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Looking To Affirm

Despite what the children's rhyme says, by now, most of us have come to the sad realization that in addition to the damage that "sticks and stones" can do, words can also deeply hurt us and can remember times when we were called names or were yelled at.

On the other hand, most of us, hopefully, can also remember kind words, things that went deep into our hearts – deeper than compliments – because they *said something positive about who we are*. For some of us, these moments are the most powerful turning points in our lives. They have made us who we are today.

When a father and mother look at a son or daughter, for example, they can either see a small child or they can "see" the man or woman they **will** become. If they can see that man or woman they are becoming, and then name it, that's affirmation. Here's a story from my own family. A few years ago, our family took a trip. We loaded up the car and drove down to Florida. When we got there, it was time to unload the car. We all made a lot of trips up and down the stairs. The last thing we needed to bring up was the cooler, a big cooler, maybe 3 ft. wide – and heavy. But just as I was going downstairs to get it, up comes my 13-year-old son, carrying it by himself. I looked at him and smiled and said, "James, that's a man's job. Good work." Now, obviously, my 13-year-old son was not a full-grown man, and he couldn't at that time carry things as well as I could. But do you see what happened here? By affirming the man that he was becoming, I actually helped spur on the process.

I saw a painting once that expresses this idea well. It pictured a seed that has sprouted and is sending out its first tender shoot and one unformed leaf – but it still has not yet broken through the surface. Almost anybody walking along would just see a lump of dirt, a bump on the ground. But what we really have here is life about break forth. A wise farmer "affirms" that seed by watering it and waiting for it to grow. He trusts in what he can not yet see and acts as if it were already there.

Why Not?

If affirmation is so powerful, why don't we do it more often? Here are four doubts that can hold us back.

Won't I be Condoning Somebody's Bad Choices? (Answer: No.)

There are plenty of things that people do just about everybody would agree (including the people doing them) that are just plain stupid, other things that people do that we disagree with and plenty of things that we know are fine but are just not our own preference. Sometimes, people think that if they say anything positive about a person, they are giving that person an "endorsement" of everything that person is doing, including all these

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things we disagree with or don't like. We hold back on affirming what is good because we are focused on something else.

Most people, however, already know what we don't like about them and what we disagree with them about. What they usually do not know is if there is anything at all that we like about them. And most of these people are smart enough to know that saying something positive is not a "blank check" of approval for everything they are doing. (Thing about how something positive from a usually critical person would sound to you.) What that positive statement is, instead, is a little bridge of hope, a little evidence that even though there is disagreement, on some level there is still a relationship and approval that transcends this disagreement. Affirmation is a statement that even though some behavior might clearly be wrong, there are at least some things that are clearly right.

Isn't it Dangerous to Give People Too Many Compliments? (Answer: Yes, but...)

Affirmation does not mean giving compliments. Compliments are much easier to give than affirmation. A compliment praises somebody for something they did or congratulates them for something they achieved, but affirmation goes much deeper than that. Affirmation speaks to a person's identity. More than admiration for something somebody did, affirmation tells a person who they are. For example, when my kids were little, if I saw one of my sons share a toy with my daughter, I could say, "That was really nice of you," and that would be a compliment. It's praise for a good act. But over time, as I see him do this more than once, I could say to him, "David, you have a good heart. You have a heart that wants to share. I like that." That's affirmation. I'm speaking to my son's identity.

Compliments and affirmation can both be good things. But you do have to be careful with compliments. If compliments only highlight somebody's performance, it can create pressure: "I just got a compliment for sharing. Now I have to keep doing that." We have to be careful with compliments and make sure we are not creating a performance environment. Affirmation helps avoid that. It doesn't praise somebody for what they did but smiles at who they are.

What Am I Supposed to Say? (Answer: It depends on who you are talking to.)

There are few emptier words than a "canned" compliment, one that you can tell somebody tells everybody. Getting to know a person well enough to say something that is especially true about them doesn't have to take very much time, but it will take some attention to an area that we are not often trained to pay enough attention to. We must learn to pay more attention not only to our message but also to our audience and to what the person in front of us is ready and able to hear.

Most of the time, when we are thinking about presenting something to someone we mostly think - and sometimes only think - about the message itself. But as anyone who has studied the field of communication can tell you, there are always three components to any communication: the person sending the message, the message itself and the person

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receiving the message. Most of us have been taught that the most important thing to concentrate on is the message: no matter what, we need to get that clear.

Affirmation puts as first priority something else: the audience. Affirmation means looking at the audience first and drawing from them what needs to be said. Affirmation only works if you are saying something about what is really true – you can't make this stuff up. This is not a marketing trick, it is not about looking for ways to package what you have already decided say. It is about looking at the person in front of you as the source for what you need to say.

Um, Is There Really Anything Good to Say? (Answer: Plenty.)

The final key to affirmation is believing that *there is actually something good* that can be said. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who spent 8 years in a Russian gulag, had this to say about what he learned there about human nature:

Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained (*The Gulag Archipelago*).

It is this “small bridgehead” that we are looking for. Though it may seem unlikely, my experience has been that when I look, believing that it is there, I find good.

Questions

- What experience do you have with trying to affirm others? What makes it easy? What makes it difficult? Is there anything you could do to develop in this skill?

Exercise

Using these definitions...

A compliment is an expression of praise, admiration or congratulation. They can take many forms: telling someone "good job" or "thank you," commenting on someone's appearance or writing a note to thank or congratulate someone for doing something especially well. For many of us, giving and receiving compliments is an everyday thing. For others, it is awkward to receive a compliment, so they simply nod and shuffle on their way.

Affirmation is to bring to light what is true about someone - even though it may not be seen at the moment. It starts with noticing what is just below the surface in someone's life, something that is emerging in their character, their true identity,

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and then nudging the process along through the power of language to transform. It is a form of creation at work.

Try...

...in pairs (with people you know) giving each other a compliment (i.e. "Nice shirt!") Then try affirming them ("One thing I really appreciate about you is your patience. I have seen you....") After taking turns, talk about what it was like: which was harder to do? Why? What did it feel like on the receiving end?