

CATCHING UP WITH CHUCK FISHER '72

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High school is not an easy journey for many. Much happens developmentally in those years as we all stand up, stretch our wings, and make the move to separate from home and become our own person. Author Chuck Fisher '72, PhD, will be the first to tell you that he was a rocky road at Holderness. "I had lived all over the

place leading up to Holderness as my dad worked for the CIA—Peru, the Philippines, and up and down the East Coast—we were never anywhere for more than two years." Having floundered academically, including failing sixth grade, Chuck lacked focus, discipline and the skills to succeed in the classroom.

At Holderness, Chuck says, "I lived at the top of the mountain and in the depth of the valley. I was successful in athletics (soccer, ice hockey, lacrosse, and rock climbing) and head of the Jobs Program, but I was a total mess in the classroom. By the time I was a senior I smoked pot to numb myself from self-doubt. I thought of myself as slow and called myself 'stupid' under my breath. I was on course to not graduate when my Physics teacher, Mr. Ayres, in an act of tremendous compassion, gave me a D—because "I tried hard" or so he said." With a voice of total humility, Chuck offers, "I graduated 49th out of 50 students at Holderness; I barely made it." Chuck freely admits he was "ill-prepared for college," but off to the University of New Hampshire he went. There, things bottomed out quickly, and he dropped out after two years.

Happily, that is far from the end of the story. After leaving UNH, Chuck focused on his love of the outdoors and drove to Alaska for alpine mountaineering. In his final year at Holderness, he led a Senior Project with friends mapping the climbing routes at Rumney Rocks, something our Climbing Club of today enjoys weekly. Climbing and being in the mountains "opened a path to self-knowledge for me," says Chuck. It provided him with a sense of focus and centeredness that he has continued to explore for a lifetime.

Most importantly, mountaineering turned his life at that moment from a breakdown into a breakthrough. Along the way, Chuck became an Outward Bound instructor. It was in this role where helping people find themselves became a lifelong mission. Back to school he went, getting his undergraduate degree from UNH in 1976 and then a Master of Science in School Counseling from

the University of Vermont in 1978. Chuck has been a school counselor, a director of health and wellness at an independent school, a director of a substance abuse recovery program, and currently the founding director of Dovetail Learning, an open source nonprofit where the mission is both clear and compelling: "We strengthen resilience in adults, youth and children." By the way, Chuck added to his academic bona fides by getting his PhD in Transpersonal Psychology in 1998 and writing a book, "The Heart of Resilience," which was recently published in 2024. With a slight chuckle he says, "I am here to represent all 49ers [remember, he was 49/50 at Holderness] out there in the world."

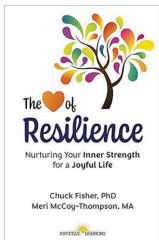
In the world of mental health, Chuck's life's work has revolved around an essential question: "How do we live into the beauty of who we are—the joy of accepting ourselves and others as whole human beings?" For Chuck, the Delphic precept to "know thyself" became his directive, which is anything but easy given all the difficulties and distortions life presents to us. Finding answers to the question of "Who am I?" has been Chuck's north star and a pillar of his career.

"HOW DO WE LIVE INTO THE BEAUTY OF WHO WE ARE—THE JOY OF ACCEPTING OURSELVES AND OTHERS AS WHOLE HUMAN BEINGS?"

Through decades of working with young people and adults, Chuck has found some wisdom. First is this: "Every human being has absolutely impeccable reasons for being exactly who they are." He teaches educators, healthcare providers and

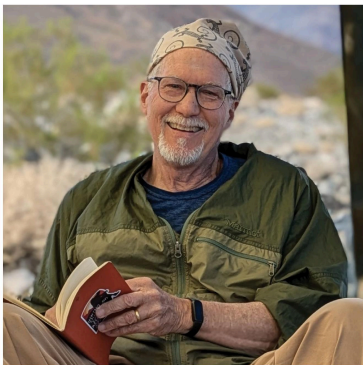
others the deeper nuances of this truth. We are all a product of our early experiences and the societal influences which informed our attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. In the process of growing up, we develop "protective patterns" which help us get through the emotional drama of life but can stand in the way of us becoming whole. He is the first to say his own early childhood trauma were the roots of protective patterns that became his default positions, asserting themselves into situations where they don't belong. He says, "our emotional reactive patterns can harm relationships, keep us stuck, and reinforce fear and separation." Identifying our protective patterns and learning how to work through and beyond them can open up a well-spring of resilience we all have within us. His book, "The Heart of Resilience," is a perfect guide for anyone who wants to dig deeply into our human condition. The ideas and concepts in the book are animated and illustrated with examples from many people's lives, including Chuck's, Chuck, and his co-author Meri McCoy-Thompson, provide a blueprint for how to move from a fixed mindset of judgement and negativity to a resilient mindset of curiosity, acceptance and beauty. The book is replete with quotes that are elegant expressions of truth to frame the author's thinking. For example, there is this gem from William James: "The greatest discovery...is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind."

Chuck Fisher lives up to this quote: "Wear gratitude like a cloak and it will feed every corner of your life" (Rumi, 13th century Persian Poet). He is quick to share how grateful he is, both for the good and the difficulties that have shaped his life and made him who he is. "For me, the real work is opening my own heart to see that all of life is an unfathomable miracle." As a counselor, father, grandfather,



colleague and friend, Chuck has been on a quest to understand who he is and how he can be his best self no matter the circumstances. Like Alice in "Alice in Wonderland," Chuck asks, "Who am I anyway?" And concludes, "Ah, that's the great puzzle." He has spent a lifetime post-Holderness working at understanding himself and then helping other people understand who they are and how they too can be their best self. While honoring the flaws each person and the world we live in have, the human story need not end there. Seeing what is possible and living into the beauty of who we are is a journey well worth exploring. Chuck is a living, breathing example of just that. Current Head of School John McVeigh is fond of saying that at its best, Holderness School "seeks to develop people the world needs most." Chuck Fisher is clearly one of the people that our world needs now. His life-long quest to unlock the mystery of "Who am I?" teaches us a lot about what is possible. |

Please visit DovetailLearning.org to learn more about Chuck's work.



Chuck Fisher '72 is the author of "The Heart of Resilience" and founding director of Dovetail Learning.



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