The Good Things We Don’t Say
By Brian Willoughby
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A good friend of mine told me this story:

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I’ve had a very dear friend for the past eight years. Our families became extensions of one another, and we spent a ton of time together. We had some boundary issues that crept in, and I kept my frustrations about this to myself. The issues, unspoken, became more and more irritating because I let them fester inside me instead of addressing them honestly. I found myself pulling away rather than facing the problem. The distance continued to grow over a year and became rather heartbreaking. I missed my friend, and she wondered what happened to our friendship. There came a critical situation where I had to make a choice as to whether to face these problems and resolve them with her or walk away completely from the friendship. There was a walking date scheduled so we could talk things over. When I saw her and heard her heartache over the loss of our friendship, I was immediately grateful for having written down and brought along the list of things I appreciated and loved about her. I gave this list to her and watched her become overwhelmed with gratitude, and I saw our friendship heal on the spot. From that point of mutual appreciation, we were able to talk about the problems in a safe and loving way. We not only healed our long-time friendship, we strengthened it. We found a deeper respect and understanding for one another. It was one of the most significant events of my life actually. It taught me that a great place – likely the best place – to start from is a place of appreciation for the people in my life.

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What if my friend had ignored that 4 a.m. inspiration? What if she had instead started from a point of frustration or anger? What if she wrote the list, but didn’t share it, didn’t have that talk, simply let things drift apart? There are so many ways good might not have happened here.

I’m guessing most of us don't routinely write down the good things we feel about family and friends. And many of us don't say these things as often as we could. And some of us, or those around us, don't really say them at all. In fact, too often, we're more comfortable, and more willing, to share the negatives, to point out what is wrong, rather than to celebrate – out loud – what is right.

The saying-it part of this equation is something I struggle with. I’ve got the thinking-it part down.

I’m daydreaming, or I’m driving somewhere, or I’m just *there*, and something good crosses my mind about someone I know.

He’s kind, even in tough moments.

She’s one of the most generous people I’ve ever known.

She routinely saves me from myself.

He’s taught me to be a better person.

I think these things all the time, and yet I say them only some of the time. Far too frequently, I keep them to myself. Not out of selfishness. Just out of absentmindedness or shyness or awkwardness or busy-ness or some other –ness.

And so here we are today.

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There was an experiment I read about a few months ago.

Some researchers called in volunteers. They tested the subjects to determine a current level of happiness. Then they asked these subjects to write a
letter to the person who has been most influential in their lives, the person who has had the biggest, most positive impact.

Once the letter was written, the subjects then were asked to call the person – a mother, a sister, a co-worker, a friend, a grandfather, a teacher – and read the letter aloud. When asked to take this step, the test subjects appeared uncomfortable, somewhat hesitant; it was clear this isn’t something we’re asked to do on a regular basis.

But through smiles and tears, they carried out this next step.

Then the researchers did a post-test – with different questions but aimed at the same target, to determine each test subject’s level of happiness.

The result?

Happiness levels rose between 4 and 19 percent, with the least happy people (at pre-test) showing the greatest increases.

Simply put, we are less happy when we don’t say these nice things to the people around us – and more happy when we do.

When I discovered this test, and looked into it more deeply, I was struck by the connection to one of our UU principles. *We are part of the interdependent web of all existence.* This practice – telling people the good things we feel about them – strengthens that web. Of that, I am certain.

Here’s a recent moment when I felt that strength:

There was a day in December when I was standing in the Sanctuary, right over there [gesture], talking with Jan Jewett about this and that – family, church work, the weather, whatever. And Jan said, "You’ve done a good job." Thinking she was talking about church work, I immediately discounted her words – you know that kind of response. *"Oh, the others did most of the work; I just showed up to meetings."*

Something like that. And Jan smiled, because she’s wiser than me in so many ways, so she smiled and touched my arm and said, "No. I’m not talking about that. I mean with your kids. You've done a good job raising them." And I tell you, it pierced my heart – a good piercing! Jan’s words weren’t required or demanded or expected. They were simply a gift.

I teared up when she clarified the remark, and I just said, "Thank you." (I may have said thank you several times. And I may have actually cried.)

I’m a word guy, and I can’t put into words what that moment meant to me, how it breathed hope and energy and goodness into my soul. Well, maybe I can put it into words … but they aren’t sufficient. Jan’s words stayed with me that night, into the next day, up until now – and, I’m certain, beyond this moment.

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So that brings up another piece of this saying-good-things puzzle. How to accept a compliment – something that causes too many of us to stumble.

I’m going to make it easy for you. It takes just two words. *Thank you.*

If someone compliments you, says something nice to you, praises one of your many talents or attributes, just say, "Thank you." Don’t deflect it, don't belabor it, don't ignore it, and don't deny it.

"Thank you."

"Thank you."

"Thank you."

It's as easy – and as profound – as that.

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I say easy, but none of this is truly easy. IAs with many things, it can be practiced and made to feel more comfortable. But it can feel risky to say something nice to someone else. What if they react poorly? What if they make me feel awkward or silly for saying it? What if they're not as grateful as I'd like? What if? What if?

I talked to another friend about that, and here’s what she said:

*I'm thinking of times I held back a compliment, and how it bugs me that I didn't say anything because too many people are ready to complain about*
things, and I don’t think people hear enough genuine good things about themselves.

I think often it’s easier to say nice things to people you don’t know as well. Maybe it’s a test market to see if it goes over well before you “share” with those closer to you, because if you get a non-reaction from a loved one, it’s a little painful – after all, you’ve put yourself out there, exposed yourself in a sense, but with a stranger, or someone you care less about, the risk is lower.

She goes on:

So I'm thinking about my Dad who is not an emotional guy. It is extremely difficult to simply say "I love you" to him, while those three words can be said more easily to others in the family. Isn't that funny (as in weird, funny)? But the few times I have said it, it has been received with a warm grin and once with a very heartfelt "I love you, too." You’d think it would, at that instant, make it easier from then on to say it, but not so.

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But not so.

Why don’t we say these good things about each other? And even if we do say them sometimes, why don’t we do so more often? Every day.

Certainly there are many reasons, some of them as specific and individual as each of us. I want to explore a few more common reasons.

One reason: We think someone already knows. OK. Maybe that person does already know. But what loss is there in reminding her? Better yet, what gain? And what if – shockingly – we’re wrong? What if that person doesn’t know? What if her insecurity or some other foible leaves her doubtful or unknowing? What then?

Another reason: We’re world-changers, we UUs. Our eyes and minds and hearts sometimes gravitate toward what is wrong, what needs fixing. Make the world a better place. It’s part of our children’s affirmation, words I try to live up to. But making the world a better place isn’t just fixing wrongs. It’s also cementing – and growing and deepening – what is right, what is good.

Another reason: We think constructive criticism is helpful, whether or not it’s sought by the person we’re addressing – and, interestingly, whether or not it is effective. We think or say, “I’m doing this for your own good.” So we point out someone’s flaws in order to “help” that person grow. There is a place for that, but it may be a much smaller place than we imagine. That term – constructive criticism? I think we added the descriptor to make criticism more palatable. What if we shifted our paradigm on that? What if we made every effort to offer constructive praise? What would that look like?

Another reason: The busy-ness of the day, any day, every day, consumes us. Or we let it consume us. We’re so focused on our to-do lists that we let moments and opportunities pass. We’re running too fast to notice that those around us could use a boost. And we’re running so fast we forget to boost ourselves by connecting, genuinely connecting, with those around us.

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So I’m going to try something here. I’m going to step out of my own comfort zone and do something slightly unexpected – the very thing I’ve been speaking of today.

I’m not sure who is here, and who is not, so this is as much about putting it out in the universe as about a specific person hearing a specific set of words.

Here goes:

Jerry King: You’re not here anymore, physically, but you remain here, in so many hearts. I want to tell you what I never had a chance to tell you, that you served as a role model for me of the kind of man I aspire to be. I'm still aspiring, and you're still with me as a guide. Thank you.

Quinn McCray: You were comfortable enough in your own skin to take a writing class I taught where the average age was probably 60. And you blew me away, with the power of your writing, the depth of your emotion, the keenness of your voice and vision. Thank you.

Angie Lindquist: You are so kind. Every encounter I have with you – even the simplest of hellos
accompanied by your sweet smile – I leave feeling better for having spent a moment with you. Thank you.

Jennifer Pratt-Walter: A CD of your music sustained my family when we were far from home and suffering greatly. Thank you.

Donna Aase: You live in this world so gently, and I admire that. It's profound, and it makes the world a better place. Thank you.

Elisa Wells: You bring all your integrity to everything you do. I'm better for knowing you. Thank you.

Gerardo Gutierrez: You devote so much time to working with our young people. Thanks for that, and thank you for your support of my daughter.

Karen Reid: A couple of your hallway hugs sustained me in profound ways. Thank you.

Katlin Smith: In a vital moment, you gave me excellent advice, and I did not follow it. And you never said “I told you so.” Thank you.

Karen Valbuena: You bolster me in even the smallest of interactions. You hold me up. Thank you.

Preston Seu: Your quiet kindness speaks volumes to your character, and it does not go unnoticed. Thank you.

Kristine Levy: When we sing "Spirit of Life," and you sing the descant, it moves me in profound ways. Thank you.

Nora Siegfried: Way back when I was new here, and feeling disconnected, you invited me to join the planning team for the annual Tenebrae service. It was my first moment of belonging here, and it made me feel a part of things. Thank you.

Kate Rae: You are quietly hysterical, and you make me smile. Thank you.

Clancy Kelly: In a meeting once, where we were asked to describe ourselves as an animal, you said you were a wolf, circling the group, protecting our children. It’s an image that has stayed with me, and I appreciate you for it. Thank you.

Penny Slingerland: When I grow up, I want to be as patient and as gracious as you. Thank you.

Jennifer Gallagher: You are a wayfinder. I have come to you in moments of confusion, and you have helped me find clarity. Thank you.

Sage Smith: I love your spirit. In just a handful of interactions, you have moved me to a deeper understanding of this world. Thank you.

Karl Anderberg: You bring freshness and light into every room you enter. Thank you.

Sue and Skip Morey: The graceful partnership of your union is lovely to see. It makes me smile. Thank you.

I could go on. I could go on and on. And that’s a lovely thing about this place, a place that has welcomed me back a number of times, after my wanderings, a place that knows me at my worst and still accepts me, a place that feels like home.

So thank all of you.

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I want to share a final story, this one from a friend who used to live here and has moved away. She says it better than I could ever paraphrase it:

My story is about Todd, my fiancé. When we first met I saw how orderly and system-oriented his mind worked. I marveled at all he built and what his interest in science had led him to create. For many people, his attention to detail would be overwhelming: his watching of solar forecasts every morning; his checking his own gauges to track any overnight changes; his yearly charting of first freeze and snowfall, highest wind gusts and many other things. But as I got to understand how his systems all worked together, all I could do was say to him, "I am astounded how your mind works, and it is pure joy to see you thinking."

This floored him.

His whole life, he had been told that he was wrong, not normal, OCD and a misfit, that no one would be interested in what he was thinking. My comment opened his own perspective to himself; he
celebrated the gift of his brain and his life; it changed him from feeling outcast to thriving.

All that from just one comment.

The night he asked me to marry him, he said that no one had ever understood and accepted how he thinks until he met me, and that it has been the best thing that ever happened to him.

He is 57 and finally happy to be who he is. I wish someone had told him earlier what an amazing gift he is.

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I stand in a roomful of amazing gifts.

All of you.

Each of you.

I challenge you to celebrate one another, both here and beyond these walls. To speak the good things you might otherwise only think. To say it out loud, and directly. To make the world a better place.

Thank you.

BENEDICTION:

What if for a week, or for a month – or forever – we routinely said out loud the good things we thought about the people around us? What if we didn’t let fear or awkwardness or busy-ness be a barrier to that? What a world that would be.

May it be so.