

How Full is Your Bucket?

My wife and I attended a high school graduation party yesterday. While there, I spied a young man whom I remembered as having acted in the high school's recent production of "Fiddler on the Roof." I went up to him and said, "I saw you in 'Fiddler' recently, didn't I? I almost didn't recognize you without your beard." He smiled at being remembered, and I then told him how much I had enjoyed his performance -- all three performances, in fact. (My stepson had a small role in the play, and so we took in as many performances as we could.) He absolutely beamed. Turning to a friend, he said, "Hey! He just made my day!" I was surprised at his exclamation, because he looked like he was already having a pretty good day.

I recently read a wonderful little book, entitled "How Full Is Your Bucket? Positive Strategies for Work and Life," by Tom Rath and his grandfather, the late Donald Clifton, Ph.D. (Clifton is known as "The Father of Strengths Psychology" and "The Grandfather of Positive Psychology," for his pioneering work with SRI Gallup on finding and building on personal and organizational strengths.)

The book's theme is that each of us is equipped with a *bucket* (in which our supply of positive emotions is stored) and a *dipper* (which we use to fill or deplete other people's buckets). All of us know life-affirming people who seem always to be filling up others' buckets with praise, smiles, generous acts, speaking well of others, etc. Sadly, we also know people who deplete, rather than fill, others' storehouses of positive emotions. (Such folks are sometimes called "toxic" or "sourpusses" or "downers," as well as names.)

The authors cite research showing that full buckets are associated with many positive outcomes: greater happiness, closer relationships, higher productivity and creativity, more effective decisions, lower stress, and greater ability to rebound from adversity (i.e., resilience). There's even strong evidence that positive emotions lead to better health and longer life! Don't we want all those outcomes for our clients, work associates, friends, family, and ourselves? In our more generous moments, don't we want those outcomes for *everyone*?

The bucket-and-dipper model provides a visual image that we can use as we go about our lives, to help us (a) enrich others and (b) enrich and fortify ourselves. The research also shows that (a) and (b) are mutually-reinforcing:

if we fill others' buckets, we find ourselves enriched and enhanced in turn. This is because we have set in motion a virtuous cycle of positivity: a real case of "what goes around, comes around."

Yesterday's interaction with that young actor perfectly illustrated a virtuous cycle, because his reaction told me I had filled his bucket, and his response - telling me I had just made *his* day -- pretty much made *mine*.

Sadly, the converse is also true: if we disparage, deplete, or diminish others, we are not only dipping from their buckets but from ours as well. All of us know sourpusses who delight in others' misery (either causing it or giving reports to others about it). And in our own sour moods, we can have that same bucket-diminishing effect. It always sets in motion *vicious* cycles.

We can use our dipper to increase others' buckets (and thereby fill our own), or we can use it to reduce others' happiness and future resiliency (and, of course, our own). The authors' bucket-and-dipper metaphor is a vivid and compelling image, and their admonition about "*the choice is ours, in each moment*" is very powerful. I've used it lately to guide me in speaking helpfully, acting generously, and refraining from sour words and acts. I'm not always able to catch myself but I'm getting better at it, guided by that mental image of my bucket-and-dipper set. It's amazing what a little self-restraint can do, in freeing up the better angels of our nature.

So, how full is *your* bucket? And how can you fill it, by filling others' buckets?

This week, be aware of each time you fill others' buckets and each time you dip from theirs; observe what happens as a result of your action. And likewise, be aware each time you witness bucket filling and bucket depleting, and observe how those situations turn out. I wish you a wonderful week of filling others' buckets and allowing them to fill yours -- and keeping your dipper out of their buckets!