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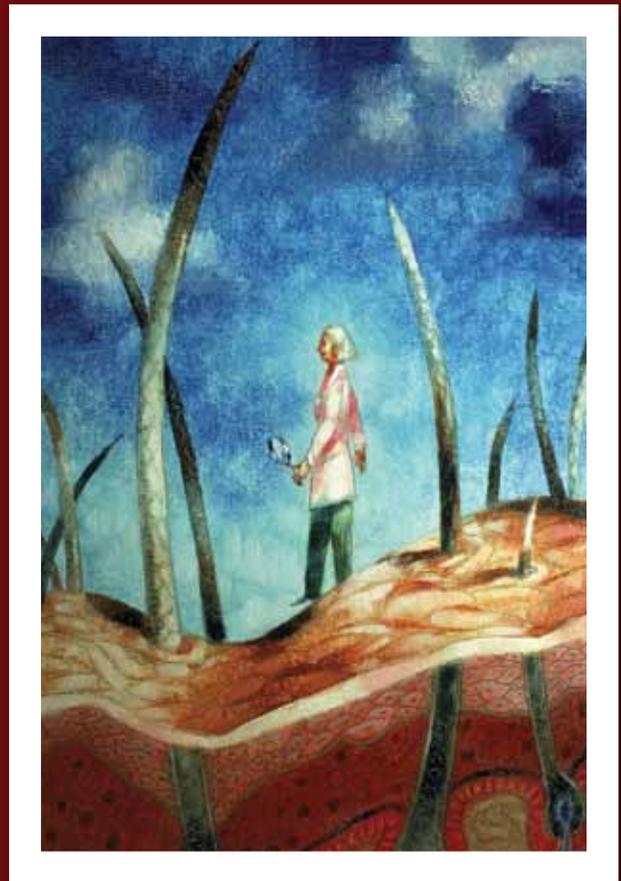
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The Difference We Make Reclaiming The Lost Art of Appreciation

By Steven K. Shama, MD, MPH

When was the last time you said thank you to someone and really meant it? Someone taught me years ago the lost art of appreciating someone's efforts, and I do so whenever I can and look forward to it. I'm talking about a simple thank you, followed by an explanation of what you are thanking the person for. If nothing else is gained (for example, the person doesn't seem to appreciate your thank you) at least it makes me feel good, and I like myself better for this act of recognition.

I am one of those weird people who thanks the Starbucks barista for being up at 5:30 AM on a holiday, no less, to serve me my cup of coffee. I am told that they are rarely thanked. I tell them how much I appreciate them while looking them in the eyes and with a tone that lets them know I mean it.

Of course, the first person I thank in the morning is myself. I don't believe you can truly appreciate some else until you appreciate yourself. Your cup has to be overflowing with gratefulness for simply being alive, for the many blessings you have, and for being someone who is doing his/her very best to make this world a better place. You can then start by giving away some of that wonderful energy.

It was William James, the 20th century philosopher and psychologist, who said, "Perhaps the greatest human need is to be appreciated." In surveys of the American worker, 65% feel that they are underappreciated. So what does this say for us and what we need to do, especially since we are the "captain of the ship" in our offices? In what ways can we appreciate those who visit and appreciate our staff members who work with us so intimately and in whom we place our trust?

We could start by giving a staff member a simple, "Thank you." The person would of course say, "For what?" And your reply would be something like, "For making my day so easy," "For smiling all the time," or "For always being on time."

You might say to a patient, "Thanks for doing what I asked you to do because your rash has cleared so nicely," or "For being you." I love the explanation you can give someone when they want to know why you are so full of compliments, and your reply is, "Just because." No other explanation needed. Just because.

"Just because" is what I said to a physician who I had called to thank for a great story he told at a recent meeting I attended. I had interrupted him during a busy day with my phone call, which he graciously answered. After I told him how appreciative of him I was for his touching story about how he missed his family while being away at the conference, he thanked me and then quickly asked, "So what did you call for?" I tried to tell him at least three times that my thanking him was the only reason for the call. When he

still could not believe that, I finally said, "Just because" and wished him a good day.

It is so unusual that we take the time to appreciate someone that when we do it people wonder what else is on our mind. They are typically wondering, "Why are you really saying what you are saying? What is your hidden agenda?"

If you want practice in finding ways to appreciate people and getting into the mood to appreciate others, may I suggest watching how people act when it is someone's birthday. People often will say beyond the expected happy birthday wish, "It is lovely to have you on the staff" or "It is a pleasure to have you as a patient." A birthday is one special celebration that allows us to appreciate someone else without an explanation. We need to imagine it is everyone's birthday every day and give ourselves permission to appreciate one another. Make others feel special, just because!

You may wonder what excuses people give for not appreciating others so often. Here are a few that I have heard: I'm too busy; they must know that they are already appreciated; my way of saying thank you is by paying them; I'm looking to correct, not compliment; I'm in a survival mode with no time to be nice; it makes me feel uncomfortable.

And when we do compliment, thank, or appreciate someone, we often do it in some impersonal, efficient way such as in an email, a short letter, or a phone call after hours, knowing full well that the person isn't there and thus avoiding a personal interaction.

It was Mark Twain who said, "I can live for two months on a good compliment." By one simple compliment you can positively change someone's day, week, month, year, or even a life! One simple "Thank you for being you." When you decide to express an appreciative thought, practice saying it long enough so that you believe yourself saying it!

May I suggest that you make a promise to yourself that you will thank at least one person today for something. It could be a family member, a friend, a colleague, a staff member, or a patient. Thank them for making someone else's life sweeter because they have lived. And tonight, when you end your day, look in the mirror and thank yourself for making this world a better place. 🗣️

Dr. Steve Shama was practicing general dermatology for 30 years in Boston, Massachusetts until last year. He retired at that time but continues in a 20 year career as a professional speaker and enjoys speaking on topics such as, "Dealing With Difficult People and Looking Forward To It!" and "Rediscovering The Joys of Medicine and of Life." He gives these talks at medical meetings, in private practices, and to general audiences and youth throughout the country. You can reach Dr. Shama at www.steveshama.com.