

Everything is a gift

Let's start with a sad fact and work our way to a happy conclusion.

The sad fact is that students do not say 'Thank you' for the things that are done for them anywhere near as much as they ought to. Every other academic I have spoken to about this has confirmed that their experience is the same as mine. One told me about a time when he was contacted by a student at 9 pm – the student said they needed a reference written and sent off by first thing the following day. The academic dropped everything else and sat down and got the reference in on time, and emailed the student to let them know that the reference had been submitted on time. The student didn't bother to acknowledge the email, let alone say 'Thank you' to the academic for getting them out of a hole.

So what underlies this, and many, many other stories I could tell you, of absolutely stunning ingratitude on the part of students? The simplest explanations are the best and the simplest explanation for this phenomenon is that students think they are *entitled* to the various acts of kindness and consideration that they receive from their teachers. People tend not to say 'Thank you' for being given something that they are entitled to in the first place. We don't thank people for not running us down in the street, or buy flowers and chocolates for the owner of the corner shop where we get our newspapers. Given this, if students think that they are entitled to a Rolls Royce service from their teachers, it would be only natural for them not to bother to say 'Thank you' every time they received that kind of service.

If that describes your state of mind pretty well, I'd like to encourage you to adopt a different mentality, where you don't think of yourself as being entitled to anything, but instead regard anything good that happens to you as a *gift*. *You will be far happier if you think of the good things that happen to you as being gifts, rather than thinking of them as simply being due to you.* Someone who has a very large notion of what they are entitled to can only ever be angry and miserable: getting what they think they are entitled to will leave them unaffected as all they are getting is what they were supposed to have anyway, while *not* getting what they think they are entitled to will leave them consumed with rage that the world has done them an injustice. In contrast, someone who adopts the kind of mentality that I'd like to encourage you to adopt can only ever be happy: when something good happens to them, it will be like Christmas all over again, while if nothing good comes their way, they won't regard that as being unjust or something to complain about.

Given that you will be far happier if you regard everything good that comes your way as a gift, why do so many people fall into the trap – and it is a trap – of thinking that they are entitled to have good things happen to them? I think the ultimate explanation is that people want to be in *control* of what happens to them, and from that point of view, thinking that you are entitled to this or that is very comforting – because by asserting that you are entitled to these things, and getting other people to acknowledge that you are entitled to those things, you hugely increase your chances that you will be given those things. So making more and more claims as to what you are entitled to is a way of getting more and more control over what happens to you.

I think this desire to be in control of what happens to you, while completely undesirable and one which I'm not immune to myself, is one of the worst desires someone can have, because it robs you of your happiness, in two ways. First – as we have just seen – it means you will never be grateful for any good things that happen to you because you will regard them as

things that were due to you anyway. Secondly, it is simply impossible to be in control of everything that happens to you, and that lack of control and how to overcome it will begin to obsess you and make it impossible for you to appreciate the things that you do have.

Our happy conclusion is that happiness is within your grasp, if you want to reach out and grab it. All you have to do is to give up the vain desire to be in control of everything that happens to you and start viewing your life as more like an adventure, where good and bad things will happen to you, and the only thing you have to do is react to those things in the right way. And when good things happen to you, think of them as gifts for which the only appropriate reaction is profound gratitude, and never think of them as something that you were entitled to all along.