A Debt of Gratitude

By Theodore Dalrymple

No doubt it is rather peculiar, but whenever I see a grain of rice left on a plate, or a few crumbs scattered on a tablecloth, I think of those who were taken prisoner by the Japanese during the war and nearly starved to death. One day, I think, I might be glad of that grain of rice or that scattering of crumbs. I have an almost visceral aversion to waste of food.

This is odd, because I have never had to go without food myself, except once when I suffered from hepatitis and had no appetite for it anyway, and once when I was crossing Africa by public transport and there was nothing available for me to eat for three days in the Zairean jungle.

But this peculiarity of mine is of long date, going back to an account when I was very young given me by an older second cousin who had been a prisoner of war, and who had suffered horribly from deprivation. It was reinforced some years later by meeting Dr. J.E. Nardini, an American doctor who had been a prisoner of the Japanese taken in the Philippines at the outset of the war in the Pacific. Half of his unit died of starvation, and when he was liberated, he himself was suffering severely from the nutritional disease beriberi. He was only a fraction of his normal weight, and it was not certain that he would survive even after liberation. Six years later, he wrote an important paper, “Survival factors in American prisoners of war of the Japanese,” in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*.

He said something to me that has stayed with me for more than forty years. In the context of his whole life, he said, he was glad to have lived through so terrible an experience because it gave him a standard of comparison by which all other suffering was trivial, and this in turn had allowed him to meet difficulties with equanimity. Nothing that he was likely to suffer again was remotely comparable.

He did not, of course, recommend such an experience as a means to achieve equanimity, or fail to recognize the sheer horror of what he had witnessed and lived through; he did not mean to imply that the death of half his unit was worthwhile so that he might attain his stoic calm, only that he had found the experience of some use for the rest of his days, in the way, perhaps, that Charles Dickens' experiences in the blacking factory as a child were a source of both pain and inspiration to him for the rest of his life.

I think of Dr. Nardini when I see my grain of rice or scattering of crumbs, but also when I am losing my temper over some minor bureaucratic idiocy by which I, like everyone else in the modern world, am sometimes plagued. It is not an invariably successful technique, but it does sometimes help to calm me down. The fact is that bureaucrats, even the most stupid ones, are human, and have their sorrows and troubles.

Last week, I went to the doctor's office for an appointment. My doctor is a member of a group practice. My wife arrived a few minutes later, but the receptionist wouldn't tell her where I was because I hadn't signed a form giving consent for the receptionist to give out this information, even though she recognized that my wife was my wife and she, the receptionist, knew where I was.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant said that one should not tell a lie about a person's whereabouts to someone who asks for it, even if one knows that that person is intent on murder. This, of course, is an absurd view, but the receptionist in the

doctor’s office took an equally absurd view, perhaps because she thought my wife might have come to murder me, which goes to show that often the opposite of absurdity is not good sense but a different absurdity.

My wife was able to locate me by telephone, and the recollection of Dr. Nardini helped me to laugh at the absurdity rather than be angry at it, as I might otherwise have done. And this in turn assisted me to put myself, or to try to put myself, in the position of the receptionist, whose job consisted largely in the application of rules and procedures that she did not lay down herself and from which she did not dare deviate—a situation in which a large proportion of humanity finds itself.

By yet another association, I realized how fortunate I had been in life. I have never had merely or thoughtlessly to follow other people’s rules in my life, as the receptionist had to do, but have always had a liberal dose of self-determination: not total, of course, but with a greater dose than befalls the lot of most people. The wrong turnings in my life have been largely of my own doing, my miseries of my own making, which I suppose is one definition of freedom. I have never been oppressed and have never been denied anything in an unjust fashion. I have failed to take opportunities that came my way, and knowingly done things that were, if not quite self-destructive, at least not to my ultimate advantage, but I cannot blame anyone else for this. I have never been made to suffer anything remotely comparable to what Dr. Nardini suffered.

I feel grateful, though I am not sure to whom or to what. Whether you can feel grateful without being grateful to some responsible being I am not sure; can you really thank your lucky stars? I have been writing, in very desultory fashion, a memoir of the dead whom I have known, that is to say the people whom I have known who have died. I doubt that I shall ever publish it (the list is growing and accelerating in

length); but one thing that has stood out for me is how fortunate I have been in my personal acquaintances. I cannot recall ever having been the victim of human malignity and, on the contrary, have received much kindness. I have known terrible people, but not close up enough to affect me.

Of late, I have thought of what I should like my epitaph to be: perhaps “He was not a nuisance.”

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