Two Words Is All It Takes

(Original)

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The kindest thing I've ever done was saying, "Thank you."

Now, that may sound rather lackluster. Saying "thank you" is a common courtesy in daily life; in many situations, it's an expectation, sometimes even an obligation. Words of gratitude indeed are standard in the vocabulary of any polite person, but a sincere thanks can go far deeper than mere manners. In my eyes, the act of thanking someone for the kindness they've done unto you, of recognizing the value and validity of that kindness, is what makes all other future acts of kindness possible.

To better represent the role of gratitude in the cycle of kindness, let's begin with a seed. This is the seed of kindness, and each of us enters the world with a fresh, untarnished seed within us. In our earliest years, the people who raise us and the stories that surround us are the main cultivators of our kindness seed. Overhearing an altercation between parents may weaken a root; learning about the crusades of Mahatma Gandhi or Mother Teresa may allow a new one to take hold.

As our young sprout of kindness grows stronger, so too does our capacity to give kindness back: we begin to share toys, to tolerate people's differences, to smile at strangers. Each of these acts of kindness is like a gleaming crimson apple, plucked from our own tree and offered to another. Most of the time, our apples of kindness are accepted — we get a smile back, or perhaps a "thank you." In these instances, the gratitude serves as sunshine, water, and fertilizer all in one, allowing our own tree to develop to greater and greater heights with an ever-increasing harvest.

Of course, there are moments when our apples of kindness are denied, refused, or tossed aside as if the beautiful fruit were rotten. However, even if we don't receive any new apples in return, our donated apple will still sit at the base of the other person's tree until the apple decomposes and releases its nutrients back into the surrounding soil. Some of us have tougher soil than others; some of us have trees that grow more slowly than others. Either way, no act of gratitude or kindness is ever forgotten or wasted.

Recently, I had an opportunity to examine the close relationship between kindness and gratitude in a more tangible context. At the end of every school year, I give presents and handwritten cards to each of my teachers. This time, though, things felt different. As I signed off my cards and wrapped my gift boxes, it suddenly hit me that my teachers had devoted themselves to the kindest of pursuits: changing the future — a future they might not ever get to see for themselves — for the better, even if it meant taming the most tempestuous of middle schoolers.

Their lofty goal was so admirable that it seemed my small cards and cute trinkets could never suffice as a reward for all their efforts. As it turned out, though, the very teachers who had played an enormous role in growing my tree of kindness accepted my gifts with genuine, earnest gratitude. All I did was directly express my thanks to them — something that few students did, unfortunately — and I believe I exchanged more apples of kindness that day than on any other day of my life.

It's difficult for me to precisely define kindness, but my teachers seem to epitomize it quite well. Based on their example, kind people work to extinguish suffering and pain from this planet. Kind people desire not only to ameliorate their own life but also to ameliorate the lives of everyone. Most of all, kind people unfailingly express thanks to others but never expect others to express thanks to them.

Kindness may not be a magic panacea that will heal every divide in today's polarized society, but it's certainly a good starting point. So what's the first step in making the world a kinder place? Just say "thank you" a little more often, a little more sincerely. Our metaphysical trees of kindness should take care of the rest.