

Give praise only when warranted

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By James N. Myers Community Board of Contributors

"IF|YOU|CAN'T|SAY|SOME-thin' nice, don't say nothin' at all" was the way Thumper relayed his mother's command in the 1942 Disney version of Bambi. It is good advice, and most of us try to follow it. However, I have often wished that Thumper's mom had put more emphasis on the "say nothin'" part and less on "somethin' nice."

While a measured amount of self-esteem is certainly a good thing, excessive praise can be destructive. Perhaps I give Thumper too much blame for the rampant use of excessive congratulation, but we do live in an age where praise of the commonplace in the name of political correctness does seem to have won the day.

As I go through my day, I receive numerous unearned and unwanted compliments on small matters that require no notice at all--this because I have an obvious physical handicap. It is usual for people with disabilities to be admired for any number of trivial things.

It is not uncommon for me to receive compliments for successfully signing my name on a credit card receipt, for picking up change off a counter, or for managing to eat a meal without spilling it down the front of my shirt. The people who deliver these compliments are simply following Thumper's maxim. They are trying to be nice and attempt to build my self esteem. In turn, I have learned to accept the compliments graciously, as they were intended.

I must admit that I craved such notice as a young person. I remember taking countless ordinary front dives from a 3-meter platform at a local public swimming pool. My diving almost always drew a crowd, and I could hear them talking quietly about how amazing I was. The notoriety was sweet at the time.

As I grew older, however, I realized that it wasn't the quality of my diving that was of interest. Instead the observers thought that the fact that I could dive and swim at all was surprising and noteworthy. It was somewhat like the story of the singing dog whose singing was not so good, but it was amazing that he sang at all. So, when the sales clerk says, "You signed that check better than I could have myself," I cringe a little, smile, and say, "Thanks."

The problem with noticing a person's disability at the same time you are offering a compliment is that there is always the implication (often unintended) that what the person has done was done well "for a handicapped person" but is otherwise rather ordinary.

Not long ago a concert artist was featured at a local musical event. Each time the concert was advertised on the radio, the artist's handicap "from birth" was advertised as well. The advertising raised the question whether one ought to go to the concert because the music would be good or because the listener would be inspired that such a person could make music at all. The concert promoters had no such intention, I am sure, but then why did they mention the disability?

Recently I went to the Dayton Art Institute for another of its wonderful special exhibitions. This one was "Form from fire: Glass Sculpture by Dale Chihuly." It was so good that I intend to return to see it again, at least one more time.

At the end of my visit to the exhibit, I stopped to see a film about the creation of the sculpture and noticed that Chihuly has only one eye. When I returned home, I read the article about the exhibit in my DAI Member Quarterly. Refreshingly, the art institute had not referred to Chihuly's handicap. The sculpture is not great because it was produced by a one-eyed artist. It is simply wonderful sculpture.

It is a difficult thing to hit just the right note when trying to be politically correct or sensitive. One wants to give credit to those who have overcome difficulties in order to achieve something noteworthy. However, it is almost impossible to mention the difficulties without cheapening the accomplishment itself. So when it comes to whether to note a handicap, I vote for saying nothin' at all.

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