréal, I moved to Boston with a suitcase of clothes and boxes of books to earn a doctorate at Boston University. There, I would learn from the best. I would go on to become a neonatal PT, a scholar, an educator, and, earlier this year, the recipient of a Fulbright Specialist grant.

I never could have predicted my future based on my past experiences. I simply did not see it coming. But when opportunities presented themselves, I knew what I was meant to do. The only links across time were my love of reading and desire to work with children.

We needn’t know exactly where life will take us. Life itself will take care of that. All we must do is be prepared for the opportunities presented to us. My sister led me to a career in physical therapy. A clinical affiliation led me to pediatrics. A scientific paper led me to the area of neonatology.

I’ve described neonatal physical therapy to my mother as “knowing much about little,” given its targeted focus and the size of my patients. I somehow have an innate ability to understand the subtleties of newborns’ behaviors and efforts at self-regulation, and a gift for working with families of sick infants.

I love my profession, my work, and my life as a PT. I count my blessings every day. But I did not plan it out this way. It all came to me. I simply ran with the chance I was presented. For this, I thank my parents—who gave me my love of reading.