

Further Reflections on Connections

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Many readers e-mailed me in response to last month's newsletter "Reflections on Connections." Some shared their experiences in which someone engaged in what I called "a seemingly small gesture" to help them feel special and appreciated. Others recounted with much satisfaction their own efforts to overcome a "praise deficit" by becoming more aware of the many opportunities that exist to communicate appreciation towards relatives, friends, and colleagues at work.

I was very touched by these accounts. In my clinical work and seminars I have heard many individuals describe their regrets at not having truly acknowledged and thanked someone who played an important role in their lives, whether it be a parent, a coach, a teacher, a friend, a co-worker. Sadly, in some instances that person is no longer alive so that the opportunity to offer thanks to rectify the oversight is no longer possible.

I have also heard many stories in which people found a few moments to demonstrate their appreciation and the impact it had on both parties. People seem eager to share with me the joy of these seemingly small gestures. For example, one man who attended one of my parenting seminars told me before he left, "When I get home, I'm going to tell my two kids how much I love them and not ask them if they did their homework and chores. I'm going to also tell my wife what she has meant to me." He called me a couple of days later and said, "At first my kids were surprised, maybe stunned would be a better word, but then they smiled. I wish I had a camera to capture their smiles. I also wish I had a camera to capture my wife's hug."

As I have discovered, even caring, loving individuals can get caught up in the day-to-day demands and hassles that confront most of us and begin to lose sight of what is important in life. Since the themes of connection and overcoming "praise deficits" have generated so much interest I thought it might be helpful to share additional anecdotes of the actions taken by some of my readers or attendees at my workshops to foster closer relationships and strengthen connections to significant people in their lives. I believe that we can all learn a great deal from the experiences of others.

A mother who subscribes to my newsletter has an 8-year-old son with learning and attention problems. Earlier in the year she had told her son's teacher about my monthly columns and the latter decided to subscribe. This mother wrote to say that shortly after my January newsletter was sent out, this teacher made a point of calling her son at home to say how pleased she was with the progress he was showing. "The conversation lasted a very brief time but if you could have seen the glow on my son's face, it was as if he had received a great treasure. Since that call he seems more

motivated to learn.” The mother called the teacher to thank her and the teacher warmly said, “I want to make certain that I avoid a praise deficit.”

Similarly, at a recent workshop I gave, a mother told me about her son who was in elementary school. He had experienced difficulty for a couple of years, apparently engaging in behavior that was not endearing to his teachers. He was left with the feeling that people didn’t care about him in school. His current teacher contacted him before the school year began to say how pleased she was that he was going to be in her class. His mother said to me that this message set the tone for the school year, which thus far has been very successful.

At another presentation a man came up to me shortly before I was to speak. He said that he “checked” my website when he saw an announcement of my talk. He was holding a copy of “Reflections on Connection,” having printed it from his computer. He told me that the article prompted him to think about his relationships and the changes he felt he should make, some of which he had already initiated.

He said that after reading the article, he sat down and wrote his wife what he described as a “love note.” He added, “Sometimes we forget to say certain things to the most important people in our lives.” In addition, he said that as an executive in a company he has become more sensitive to greeting staff members each morning and to spending a few extra minutes with different people during the day, especially to offer positive feedback. He added, “I have enjoyed these little chats with my staff and have been impressed with their enthusiastic response.”

I plan to devote several of my future newsletters to the topic of motivation. This man’s comments as well as those of the parents mentioned earlier provide a glimpse into some of the actions that may serve as the most powerful forces that motivate people of all ages.

As a final example of demonstrating appreciation I would like to share with you what Susan Rice, a wonderful woman and social worker, has done as well as some other ideas about which she wrote to me. I believe that her thoughts and actions deserve to be described in detail since they offer such incredible insight into what we can do to strengthen relationships. Susan has attended several of my workshops and has become a valued friend. She told me about a project she undertook related to her father, a former teacher, headmaster, and counselor who had undergone a kidney transplant.

Susan wrote, “The idea originated from your discussion this summer about whether or not students write to their teachers. I have often written to teachers about the impact of their work but wondered if Dad had heard from any in the recent past. I also wondered about colleagues as well, as you spoke about that brief note your colleague had written to you (please see my September, 1999 newsletter). So as a holiday gift I decided

to contact some of Dad's previous students and colleagues and explained that I was putting together a collection of letters for Dad and asked if they would like to contribute. The plan was that they would either send me these letters via e-mail or through the mail and I would put them in a binder for a holiday gift."

Susan continued, "I asked these students and colleagues if they had any memories, experiences, or thoughts of appreciation that they might like to share with Dad. It was fascinating to learn from these students and colleagues how grateful they felt to have this opportunity to share their experiences with Dad. Almost everyone mentioned this fact. When Dad opened his gift and started to read the letters the tears were overflowing. He talked again and again about how touched he was to realize that he had touched so many people's lives in such meaningful ways."

Susan's then highlighted a powerful observation. "In reading these letters to Dad, I was reminded about how busy we all are and how little time we take to stop and express the appreciation of the relationships we have. I also thought about your last article and how crucial these connections are for all of us and how letters are such a great vehicle to express our love and appreciation of one another especially if one might be reluctant to express those feelings in person. I do believe these letters are treasures that can provide comfort for a long time. I also thought about the fact that it is often at the end of one's life that these letters start to arrive and what a difference it would be if we could have those letters when we are well and able to enjoy them and respond to them."

Susan has given me permission to share some of the letters she received about her father. It's important to emphasize that these individuals would not have written these letters had Susan not initiated the request. Yet, as Susan mentioned, they were delighted to do so. It has also been my experience that demonstrating appreciation through "seemingly small gestures" provides a feeling of happiness. Let's look at a few examples of what former students and colleagues wrote to Susan's father:

"Some people come into our lives and quietly go. . . . Others stay for a while and leave prints on our hearts and we are never the same." (Student)

"I have always appreciated the ways in which you saw and honored the gifts and graces of my soul, whether it was for making art and music, or for being attentive to the spiritual life." (Student)

"I will never forget the warmth and enthusiasm with which you drew me into the life of the school. Once there, I realized it was nothing less than miraculous that you had done the job I inherited with wisdom and love, even as your body was failing. I found that you shared your deep knowledge of schools, and your care for students and families and colleagues with a calm that nourished everyone around you." (Colleague)

“I am blessed with your friendship and forever grateful to you for sharing your guidance and wisdom with me.” (Colleague)

It is little wonder that Susan’s father cried openly as he read these and many other poignant letters. I think it was very gracious for former students and colleagues to write these notes of appreciation and love. However, as Susan observed, it would be wonderful if we took the time to write these letters not at the end of a person’s life but while they are still healthy and are part of our everyday existence.

I have discovered that ideas quickly flow from Susan’s creative mind. When I asked if I could share what she had done for her father, several other e-mails followed with additional suggestions. Let me rely on Susan’s words again.

“I think it’s helpful to remember that one of the most special birthday gifts we can receive is a letter from a friend describing the importance of one’s friendship. These letters might include memories, experiences, thoughts of appreciation, how someone has touched a life, etc.

“Here are just a few more thoughts about letters. . . . Letters to nieces/nephews/friend’s children who are off at college and like to find something in their child’s mailbox. Letters to grandchildren that may be kept for a lifetime and the simple yet compelling thoughts of expressing one’s love and appreciation for that grandchild. Letters to sitters and caretakers expressing gratitude and appreciation and the sharing of cherished memories.”

And finally Susan wrote, “Do we ever write the parents of our children’s friends to express how much we enjoy having their children over to play? Do we write a pillow note for our spouse thanking them for a wonderful dinner or for putting the children to bed so one could just go to bed early? Or what about writing to a sibling or cousin about a cherished memory.”

Obviously, there are many avenues in addition to letters for expressing the feelings Susan describes. Each one of you can discover the ways in which you are most comfortable to convey thoughts and feelings that will strengthen your connections to others.

As I wrote in last month’s newsletter, we must recognize that each moment is precious, that each moment represents an opportunity to express feelings of appreciation and love. Too often we may miss these opportunities because of the hectic pace of our lives. However, I hope we all can take time to reflect upon what is truly important and not lose too many of these precious moments, moments that will enrich not only the lives of others but our own lives as well.