

Messages of Thanks from a Super Bowl Star: Acts of Thoughtfulness and Gratitude

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In last month's article I discussed the increased attention being accorded the study of happiness. I highlighted eight recommendations offered by psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky for achieving a life filled with satisfaction and contentment. I was pleased to receive a number of e-mails in appreciation of the article and was especially delighted and flattered by one message written by a man who had been a student in one of my psychology classes at the University of Massachusetts in Boston more than 35 years ago. It was my first position in the field of psychology. Not only did it provide me with a sense of purpose and excitement, but it represented a confirmation that I had made the right decision to become a psychologist (I had two other majors in college before discovering psychology). Thus, my teaching experience at the University of Massachusetts in Boston will always hold a special place in my career and in my heart.

My former student said he was prompted to write to me after reading my February article in which I described "thanking a mentor" as one of Lyubomirsky's recommendations for leading a more satisfying life. He thanked me for the manner in which I taught the course and he recounted some very specific memories he had of the class, including the theme he had selected for his term paper. I was very touched by his words, which I found uplifting. The receipt of such an unsolicited note at any point in one's career is satisfying and affirming. I immediately wrote to thank him for his thoughtfulness. I hope he received as much satisfaction writing his note to me as I experienced reading it.

To convey appreciation is a behavior I have long advocated. I believe it enriches both the person showing gratitude as well as the person receiving it. And yet, even well-intentioned individuals often neglect

to express appreciation to those who have made a difference in their lives. However, a couple of weeks ago I was fortunate to read an article that poignantly reinforces the importance of "thanking a mentor." Given the interest expressed by many of my readers about my last article, I should like to share this story with you, trusting it will serve as a catalyst for reflection about your own lives and your relationships with others.

As many of you are aware, I am an avid (my wife would probably say "passionate") fan of the professional sports teams in New England. One of my website articles this past fall focused on the World Series victory of the Red Sox and the impact it had on generations of their fans. You will not be surprised to learn that I was very pleased when the New England Patriots won their third Super Bowl in four years last month. Not only do I enjoy watching the Patriots play, but I admire their professional demeanor both on and off the field. They truly epitomize the often-stated phrase, "There is no 'I' in the word team." In an age when far too many athletes place their own interests above those of their team and their fans, and feelings of selfishness and entitlement dominate the sports arena, it is refreshing to watch a group of players place team chemistry and teamwork first. As many may recall, in their first Super Bowl victory in 2002, the Patriots broke with past tradition by requesting that they be introduced as a team rather than as individual players.

In addition, the Patriot players refrain from uttering provocative pre-game statements that would serve to add negativity to the game and provide their opponents with added incentive. They display respect for the game, themselves, their teammates, their coaches, their opponents, and their fans. It is little wonder that one newspaper article suggested that youth coaches call attention to the demeanor of the Patriots as they teach their young players about teamwork, cooperation, and values.

I eagerly awaited my copy of *Sports Illustrated* to read about the Super Bowl. While I enjoyed accounts and analyses of the game I was especially drawn to Rick Reilly's column. I have quoted Reilly in

previous articles since he is gifted in capturing the human side of athletes and athletics. His column following the Super Bowl was titled "Making the Right Calls" and focused on Deion Branch, the wide receiver of the Patriots who was named Most Valuable Player of the game for catching 11 passes for 133 yards. As I read Reilly's story, I was left with the impression that what Branch did prior to the game in many ways rivaled or exceeded his subsequent performance on the field.

Reilly reported that on the day of the Super Bowl Branch called every coach in his life who had impacted on his life. "He called Pee Wee coaches. He called his high school receivers coach. He called his junior college offensive coordinator. He called his college head coach. He called 13 coaches in all. And do you know what he told them? Thank you."

Some might wonder if calling coaches several hours before the biggest professional football game of the year might not be distracting. Some might contend that his attention should have been focused exclusively on the upcoming game and that the phone calls could wait until the following day. Given Branch's stellar performance during the Super Bowl, it would appear that if his display of appreciation affected the quality of his play, it did so in a very positive manner.

Branch thanked his coach at Louisville for standing by him when he was struggling with his grades. He thanked his high school coach for not perceiving him as too small for football (Branch is 5'9" tall). He offered thanks to one coach who was available when Branch's infant son was near death. Reilly wrote that Branch became very emotional while thanking his coaches. Branch said, "I was crying half the time. It's hard, but I don't want them to think I've left them behind. I want them to know I'm thinking about them all the time." He spent two hours speaking with all of his former coaches.

Reilly spotlighted the reaction of Vernorris Bradley, Branch's receivers coach at Monroe High School in Albany, Georgia. Bradley

recounted, "He called this afternoon (Super Bowl Sunday) about three and said, 'Coach, I'm calling to say thank you for the many ways you helped me. Thanks for all of the ways you influenced me. I just want you to know how much I appreciate all you did.' I mean, I was just floored. A guy that famous and successful can think about a guy who coached him so long ago. On the day of the Super Bowl? Man, that's somebody who hasn't forgotten where he came from."

Near the end of his column Reilly described another detail of Branch's life, an experience that I believe may have strengthened Branch's belief that one must be proactive in finding opportunities to express gratitude, especially since one can never be certain that the opportunity may be available tomorrow. During my career as a psychologist I have heard the regrets of many people who failed to share words of appreciation and thanks with relatives and friends who enriched their lives but who were no longer alive.

Reilly observed, "O.K., so Branch is a gratitude freak. So sue. Four years ago he nearly lost one of his newborn twin sons, Deiondre, to spinal meningitis. The baby was in a hospital being kept alive by machines. 'I think Deiondre was having to decide whether it was time to unplug,' says Bradley, when a 'miracle' occurred. The infant suddenly responded to treatment. On Sunday, Deiondre was chasing his brother, Deiontey, around a Super Bowl of confetti. Now his father holds on tightly to anything that comes his way - spirals *and* sons."

In reading about Branch's phone calls, I could not help but think of the many parents in my clinical practice or workshops lamenting about the lack of appreciation shown by their children. I hear parents complain about children whose two favorite words are, "Give me." I am frequently asked how might we teach children to be caring and compassionate, to show gratitude. I respond that there are countless opportunities to teach children not only to use words such as "please" or "thank you" but to help them understand why these words are important. Also, as I have discussed in past articles, we must provide our children with experiences in which they

contribute to the well-being of others, in which they begin to believe that their presence makes a positive difference in the world. This belief is one of the key ingredients of resilience.

In addition to actively instructing our children about kindness and generosity, I always remind parents that our children learn a great deal by watching us. I ask parents to consider such questions as:

"Do your children observe you engaged in acts of appreciation?"
"Do they see how satisfying such acts can be?" "Do you convey appreciation to your children for things that they have done?" "Do your children hear you comment about what a nice feeling it is when you receive expressions of gratitude?"

When parents reflect upon these questions, many have responded that they must become more diligent in displaying and modeling gratitude, towards their children as well as others. For instance, a man I saw in therapy told me that he could not remember his parents ever showing gratitude. He observed, "They were very good at criticizing each other, me and my sister, and almost everyone else. Looking back, it was a very oppressive home to grow up in."

He continued with a sad look, "I have fallen into the same trap, what you call a 'negative script.' In thinking about the questions you asked, I realize that I basically live by the philosophy that if someone does something good, there is no need to say anything since it's what's expected, but if they do something wrong, let them know about it."

He added, "I can't expect my kids to be caring and thoughtful if they don't see me doing the same. I've got to change what I've been doing."

This man's courage and insight to recognize his own negative, counterproductive script permitted him to move forward and author a new script in which expressions of gratitude appeared on a more consistent basis. He reported that his change of behavior served as

a catalyst for his children to "become more considerate and appreciative." He emphasized, "Once you think about showing appreciation, you really don't have to expend a lot of time and energy doing so. And you feel so much better when you do."

Deion Branch spent a relatively short time thanking 13 of his former coaches. His actions enhanced their lives and I am certain it added value and meaning to his own life. I also believe that his positive attitude will permeate his role as a father and impact on his children. Very few of us can become professional athletes and accomplish what Branch did in the Super Bowl. However, we can all strive to model his performance prior to the game. If we do, we will all be winners.

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