

Count Your Blessings:

An Important Life Lesson From a Restroom Attendant

Dr. Thompson's Mentoring Tip for the Week

March 11, 2013

Dear Colleague:

If you've been reading my weekly mentoring essays for untenured faculty and graduate students, by now, you know that I love to sing—even though many folks believe that I have a horrible singing voice. But who cares what they think? Because singing always cheers me up, I'm going to keep singing until I can't sing anymore. Speaking of singing, one of the songs that was popular in the churches that I attended during my childhood was called "Count Your Blessings." The first lines are:

Count your blessings.

Name them one by one.

Count your blessings.

Name them one by one.

Count your blessings.

Name them one by one.

Count your many blessings,

And see what God has done.

The words of this song summarize my message to you this week: "Count your blessings!" If you're wondering why you should even bother to count your blessings, or

are having difficulty thinking of aspects of your life for which to be thankful, the following information may be useful to you.

I'm not religious, so why does this week's mentoring essay have religious overtones?

In the Academy, a place where many individuals get upset about the mention of "God," or anything that smacks of religion, I realize that this week's mentoring topic might disturb you. So, let me recount the story that prompted me to select this week's topic.

Last week, I had a layover at the airport in Charlotte, North Carolina. At the time, I was heading to Atlanta to give a presentation at the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education Conference. Although I usually meet interesting individuals during my travels, the last place where I expected to do so was in a restroom in the airport's Terminal B. But that's where it happened.

As soon as I entered the restroom, singing greeted my ears. I quickly realized that the melody was coming from the restroom attendant, a silver-haired African American woman. "May you have a blessed day. May you have a safe journey," she sang over and over again, as she cleaned the restroom counter and stalls. Periodically, she stopped singing to address a traveler, and then, she'd quickly resume her singing.

Unlike the other travelers, who appeared to ignore her, I *had* to say something. "Thank you for being so cheerful," I said. Her reply surprised me: "Honey, I *have* to be cheerful. You see, I *just* buried my father a few days ago. He died in a house fire while trying to save the life of his friend." After my shock subsided, I asked her several questions, and long after I boarded the airplane, I kept thinking about the message that

she had conveyed to me: “Life is short. Life can be very painful. Although we can’t control everything that happens to us, we can decide how we’ll handle life’s setbacks.” Because this woman made such a profound impact on me, I was “itching” to tell others about her. That’s why I chose “Count your blessings,” as this week’s topic. The next point is related to what I learned from her.

Why should I bother to “count my blessings?”

Another lesson that I learned from the Charlotte airport restroom attendant was, how blessed I am. When I was a teenager, I used to clean people’s houses and clean office buildings, but today, I have a “cushy” job. Since my mentoring essay audience consists mostly of higher education faculty, then, you probably also have an enviable job.

As I’ve stated in previous essays, “working in the Academy,” can be challenging to say the least. Balancing personal responsibilities and professional obligations, including, teaching, writing, student advising, preparing lesson plans, and serving on committees can be extremely difficult. In fact, in *Exposing the Culture of Arrogance in the Academy: A Blueprint for Increasing Black Faculty Satisfaction* (Thompson & Louque, 2005), nearly 60 percent of the faculty (N =136) who completed the questionnaire on which the book is based, identified “time management” as one of the most difficult aspects of their jobs. Furthermore, nearly 70 percent identified “time for research,” 58 percent identified “time for course preparation,” and 55 percent identified the “teaching load,” to be among “The Ten Most Difficult Aspects of ‘Life’ in the Academy.” In spite of this, those of us who are employed full time in academia, have jobs that have more perks than most other jobs. So, on the days, when you’re feeling

glum, remember, that you could be cleaning smelly restrooms. Counting your blessings is a way to focus on the bright side of life. It's a concerted effort to be optimistic, especially during times when it's easy to adopt a pessimistic mindset.

I'm still having trouble thinking of blessings to count. Can you give me a few other examples?

Blessing One: A Shorter Work Day

If you're an untenured faculty who is feeling overworked, overwhelmed, and anxious about the tenure and promotion process, you aren't alone. I hear similar stories often. Nevertheless, the fact that most faculty don't have to work traditional nine-to-five-hour jobs five days per week is something for which to be thankful. Moreover, even faculty who work five days per week, usually don't have to work for eight full hours.

Blessing Two: More Days Off

In addition to having a shorter workweek than most full-time employees, higher education faculty have more vacation time than other employees: inside of and outside of the Academy. A week-long Spring Break, a two-week Winter Break, and a Summer Break that lasts for at least two months are definitely blessings worth counting. They're also perfect opportunities to devote extra time to writing projects, developing conference proposals, and creating grant proposals! With this in mind, how can anyone complain that there's not enough time to write?

Blessing Three: Numerous Opportunities to Become Influential

Because writing and publishing are requirements for tenure and promotion, you can choose to use your writing agenda to improve social conditions, recommend solutions to problems, and impact programs and policies. This means that you're in a key position to become influential on a local, regional, national, and even global level, and that's a blessing that's definitely worth counting.

Blessing Four: Mentoring Opportunities

In addition to the possibility of influencing policies, programs, and social conditions through your research agenda, you're also in a position to affect future generations. Through your teaching, you're making either a positive impact or a negative one on your students every time you lecture, assign work, give written feedback, or advise students. If you strive to make a positive impact, some of your students may follow in your footsteps by eventually becoming higher education faculty. Others may become motivated to write a ground-breaking book or article, or to become a phenomenal K-12 school teacher or administrator. This puts you in a powerful position, and that's another blessing that's worth counting.

Now It's Your Turn: A Writing Exercise

Please list five additional blessings for which you should be thankful.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

5.

Conclusion

I hope that you'll continue to count your blessings on a daily basis and update your list, because everyone has something for which to be thankful. If a restroom attendant who had recently buried her 91-year-old father could sing and speak positive affirmations to strangers, surely we can all find ways to be thankful for many aspects of our lives. Doing so may help us to put the vicissitudes of life into proper perspective, and might even lift our spirits on days when we're feeling less than ideal. Being optimistic might also make the remainder of the academic year less stressful. With this in mind, hang in there, have a great week, **keep writing**, and be on the lookout for next week's mentoring advice.

Blessings and peace,

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