

Strength in Numbers

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We have all seen a flock of birds, or a swarm of bees, but what about a *parliament* of owls? Or a *shrewdness* of apes? According to James Lipton's wonderful compendium, most animal groups have terms that, to a greater or lesser extent, capture the meaning of the collective (1). These terms might be based on certain characteristics of the animals, like a *leap* of leopards or a *knot* of toads, or on some early linguist's onomatopoetic attempt to capture the sound of the animal, as in a *gaggle* of geese. And what about human groups? Lipton suggests, to our amusement, that we might encounter a *flush* of plumbers, a *wince* of dentists, or a *void* of urologists. He even dares to propose that a group of psychoanalysts might be termed a *complex*! Given enough time, I wonder whether Lipton might have considered a *shrink* of psychiatrists as the wittiest term for my own professional troop (logically converted to a *shrunk* of geriatric psychiatrists). Whatever you call it, it is certainly true that something changes when you bring together people who have a common mission or plight; they form a stronger unit that is able to achieve on a level far above that of the individual.

So it is with dementia. I encountered such a group recently when I was invited to give a talk on the brain to twelve ladies who all face a similar dilemma. Suffering from early stage dementia, they are too impaired for many senior activities in the community, and yet not impaired enough to benefit from the average dementia day program. To meet their needs we created Bella's Club, a day program named after one of our institution's most generous benefactors and designed to emphasize skills that are resistant to early stage dementia, such as imagination, sensation, and camaraderie. Led by a graceful and empathic social worker named

Stephanie, the ladies of Bella's Club have lectures on humor and history; they read poetry, listen to music, and sing; they read a selected book and have discussions on the content; and they sit together in a leisurely luncheon to talk and laugh about whatever topics come their way.

My invitation to lecture to them on the brain was accompanied by a list of ten questions that the participants had devised the week before and inscribed on a chalkboard that stood in their cozy and beautifully appointed apartment. My arrival was greeted enthusiastically by the group, not because they knew me as a speaker or a particularly wise lecturer, but because I am their doctor, having evaluated each and every one prior to being enrolled in the program. I know their deficits well, having reluctantly conferred their very diagnoses. When they see me in the clinic these ladies are typically friendly and gracious but reticent at the same time, insightful into and sobered by the fact that their cognitive deficit are exposed and probed in my presence. One-on-one, I rarely get many questions from them; they listen intently to my words and often turn to an accompanying husband or adult child for assistance and reassurance.

Meeting with them as a group, however, I encountered something quite different. I saw broad smiles and heard small talk that easily gave way to giggling or burst into full-bodied laughter. They did not merely ask me about the brain, but interrogated me with ten of the most sophisticated questions on brain function that one could imagine. What is the limbic system? They asked. How do the right and left hemispheres differ? Do male and female brains think differently? The questions flowed logically from one to another, and as I spoke the group jumped in to discuss my responses, add in their own commentaries, and pose thoughtful follow-up questions. I found myself transported back to my own training in psychiatry as I invoked Dr. George Murray's wonderful description of the limbic system as providing the "music" to our emotional displays (2). And looking around me, I felt part of a human symphony.

Alone, each member of the group faces a growing sense of disconnection from personal memories and other aspects of their identities. Together, however, they share not just a common ailment, but common aspirations; to feel a part of something larger than themselves; to feel loved and cared for; to care for someone else; and to laugh in the face of adversity. They interact together in ways that defy their individual limitations, with their strengths united. As I talked about the wonders of the brain, I concluded each of my responses to the ten questions with the same theme: short-term verbal memory may wane in dementia, but our brains have many different ways to capture life experiences, yielding a vast storehouse of persistent memories and cognitive skills. The goal of Bella's Club was to tap into these latent skills, and as I lectured I witnessed an extraordinary demonstration of these brainpowers in tandem with others -- a true strength in numbers. And what would I call this group? I recall a sketch from Lipton's book that depicts a dozen beautifully choreographed larks flying together – an *exaltation* of larks, as they are called en masse. That is what I saw in Bella's Club that day, a *joy* of women, a *dignity* of ladies, a *strength* of patients – and a true *exaltation* of friends.

References

1. Lipton J. An Exaltation of Larks. 2nd Edition. New York: Grossman Publishers, 1977 [1968]
2. Murray GB. Limbic Music. In: Massachusetts General Hospital Handbook of General Hospital Psychiatry, 5th Edition. Edited by Stern TA, Fricchione G, Cassem NH, et al. St. Louis, MO: Mosby, Inc., 2004.

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