

A Grateful Heart by John Kralik

(As seen in Parade - January 1, 2012)

I've received quite a few nice notes and letters from people who saw my piece in Parade. That piece was necessarily much shortened, because of space limitations, so I thought I'd share an earlier draft with those who have taken the time to come to this page. Here goes.

"Knowing that you had to work on Thanksgiving, of all days, I thought I'd express my gratitude that you have taken the time and made the effort to learn my name and greet me each day in a way that makes me feel like a person instead of a number. It's a small thing, but on any given day, it can make all the difference. Thank you!"

I sent this thank-you note to a barista at Starbucks who had brightened my day, and many other days before and after, by remembering my name with a smile every morning. It was one of the special things for which I was grateful at Thanksgiving of 2008, the year in which I had vowed to write a thank you note every day of the year. It nearly brought her to tears.

Strangely, the idea for this year-long act of gratitude had come to me on a day when I was desperately looking for something, anything, for which to be thankful, New Year's day of 2008. On that day, I went for a walk up the Echo Mountain trail in Pasadena, California, where I lived. At 52, I owned a law practice, but after working hard at it all year I found I had earned nothing. Actually, having lost money, I earned less than nothing. As a result, I could not afford to pay Christmas bonuses to my employees, a failing that greatly embarrassed me. My firm was losing its lease, and I could not afford a new one. After a divorce, I was living in a cheap apartment instead of my own home. Even the hopeful aspects of my life had just deflated with sudden and despondent developments: A woman I had been dating ended our relationship suddenly before Christmas, and a million dollar jury verdict that would have bailed me out was nullified by a judge's ruling.

In the mountains, I heard a voice I did not recognize. Wherever it came from, it did not seem to come from me. It told me I needed to learn to be grateful for the things I had, rather than to focus on the things I wanted, or the many things I felt I had lost.

It took a little more than a year, but by the time I had written the 365 thank you notes I had set out to write, my life had been transformed in ways I could not have expected. As I saw how my children, friends, coworkers, acquaintances, and even baristas had blessed my life and as I acknowledged their impact by writing to them, my blessings seemed to multiply. When I was grateful for clients paying their bills, they paid faster. When I

thanked lawyers for referring clients to me, they referred more.

The benefits were not just economic. As my barista later told a reporter who came to ask about the note I wrote to her, "So when I saw this, I realized that what I do really counts." By showing others how their lives had meaning in mine, I found them reflecting back to me that my life also had meaning in theirs. I gained an overall sense of peace, a belief that my life was, and had been, a good one. The change did not happen overnight. My note to my barista was thank you note 260.

Almost without intending to do so, I started to change my life in ways that would make me more worthy of receiving thank you notes myself. For example, having been thankful for my office manager's constancy in our business crises, I was reminded she had lost a son to leukemia. I began to run marathons to benefit the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, which gave me an opportunity to write thank you notes to those who donated to my runs. And those notes helped me finish writing 365 notes. (I've now done three of these marathons.)

Awakened by these experiences, I decided to write a book, "365 Thank Yous," which was released in a new trade paperback edition called "A Simple Act of Gratitude" just after Christmas. Because the book is personal, and frank about some of the problems I had, I became concerned about "going public" in this way, and considered not publishing the book at all. Thanks to a trusted friend who encouraged me, I decided to go on. "You have to publish this," he said. This is bigger than you. It's not just about you anymore."

From a reader:

"After hearing about your 365 Thank Yous experiment, I felt inspired to follow in your footsteps, and take on a similar project of writing Thank You notes to the people who have had a positive impact in my life. I was especially intrigued at the idea of envisioning people going to their mailbox and finding a mysterious envelope, and wondering what the heck it might be...and then opening it, to find out that some person from their past (who they may not even recall) still thinks about them today, and feels grateful that their lives had crossed paths."

A few days after the book was released I found something new among the junk mail and bills in my mailbox, my first handwritten thank you note from a reader. The next week, there were more. Then the publisher sent a whole box of them.

One of the first letters I received told me of how the signals of gratitude I sent could ripple farther out. She told me she had chosen to write the first of her 365 thank you notes to me. "I am starting with you so that you know, in my mind, you have pushed a domino tile and from it will branch many more tiles that will grow in all directions and that will allow us all to win at this game of life." I felt humbled by these letters, realizing again that the message that was spreading, like the voice that I heard on the mountain, was not my own. It was something bigger.

So many of my readers have inspired me. A woman living in a nursing home because a stroke had paralyzed her "on my R side" told me that she praises "the Lord I was born left handed & I've taken it upon myself to write Birthday & Thank you cards to All the Staff..." A woman whose husband had been paralyzed for 20 years in a car accident wrote of how she had been "thankful that he was not killed." Her children had "grown into "very empathetic" people "with a very personal perspective on individual abilities." Although she never thought she would have been able to say it, she was writing to tell me "I am

now grateful for our experience and the depth and meaning it has brought to our lives.”

My readers told me stories of how important people were thanked before it was too late. A woman in Omaha thanked a priest who changed her life 22 years ago, and her letter arrived to comfort him a few days before he died. When she went back to thank a teacher, “She saw us and the flowers, put her head on the desk and cried she was so happy. She said she had been a teacher for 23 years and no one had ever thanked her.” I am grateful to hear of such moments, though I know I am not the one responsible for them.

When I write to my readers now, I try to express to them my hope that they will find, as I did, that the love and gratitude they express to others will return to them someday. Having just written my 860th note, I can say that I learn in new ways all the time that gratitude is a pathway to the peace that we all seek in life, the peace which passes our understanding. I still feel calmed in my dark or stressful times by writing “thank you” patiently and neatly to those who have helped and comforted me.

After my book came out, my father became one of the many who began to write their own 365 notes. Now 87, he was a surgeon for over fifty years. He has discipline and focus far beyond mine, and will soon complete his first 365 notes. His collection of notes is more beautiful than mine, and his journey has reconnected him with a lifetime of friends, colleagues, high school classmates and patients who have lived as long as he has by following his advice. Having written a book, I suppose I am now the writer, but his notes have an uncluttered elegance that training cannot imitate. For example, his notes thank those who have journeyed with him for as many as “eighty years of treasured friendship.” Writing to a new friend (yes he’s making new friends) who had taken him and my Mom out to dinner, he described the evening as “presidential.” Reading these notes, I found a curious phrase recurring, as when my Dad thanked my niece Megan for sending flowers: “They brought us implausible joy.” My current favorite of my Dad’s thank you notes is the one he wrote to the doctor who performed his recent cataract surgery:

“Thank you for my new eyes. The stars are brighter. The ocean waves are whiter. I can see clearly for miles up and down the shore. I can see the cargo ships on the horizon coming in and out of the river.”

Even when you’re eighty-seven, perhaps particularly then, being thankful can bring you “implausible joy.”

My life today is generally a happy one. Both my circumstances and outlook are much improved. But as we all must know, moments of despair are inevitable. Just last week, the friend whose encouragement gave me the courage to publish the book suddenly left the world without warning or goodbye. On my desk lies a thank you note he wrote to me last year to tell me I was “the most generous person” and another in which he assured me that the voice I heard in the mountain on New Year’s Day in 2008 had “confirmed the possibility that one could change one’s entire life for the better.” I pray that the note I wrote to say that his support for my writing was a gift I could never “fully measure or repay” did not go unread or unremembered.

At times like these I return to the pattern that brought me out of darkness four years ago. As I sit at my desk, I see that there is a pile of notes from readers to be answered, and, on a legal pad, a scribbled list of kindnesses and gifts yet unacknowledged. I think about the many to whom I owe ungiven thanks, realizing how their struggles are so often much greater than mine. I take out my pen and what remains of my old stationery, and begin to write. Every note includes the words "Thank You."

How to write thank you notes.

1. A Grateful Heart.

Of course, at the beginning of my journey, in January 2008, I did not have a grateful heart. So many things were going wrong that I felt I had nothing for which to be grateful. Yet starting with thank you notes for the Christmas presents I had received a few weeks before, and, note-by-note, I became more able to see the good in people around me.

Try to say one true thing about why you appreciate the gift you were given. If there is still room in the short note, say one sincere thing about the person who gave it, and what that person means to you. Don't forget to say the words "thank you."

2. Recalling Turning Points.

After thanking all the people Emily post recommends, I began to look beyond my immediate day-to-day circumstances for persons to whom I needed to write a thank-you note. For example, I began to look back, and to write notes to the friends who rescued me from self-destructive behavior in my youth, to the doctor whose operation saved me from a life of pain, to the doctor who told me to stop drinking.

Inevitably life has its periodic rough times. By going back and thanking these people, I connected with better times and renewed the friendships forged then. This enabled me to take a longer, more balanced view of the difficulties I experienced in the near term. Even at eighty seven, perhaps especially at eighty seven as my father has found, you will be amazed at those who likewise remember you with gratitude

3. The Basics: Of Pen and Paper

Handwrite your notes, in pen. Write neatly enough that someone else can read it. Perhaps because it is becoming somewhat of a lost art, handwritten notes feel special, and real, as if the person who wrote it is there with you. Many who received my notes saved them, as if they were a precious gift. When something is typed by a machine, people always wonder whether it comes from you, or from the machine.

Most of my notes were written on very simple off-white note cards, which had only my name printed on the cover. This had two helpful effects. First, with my name printed on the cover, people who could not read my signature knew the note was not from a madman. Second, because it was not a pre-printed thank-you note, the words "thank you" had to actually be written by me, over and over, and the person could be sure it was my gratitude being expressed, not that of the greeting card company. I felt the words as I was writing them, and it helped to change my point of view.