

Happiness shared

Thank-you notes not only make us feel appreciated, they also allow us to experience the good feelings we engender by our thoughtful acts. This notion hadn't occurred to me until I read a story by Roxana Robinson in *The New York Times Magazine* titled "Great Expectations: Should an Act of Kindness Merit Something in Return?" In the article she tells of finding a wallet in a cab, locating the owner's phone number, and calling to tell him she had found his wallet. Instead of hearing ecstatic statements of relief and gratitude, she heard only a calm "Oh good. Thank you." He said little more except "I will pick it up tomorrow." Ms. Robinson was disappointed. She wanted to "talk about how wonderful it all was." Later she consoled herself, thinking he would surely leave a "grateful note" or a "heartfelt message on our machine."

She left the wallet with her doorman, and the owner picked it up, but he left no note in return. Days passed. Ms. Robinson began analyzing her feelings: "At first I was disappointed, but by evening I felt foolish. Why had I expected a deluge of gratitude? I had felt so noble, but in fact I hadn't been noble at all, only responsible. My entire effort had cost exactly 25 cents.

Karen,

Thank you very much for that rather hefty graduation present. I hope Aimee knows how lucky she is to have a mother as kind and outgoing as yourself. Since I'm still going to be around, you're welcome to interject with any motherly advice anytime you hear my mom giving me a lecture before I go out.

Thanks again,
Chris Medley

A friend of mine received the following note of thanks from a youthful neighbor to whom she had given a graduation check. As with so many notes of thanks, my friend appreciated and enjoyed it so much that she saved it.

Why had I expected to be treated like a hero? . . . I was embarrassed by my own expectations.”

Four days after finding the wallet, Ms. Robinson received an orchid with a card that said, “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I love New York!” The wallet owner was clearly grateful, and Ms. Robinson was surely gratified by his gift and note. And while the opportunity to talk about “how wonderful it all was” had passed, the note of thanks conveyed his delight in having his wallet returned.

We can all identify with the author’s expectations as she called the owner of the wallet and waited for—but didn’t receive—his enthusiastically happy response. If we have made others happy, we want the feeling to wash over us. A thank-you note can make it happen.

I suspect the desire to share the happiness may be the reason doctors, who often receive gifts as expressions of gratitude, would much prefer a thank-you note, even if the gifts are extremely valuable. (The former Shah of Iran used to give Rolex watches.) Dr. Laura Poppér, a New York City pediatrician, is a case in point. To save an infant who had stopped breathing, she ran from her office two and a half blocks to the parents’ apartment. There she provided the resuscitation and follow-up measures that saved the child’s life. Later, Dr. Popper received a box of

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Dear Mr. Marx:

Thanks for the book and for including my name at the end of that long, dreary list in the front. Thurber says it is alphabetical, but he is full of all sort of odd bits of information.

I’m enjoying the book, and it is one of the two books in my library in which the sentences seem to be uttered aloud by the author of the book. (The other book is Fred Allen’s.)

My wife and I continue to watch your show with enjoyment, and the whole thing is better than ever now that the bittersweet vine has reached the top of our antenna, so that you come through the set looking more and more like Raymond Duncan, the goatherd. Keep up the good work, and tell Melinda I was enchanted with the witch doctor.

Sincerely,

E. B. White

Groucho Marx sent E. B. White, the well-known author of The Elements of Style, a copy of his book Groucho and Me. White is mentioned in the acknowledgments.

chocolates from the grateful parents. While she appreciated the acknowledgment, she would have appreciated even more a few words that described the infant's return to health and the joy this brought the parents. "I did care about the letter," she admitted—that is, the one she didn't get.

Worldly rewards

Writing thank-you notes can be rewarding—sometimes extremely so. For example,

- Peter Cummings, chairman of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, wrote a personal—and lengthy—thank-you note to an elderly heiress who had contributed \$50,000 to the DSO. Two weeks later, the heiress contributed an additional \$50,000. This pattern of donations followed by letters of gratitude continued until the DSO had received an unprecedented \$2.5 million from this donor.
- A woman wrote to etiquette expert and columnist Miss Manners saying that her six-year-old "...writes her own notes and expresses delight in most gifts, even new toothbrushes, so it is fun to give her presents. Her grandmother and

godmother enjoy it so much, that they give her several gifts each month."

- A job-seeker was among five finalists for a highly desirable job. Of the five, she was the only one who sent a thank-you note following the interview. She got the job.
- A woman who had been shopping for a car received a personal letter of appreciation from just one of the eight or ten dealerships she visited. The dealer who wrote the note got her business. "I felt important and believed my business was truly wanted," she says.

On the other hand, failure to offer written thanks can be costly: grandmothers who do not receive thank-you notes have been known to cease gift giving.

Reputations in the balance

Failure to write a thank-you note can sully your reputation. If you received a gift, especially an expensive one, such as a wedding gift, and did not acknowledge it, your negligence will be remembered—and remembered for a long time. I read about a group of women who were gathered together in a spa hot tub, discussing regrets about unwritten letters. The topic prompted

one participant to recall a bride and groom who, *fifty years ago*, neglected to acknowledge the gifts they'd received. "Nobody has forgotten it," she said.

I must admit that I, too, remember those people who did not send notes to acknowledge gifts I have sent—especially wedding and new-baby gifts. I know, from talking to friends, that others do too. When I don't receive a note, I tend to surmise that the recipient was never trained to do so, or is unsure of his or her writing skills, or has a problem with disorganization or procrastination. Some people who don't receive notes of acknowledgment may be less charitable than I, thinking, for example, that the non-note-writer is not grateful. (Andrè Comte-Sponville, author of *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, defines the ungrateful person as one who is unable to give back "a little of the joy that was received or experienced.")

None of us wants to be remembered for negative reasons. Even if you are not otherwise motivated to express gratitude for a gift you have been given, the risk to your reputation should be motivation enough.

Justified grievances

People have a right to feel aggrieved at not receiving expressions of gratitude for gifts and other acts of

kindness. Take, for example, the seventy-six-year-old grandmother who wrote to advice columnist Ann Landers, complaining that she receives no thanks from the fifty-two relatives to whom she regularly sends birthday and holiday gifts. The grandmother has clearly expended considerable time and effort on behalf of her relatives. In response, the relatives give nothing back: the gift is not followed by gratitude. While the relatives' neglect reflects poorly on them, of greater importance is the grandmother's feelings. For all of her efforts, the grandmother deserves some words of appreciation.

I like the way Miss Manners put it in her reply to the bride who complained that she wasn't able to write personal letters to all who sent gifts: "You can, by simply doing nothing, make it perfectly clear to all of your original and newly acquired relations and friends that the planning, shopping, and spending each has done on your account do not justify a two-minute effort and a stamp from you."

Real men write thank-you notes

Young men, I've learned, think that writing thank-you notes is not manly. When asked if he wrote thank-you notes, one twenty-three-year-old man replied, "I just

don't think it's a thing that a guy has to do. I mean, the girls do it because it's a girl thing. But I feel kind of dorky doing it." It's "dorky" to express gratitude? A "girl thing" to write notes of thanks? Presidents Reagan, Carter, Clinton, G. H. Bush, and G. W. Bush are known for their handwritten notes. The writer Ernest Hemingway, a man's man if there ever was one, was also a regular writer of thank-you-notes. In fact, a hefty percentage of his letters began with "thank you." For example, here is a fragment of a thank-you letter he wrote to John and Katharine Dos Passos (January 13, 1936):

Thanks very much for the swell still champagne. The day it came Burris Jenkins was here with three other guys and we drank seven bottles. It was wonderful. Caught six sailfish the last six times out. Been feeling good again since about two weeks. Hope everything going well with youse.

If you're concerned about your manly reputation, then write a manly thank-you note. Like Hemingway, you can throw in something about the fish you caught or the bear you wrestled. But do write the note. I'll guarantee that the recipients will be both pleased and impressed, and your reputation will be burnished, not tarnished.

Dear Goldie,

Am I enchanted? You bet. Thanks for giving me such a relaxed good time at dinner.

When Jane Weintraub told me where I was sitting, I was a little worried *only* because I'm not too hot of a dinner partner. (I didn't ask you to dance—on that one, look at it this way—you've still got 2 good feet.)

Anyway you were a fantastic dinner partner. You made me feel welcome and totally at ease. I didn't even have to unveil my 12-point plan for dealing with Gorbachev. Thanks for being so darn nice!!

Good Luck—
George Bush

This note from President George H. Bush to Goldie Hawn is a wonderful example of an expression of gratitude not confined to the "when to send a thank-you note" rules.

William McGurn, a columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, observes that the people who don't send thank-yous outnumber those who do. "The decline of the thank-you note," he writes, "can be attributed to the corresponding elevation of sincerity. Sincerity is not always called for, especially when you're five years old and Aunt Martha got you a new itchy sweater in exactly the wrong color instead of the Pokemon cards you were hoping for. **Even adults know that the obligations of gratitude are such that they override the usual imperative for truthfulness.**"

Truthfulness is not the important thing here. What is important is that the child learns to be polite, an aspect of early childhood training that leads to morality. "Politeness," writes Comte-Sponville, "is a small thing that paves the way for great things. To say 'thank you' is to pretend to be grateful. And it is with this show of respect and this show of gratitude that both respect and gratitude begin. . . . **It is by mimicking the ways of virtue, that is, through politeness, that we stand a chance of becoming virtuous.**" And finally, "Politeness is not everything; indeed it is almost nothing. *Almost*, but not quite: for man, too, is *almost* an animal."

To the woman who opined that children shouldn't be taught to "feign emotions," Miss Manners responded

that parents who do not teach their children the amenities must therefore "want the child to remain in the natural, and therefore uncivilized, state in which he was born. . . ." This is an overstatement, of course. We all want our children to behave in a civilized manner. But the training is hard work—especially when it comes to getting kids to write thank-you notes.

A final word

As you sit down to craft your thank-you note, bear in mind that, just as a gift or act of kindness comes from a spirit of generosity, so too should your expression of gratitude. French philosopher André Comte-Sponville, who has made a study of virtue, says, "Generosity elevates us *toward others*, as it were, and toward ourselves as beings freed from the pettiness that is the self." More than that, he adds, "accompanied by gentleness, it is called kindness."