



Filling in the blanks

Nothing can cause someone's spirit to dry up and shrivel more than the feeling they're unappreciated.

BY JIM CAMPBELL

Half way through the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, which is set in a traditional Jewish village in Russia, Tevye, the long-suffering father of three daughters, asks his wife in song, "Golde, do you love me?"

At such a question, Golde assumes Tevye must be sick or something. "For 25 years I washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, gave you children, milked the cow; after 25 years, why talk of love now?"

Tevye persists in asking – over and over he says, "Do you love me?" until Golde finally says, "For 25 years I lived with him,

fought with him, starved with him, 25 years my bed is his – if that's not love, what is?"

To that Tevye said, "Then you love me!"

"I suppose I do," Golde replied.

So Tevye says, "And I suppose I love you."

The song ends as they sing together, "It doesn't change a thing, but even so, after 25 years, it is nice to know."

It is a touching moment in the musical. However, the last line strikes a false note. Acknowledging their love for each other did make a difference. That is why Tevye

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persisted in asking his wife, “Do you love me?” It was important to know.

We need to know if we are appreciated, cared for, loved and recognized. Kind words are the food of our spirits. That is why we can say that someone is starved of affection. We need each other; we need to feed each other’s spirits.

You see, words constitute the most natural way we interact with others. Words are the lubricant of human encounter, the main vehicle through which we express feelings, explain ideas and experiences. We use words to build understanding and to comfort one another.

There is a firm idea that primitive people, the cave dwellers of long ago, communicated through grunts and body language, by jumping up and down and pointing. This idea persists even though every group of people we’ve discovered on remote islands or deep in jungles have all had complex languages. It seems that having a rich language is a basic element in being human, the essential ingredient in having a community, a society.

Talking is important. And yet you’ll hear people say, “It goes without saying.” Which means that there are things that should, by observation, be crystal clear and easily understood and don’t need a lot of words and explanations. (You have probably noticed that the words, “It goes without saying,” are often the prelude to long, complicated explanations.)

There is not an awful lot that actually “goes without saying.” In *Fiddler on the Roof*; the care that Golde took of Tevye and his home all those years was not enough. The question remained, “Do you love me?”

However, a lot is left unsaid by design or by accident. In the vacuum, assumptions



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are made to fill in the blanks. Sometimes what we think has been implied in the silence, in the lack of communication, is right on. More often than not, what is filled in the blanks is the product of our wishful thinking or of our worst fears.

And so we say, “But I thought that is what you wanted!” and “Where did you ever get that idea?” When hopes and fears fill the

blanks, a lot can go wrong. It is the stuff of novels and plays, tragedies and comedies and, sadly of real life. We have all got caught on both sides of the problem. With all the confusion in relationships, all the wrong assumptions, we should all probably work at doing better.

Where to begin? One obvious area that suffers when we assume that “it goes without saying” is in showing gratitude and appreciation. Nothing can cause someone’s spirit to dry up and shrivel more than the feeling they’re unappreciated.

In a world that is overly judgmental and critical, in an age where people seem to feel that they need to express every bit of anger and irritation, we all need a lot of kind words. And besides, Tevye and Golde are not the only people who leave such important things unsaid, even for 25 years.

Gratitude and appreciation – they are good places to start. Work on that for a while and you’ll undoubtedly find a lot more things that should never be left unsaid. It is not good to leave a lot of blanks to be filled in. ✎

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