
LESSONS IN GRATITUDE

From blueberry pancakes

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A trip to Plymouth

In October of 2018, My wife Cheri and I visited Plymouth Massachusetts. It was a great way to spend a Columbus day weekend. The trip allowed me to recharge in the midst of a busy ,but always fulfilling semester of college teaching. We were able to sample some nice restaurants ,take in a lot of the local historical sites such as Plymouth Rock , The Jenney Grist Mill, and Burial Hill . We also had a great visit with some friends in nearby Kingston. Not only was it a relaxing weekend, but a thought provoking one as well.

I'LL HAVE THE BLUEBERRY PANCAKES, PLEASE

Cheri and I decided to leave Plymouth early Sunday morning. We wanted to get back to our home in Upstate New York sometime in the afternoon. We would have Sunday to rest and go through our mail. Since I had Monday and Tuesday off from school, I could use that time to catch up on grading and review my scheduled lectures for the remainder of the week.

Before hitting the road, we decided to have breakfast at our hotel. We sat at a table adjacent to a booth occupied by an elderly woman, whom I will call Nell.



Nell was alone, and judging from the sparse crowd at that time of the morning, was not likely to be dining with anyone else. There were a couple of social groups who traveled to Plymouth for the Columbus Day weekend. We assumed that Nell was a member of one of those.

Because we were in such close proximity, without much effort, we were able to listen to her conversation with the waitress. Nell revealed that she lived alone in a New York City borough, where she maintained a small apartment. This woman marveled at the fact that her hotel room was cleaned every day and that there were fresh linens and towels provided as well. Nell told her waitress that she was being treated like a queen.

After mulling over some breakfast choices, in a sing song voice she stated, *"I'll have the blueberry pancakes, please"*

A short time later, Nell's waitress brought over a plate with four huge blueberry pancakes. In a voice that communicated awe and wonderment, Nell stated that she would never be able to finish them all.

ANOTHER POT OF WATER, NO EXTRA CHARGE

Nell also ordered tea to go along with her pancakes. The tea must've been good, because she wanted more. Before she committed, Nell asked the waitress if there would be an extra charge for a second pot of hot water. I found Nell's request a little odd, because I've never recalled paying extra for additional coffee or tea with my meal. Her waitress simply and without judgment told her that there would be no charge. Nell's reaction was priceless, as if some donor had anonymously dropped a million dollars in her lap.

During my trip back home, I began to reflect on what Nell taught me at breakfast earlier.

THE SIMPLEST THINGS

The amenities of the hotel that Nell marveled about are things that I have always taken for granted. In the several hotels I've stayed in over the years, hotel staff have always changed the sheets, vacuumed the room, and replenished the towels. It was service that I expected as part of the price I paid to stay; I never viewed it as something to be truly grateful for, like Nell did.

My encounter with Nell compelled me to think about gratitude and what that truly means. Here is what I discovered:

- That abundance is not measured by material things or the amount of money in your bank account. For Nell, abundance was measured by a generous stack of blueberry pancakes, clean linen and a free pot of hot water. Things that many of us, including me, have always taken for granted.

- That expressing gratitude for what we have is preferable to expressing entitlement over what we think we should have.
- That our willingness to show kindness to others has a positive trickledown effect to others. Nell's gratitude was not just for the meal that she received, but to her assigned waitress as well. I would have liked to find out how Nell's gratefulness for the service that she provided impacted that waitress' behavior towards others for the remainder of her Sunday.
- We never know the challenges of another, and a little kindness may make more of a difference in that person's life than we can ever imagine.

Since Nell was also older, I figured she was no stranger to loss either. She may have experienced the death of a spouse, sibling, or child, or perhaps all three at different times of her life. She was also alone, and that coupled with any losses she experienced could have caused her to be bitter and perhaps misanthropic. Instead she chose love, benevolence and gratitude.

We are never too old to change the road we are traveling, particularly when it leads to greater awareness of ourselves and our relationship to the world around us.

If we live long enough, we will not get through life unscathed. Our losses are part of our past, orchestrate our present, and determine our future. If we choose to first survive, and then thrive in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges, we can look at life through a different lens and find ourselves. The simplest things or those we take for granted have a greater impact on our lives and the lives of others.

David J. Roberts, LMSW, experienced the death of a child when his daughter Jeannine, 18, died of cancer in 2003. A retired addiction professional, he continues to teach psychology at Utica College in New York.