

The Art of Encouragement

by Tom Walsh

One of the most positive things that's ever happened to me has been a subtle shift in my perspective and in my ways of dealing with other people. I've always felt rather intimidated by and isolated from others, so in my early years I spent a lot of time on my own, rather than calling a friend (or someone who might have become a friend) and asking him or her if he or she wanted to get together and do something. But as I've spent more time teaching and dealing with other people, I've learned that there's a great deal of need in this world, and the people who used to intimidate me now seem much more like me, and I can relate to them a great deal. Now I can honestly say that very few people intimidate me, no matter what their position or "status," and I now see them as a package of needs, just like I am. And I know that one of those needs is something that I can help with, whether I know the person or not.

That need is for encouragement. Something I realized a few years ago in one of those "Of course--I should have realized that all along!" moments is that encouragement is absolutely free. It doesn't cost me a cent to give it out, but its payoff is incredible. A brighter smile, improved performance on any sort of task, much more enjoyment in doing something--I see these in people constantly when I or someone else encourages them. I often read stories by adults who have succeeded in life largely in part because just one person saw their potential and encouraged them when they were younger, and they have never forgotten those people or their words. Wouldn't you love to feel that something like that would be possible with you as the remembered person? I know that I would, but unless I plant the seeds today, that sort of harvest will never come to pass.

One of the dynamics of encouragement is such that I rarely see any long-term results. Yes, I would like to know that I've had a positive long-term result on someone's life, but that's something that I have to let go of if my encouragement is to be sincere. I can't keep tabs, and write down all the times I give encouragement and then call someone ten years later and ask them if they remember the encouragement I gave them. That would be simply weird, and pretty obsessive. I have to trust that what I do I do for good, and that it will stay with people. Much of the encouragement that I give won't be remembered, but perhaps it can boost someone's esteem just enough so that the next time they're faced with a certain situation, they'll be able to do successfully what they need to do. Besides, I've invested nothing, remember? What I've given cost me nothing to give.

Remember that "encourage" means to give courage, and that it's the opposite of "discourage," or to take away courage.

I've learned that there are some rules to encouragement, though. In no particular order, here are some of them (I haven't learned them all yet):

1. Encouragement must be sincere. Without sincerity, encouragement is empty, and it borders on useless flattery. Encouragement's brother or sister is the compliment, and it's important that sincerity be the base of either. Saying "Great job!" to a kid who just did a poor job is obviously insincere and untruthful, while saying "Great try--now let's see if we can take this a bit farther" is much more sincere.

2. Encouragement must be realistic. We can't encourage the frail 15-year-old girl to try to become an offensive guard for the Minnesota Vikings, no matter how much she dreams of doing so. But we can recognize her other gifts and encourage her to be herself and follow her dreams. She has them.
3. Encouragement must be given some thought. If someone approaches me and says that she or he wants to get a divorce, I can't encourage her or him to get a divorce. I can't say "Go for it, if that's what you want!" But I can listen, and encourage this person to do what's in her or his heart, as long as they give a lot of thought to what they're doing (and in most situations, they do--and it's not up to me to say whether or not they've given enough thought).
4. We must not expect payback for encouragement. We shouldn't even expect a "thank you," as many people don't even realize that they're being encouraged. It should be given freely and fully, and through encouraging others we can practice the art of giving without expecting anything back. If you get positive feedback, it's a bonus, but if you expect people to acknowledge your words, you're on the wrong track, and you're trying to do more for yourself than for others.
5. We have to encourage people close to us as much as we encourage others. It's very easy to encourage someone we don't know well, as we haven't gotten to know their abilities and potential, so we don't know if they're living up to them. On the other hand, when we know someone such as a family member very well, it's easy to be more critical of what they do than supportive. We have to leave behind unrealistic expectations and look at potential, and not get frustrated if they don't live up to the potential completely. They still need encouragement, no matter how close they are to us.
6. We have to encourage ourselves. Everyone can benefit from encouragement, no matter what the source. We need it, too, and if we're not getting enough of it, we can give it to ourselves. Of course, we can't expect it to suffice if we're getting it only from ourselves, but we can make ourselves feel a great deal better by realistically encouraging ourselves to do our best and giving ourselves constant positive messages. "I can do this--I've done plenty of things that were more difficult" is a positive message--just be sure it's realistic! You wouldn't want to tell yourself this just before setting out to conquer Everest if you've never climbed a mountain before!
7. Encourage people to learn from their mistakes, and move on in their lives. Encourage them to leave behind the baggage that's accumulated--they can keep it as a memory, but not as a part of their everyday lives. Pain and mistakes happen, and we can use them to become better people (more sensitive, more compassionate, stronger), or we can let them determine who and how we are.

It's potentially one of the strongest forces in the world. And it's free--completely free. It doesn't cost me anything to encourage someone, but the payback down the road--a payback I'll probably never see--is more than worth the few seconds it may take for me to utter an encouraging word or three.

Can you imagine what this world would be like if everyone were to try to be encouraging?

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