

The Gift of Encouragement

By Rex Morgan

One day a school teacher asked everyone in her class to write down each of the other students' names and note the nicest thing they could say about each person.

Years later, the teacher heard that one of the students had died in Vietnam and she was asked to attend his funeral. The family showed her that the piece of paper from school with other students' kind remarks about him had been carried in his wallet until the day he died. Other students told the teacher that they had also saved their pieces of paper from that day and how much it had meant to them.

This true story from Minnesota demonstrates how powerful words of encouragement and appreciation can be.

Life Changing

'That dress really looks great on you!'; 'You're such a reliable person!'; 'I admire the way you handled that situation'—compliments like this can make your heart sing and give you a lift for the rest of the day. A well placed compliment can even change the course of someone's life.

Few rags-to-riches stories are as compelling as that of Enrico Caruso (1873–1921). The youngest of 21 children, only three of whom survived infancy, Caruso was born into grinding poverty. He longed to be an opera singer, but his first teacher told

him he was no good. His mother, however, praised him and told him she knew he could sing, and went barefoot in order to save money to pay for his music lessons. By the end of his life, Caruso had become the highest paid singer in the world and is generally acknowledged as one of the greatest operatic tenors ever.

Encouragement is 'oxygen to the soul'.

George Adams, physician

It is likely that you still remember compliments you received even many years ago. Everyone enjoys being appreciated. Indeed, all of us hunger for encouragement.

'The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated', concluded American philosopher William James. Mark Twain quipped, 'I can live for two months on a good compliment'.

Charles Dickens (1812–1870) had

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Japanese proverb

a very difficult childhood. His father spent time in a debtors' prison, and Charles was unable to attend school for more than four years. While working in a rat-infested warehouse, Charles mailed his first manuscript at night-time so no one would laugh

at him. After many rejections he finally had a manuscript accepted. Although he wasn't paid for the work, the fact that one editor had recognised him was so thrilling that he kept working, and became one of the most prodigious authors in history.

Encouragement is 'oxygen to the soul', said the physician George Adams. An old Japanese proverb declares, 'One kind word can warm up three winter months'. The Bible echoes these ideas: 'Kind words are like honey—sweet to the soul and healthy for the body'.¹

All of us thrive on encouragement; on the other hand, no one likes to be criticised. Criticism stings, and often leaves a scar.



Conditioned to Criticise

What a pity it is, then, that so many people are criticised so often, and sometimes encouragement is a remarkably scarce commodity. It is easy to laugh at other people's ideas, to pick holes in their arguments, and put people down. We seem to be conditioned to criticise quickly, and are slow to find words of praise. Even if we notice good things about others, we can easily avoid mentioning them. Our innate human selfishness often leads us to downplay the achievements of others lest they portray us in a bad light.

Often it takes a little thought to find ways to build others up. But really, it isn't all that hard to give appreciation and encouragement. It doesn't cost anything—perhaps a bit of self effacement—yet it is worth so much.

Did you realise that you possess a

great power that can change other people's lives for the better, and at the same time cause them to like you more? Yes, you do—the power of encouragement!

The famous American steel magnate Charles Schwab said:

The way to develop the best that is in a man is by appreciation and encouragement. There is nothing else that so kills the ambitions of a man as criticism from his superiors. I believe in giving a man incentive to work. So I am anxious to praise but loathe to find fault. If I like anything, I am hearty in my approbation and lavish in my praise.²

Animal trainers know that the key to improved performance in their

charges is to use 'positive reinforcement', praising and rewarding them instantly for good behaviour. It's a sad fact of life that while that we are quick to praise animals in order to cause improvement, when it comes to other humans, we criticise and condemn rather than praising the efforts we notice.

Another sad reality is that the people we are most likely to criticise, insult for their trivial faults, and say unkind things to, are those in our families. Why can't we bring more appreciation, and with it more happiness, into our homes?

When was the last time you brought your wife flowers and told her you loved and appreciated her? When was the last time you told your husband you are glad you married him? How often do you praise and appreciate your children or your workmates?

Working with Children

Encouragement is particularly valuable for children. As they grow, they need to hear frequent validation so they develop a balanced and healthy sense of self-worth to replace the feelings of inferiority they often have. Their inexperience causes them to make mistakes, and these can too often be criticised and punished. Young people are constantly searching for acceptance and approval. We need to give them encouragement and hope, or they will find inappropriate ways to gain attention and support.

If your children don't listen to you, try praising them for something. Express admiration for their handwriting, toys, clothing, drawing—anything you can say some positive words about—and see how they start listening attentively!

Here's a little tip to help increase your 'encouragement index'. Put

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some coins or buttons in one pocket and transfer one of them to the other pocket each time you encourage your child. The goal is to move all of the coins from one pocket to the other by the end of the day.

Words of appreciation and encouragement can work wonders. They produce results where criticism and ridicule fail. No wonder the Apostle Paul urged his followers, 'Therefore

Tips for Giving Encouragement

- **Be sincere.**

Don't say it if you don't mean it. People see right through flattery.

- **Be specific.**

It's nice to say "Well done", but it's much more effective to explain exactly what part of the job was well done.

- **Don't delay.**

Say it when you think it—or the opportunity may be lost for good.

- **Do it in public.**

Praising people in front of others adds to the impact.

- **Put it in writing.**

Thank You cards or encouraging notes can be looked at often, and kept forever. There are people who keep a file of every complimentary note they've ever received. Surely that says something about the power of encouragement!

encourage one another and build each other up'.³

Even the highest achievers and the most apparently positive thinkers suffer from doubts and fears. A professional ice hockey goalie once lamented, 'How would you like a job where, when you make a mistake, a big red light flashes, a buzzer sounds, and 20,000 fans boo?!'

In their book, *Becoming a Person of Influence*, John Maxwell and Jim Dornan note an experiment that measured people's capacity to endure pain:

Psychologists measured how long a barefooted person could stand in a bucket of ice water. They found that one factor made it possible for some people to stand in the ice water for twice as long as others. Can you guess what that factor was? It was encouragement. When another person was present, giving support and encouragement, the sufferers were able to endure the pain much longer than their unencouraged counterparts.⁴

Bringing Out the Best

Praise brings out the best in people. Has the word ever gotten back to you that someone thinks you are intelligent? The next time you're around that person, you certainly don't want to do anything to dispel the illusion. We tend to live up to the way we think others see us.

The celebrated German writer Goethe put it this way: 'Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being'.

The Duke of Wellington, the British military leader who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, was not an

easy man to serve under. He was brilliant, demanding, and not one to shower his subordinates with compliments. Yet even Wellington realised that his methods left something to be desired. In his old age a young lady

asked him what, if anything, he would do differently if he had his life to live over again. Wellington thought for a moment then replied, 'I'd give more praise'.

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Goethe

Praise and encouragement is a wonderful gift to give. It is free, requires no shopping and no shipping, doesn't have to be gift-wrapped, doesn't require batteries. Yet it is worth a fortune, and can last a lifetime. When you give it away, you don't lose anything. You are able to give it again and again, and no one ever gets too much of it. Another great benefit is that you feel much better yourself after giving it. So there's no need to be stingy about it.

Why withhold something that is so precious, so available, and so potent? Give the powerful gift of encouragement often!

Notes

¹ Proverbs 16:24 (New Living Translation).

² Quoted in Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (World's Work Ltd, 1970), p. 48.

³ 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (New International Version).

⁴ John C Maxwell and Jim Dornan, *Becoming a Person of Influence* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), p. 47.



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