

Week 28: Learning How to Take a Compliment

It was the first staff meeting of the academic year at the practice where I used to work—more than twenty psychologists, therapists, and psychiatrists gathered in a circle—and I felt like crawling in a hole. Was I about to be reprimanded? No.

I was about to be *validated*.

In order to emphasize the value each of us brings to the treatment team, we were going around the circle and, for thirty seconds, each clinician would be showered with words of affirmation by the rest of the group. I would be the fifth to go and, as the people ahead of me were blessed by good words about who they are, I discovered it was easy to call out affirmations *for* my colleagues. But as I prepared myself to receive affirmation *from* them, I began to steel myself for the experience.

I wanted to put on armor.

Crack a joke.

Find a mask.

I wanted to *hide*.

There's a myth going around that we treat ourselves better than we treat everyone else. It is just that: a myth. Generally, it's way easier to sincerely *give* a compliment than to sincerely *receive* one. It's way easier to *give* others the good words they need than it is to *show* others how badly we need the good words they give *us*.

As my turn came and the good words began to roll in, I tried to look everyone in the eye and say, "Thank you." I did it because it's the polite thing to do, and I did it because, at some level, I was deeply grateful for these good people and these good words. But, I also realized, the way I was saying thank you with such solemnity actually reflected my distrust of the good things being said about me.

Maybe that's true for all of us.

We say thank you cautiously, because we don't believe they mean it. We say thank you desperately, because we're not sure we'll ever hear it again. We say thank you with surprise, because the good thing would never have occurred to us. And sometimes, perhaps, we say thank you just to fill the uncomfortable space created by the good words we have coveted for so long but dare not truly believe.

The night after the "circle of affirmation," I arrived home for dinner and Quinn, who was six at the time, greeted me at the door with a pile of his work from school. He shuffled through colorful drawings and writing assignments and math problems. I responded to him sincerely, and I told him how impressed I was by his hard work and attention to detail and creativity. I told him I thought he was pretty awesome.

And do you know what my son did? He didn't look pained or anxious. He didn't try to deflect or change the subject. He didn't mumble any false humility or pithy modesty. No, he simply broke into a big smile, and, as he walked away, he said one word: "Yeah."

Yeah.

No hiding. No dreading. No protecting. No cringing. Just a smile. Just receiving. Just a wide-open taking in. Just an allowing. My good words welcomed into his good heart, mingling and dancing in his soul.

We have amnesia for our awesomeness. But once upon a time, before our wounds and our world made us forget, we knew the good things were true. We believed them so thoroughly it didn't hurt to hear them. We believed them so completely we didn't need to say thank you as if we were at a funeral.

I know I have to teach my son to say "Thank you" because it's a social convention and we're social creatures and I want him to feel grateful for the good people around him. But a part of me hopes he'll never stop simply saying "Yeah" in his heart. A part of me hopes he will sit in a circle of his colleagues thirty years from now and not feel pain when good things are spoken into him.

I hope every single one of us will return to that place in our hearts, where we recognize the worthy creature we are, so that when love comes our way, we all might believe in ourselves enough to say, simply and sincerely: "Yeah." And when we say "Thank you," may it not be an expression of our disbelief but a way of saying thank you for showing up, thank you for seeing me, and thank you for celebrating the revelation of who I am.