

Ripples of a Kindness Remembered

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I saw her that Spring Saturday as I rode my bicycle up the hill in front of her home. She looked to be about 11 as she sat in the bright morning sun behind her homemade lemonade stand. Since I love to support young entrepreneurs, I stopped to purchase a cup. As she handed it to me she explained the lemonade was free. I thanked her for her kindness and enjoyed the drink. A few moments later I resumed my training ride, a smile on my face as I continued to appreciate her unexpected gift. That's when the ripples began. Now, some three years later, I still enjoy the ongoing ripples from her simple kindness. Let me explain.

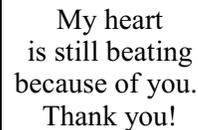
Every time I pass by her family's home, my face breaks into another big smile as I remember her gift that Saturday. The cycling route that I rode that morning is one I use regularly throughout the year to help stay in shape, so I have enjoyed many ripples from her kindness that day. Psychologists refer to this as an example of a *state dependent memory*. Some aspect of a current event triggers the remembrance of a prior event. Most anything can take on this triggering capacity. It can be a visual symbol associated with a product, the scent of a perfume, or a few musical notes from an old rock song, to name just a few. These memory fragments can work to trigger a shift in one's emotions in a myriad of directions such as anger, frustration, sadness, joy, helplessness, fear, curiosity, or delight.

Thousands of memories stored in our brains are indexed or sorted in many ways, such as by emotional content. When a person's mood or emotion changes, the brain tends to bring back into consciousness other memories that have that same emotion in common. Like throwing a small stone into the calm water of a pond, the feelings associated with what is happening right now create ripples that bring to mind other memories that included similar feelings. While mood changes are often triggered by something or someone else, you can intentionally initiate the same process yourself.

I was reminded of this truth on a ride earlier this summer. I had noticed at the outset that both my physical and emotional reserves were lower than I like, and the sky was threatening rain. Clearing the green light at the top of the first hill on my ride, I began settling into the hypnotic-like experience that cycling affords. Eight miles later as I turned on to her street, I felt my mood shift once again as it has so many times these past three years. "Lighter" is not a word typically associated with pedaling up a long hill, so I especially enjoyed the sudden lightness in my mood.

As I shifted gears to match the hilly terrain, I invited my mind to do the same, to revisit other memories that matched the pleasant shift in my mood. Maybe the flower garden I happened to be passing influenced the selection of the next ripple. This one sent me back in my own adolescence on an afternoon when the florist had come by to deliver a box to my older sister sent by her boyfriend. I sat on the stairs and watched with curiosity as she opened it. Her eyes moist with tears, she looked up at me and said gently, "Pay heed, little brother, the power of a single rose."

I don't think I ever told her, even years later, that I did. I would now, but she died in 2002, four years after developing a very aggressive breast cancer. A couple of years later, my brother persuaded me to ride with him in my first Pan Massachusetts Challenge, a cycling fund raiser for the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute¹. That's where the next ripples led me. Every year along the roughly 190 mile route, thousands of people come out to share their support and appreciation of our fund raising efforts. Along the route last year, a woman who looked to be in her early 30's stood alone at the side of the road with her sign that read:



My heart
is still beating
because of you.
Thank you!

Making eye contact with me as I approached, she gently tapped her closed hand on her heart several times with a look of appreciation and gratitude that will stay with me for years.

I savored each of these memories as I crested the hill past where the lemonade stand had been. Instead of dreading the remaining 17 miles of hilly terrain, I was aware that both my emotional and physical fatigue had dissipated with the ripples. My spirits lifted, I turned the corner and began to wonder how many more ripples I would enjoy before this ride was over.

Now that I've finally written this simple tale, I plan to share it with that young entrepreneur. I'd also like to share it with the woman who stood by the side of the road last year. As is so often the case in life, I doubt either of them realize the many ripples that have come from their unexpected kindness. I never told my sister. I want to make up for that.

¹ Over 5,200 cyclists raised \$35,000,000 that year for cancer research and treatment at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. With the 31st ride in 2010, the total now exceeds a quarter billion dollars.