

There are days that will be horrifically bad -- and nothing will soften them. You will face such days knowing that there is no choice but to drink your full measure of bitterness and sorrow. I've had a few of those days. Thinking on them now puts me in mind of a story about King Solomon. The king wanted to test the ingenuity of

his wisest minister, Benaiah. He asked the man to find for him a ring that would always make a sad man happy. After many months of searching, Benaiah asked a jeweller if such a ring existed. The craftsman produced a plain gold band on which he engraved the words, "gam zeh ya'avov" -- "This too shall pass."<sup>1</sup>

Even the worst moments are exactly that -- moments in time. Moments pass. And when they have, there is the possibility for rest, for comfort, for mercy, for healing. With the passage of enough time, the memory of the event will fade. And in the meantime, it is necessary to count blessings.

Years ago, after a wretched ordeal, I eventually came to the conclusion that the only way to pull myself through it was to list five things that I was thankful for everyday. This is a practice that has become popular in recent years with more and more people keeping a gratitude journal. In it you can list anything from a moment of intense pride in your children to a really nice chocolate chip cookie. The true value of making that list is to develop the habit of focusing on the positive.

Aristotle once said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." That statement is 100% true, not only when it comes to excellence, but to every other decision in life. We create who we are by the patterns that we set. Whether we view the

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<sup>1</sup> Story taken from [www.experienceproject.com](http://www.experienceproject.com)

world optimistically or pessimistically (glass half-full or half-empty) is simply down to habit. It sounds overly simplistic, I know, like it's too "airy-fairy" to take seriously.

"Oh yeah," I hear you say, "I'll just make a little list each day and that will fix everything. I will just choose to be happy and suddenly my life will be transformed. But what about the bad, bad day? What about the moment, Beth, when you sat by your dying mother and held her hand as she writhed in agony and begged God for mercy? Did your little list help you then?"

No, it didn't. But days later I was pegging the laundry out on the line and just waiting for the phone call saying that we'd lost her. And my garden was a sea of blue. Thousands of forget-me-nots had sprung up everywhere. I stood there looking at them for a long time and I felt comforted. I was being shown something calm and soothing and beautiful. I knew I was being shown mercy and I saw it because I had cultivated the habit of recognising the good. There were two ways to see the garden on that day: as a scruffy patch that needed more work than I had the energy to give or as a message of peace, of remembrance and beauty, of things returning to nature as they die, becoming part of it, remaining. Forget-me-not was the message -- quiet, simple, and beautiful. I heard.

Francis Spufford once told of a comparable moment from his life. With his marriage on the brink and having argued all night, he sat exhausted and beaten in a cafe. Over the sound system there came Mozart's Clarinet Concerto (the Adagio). And with it came an epiphany. The tenderness of that music held a complex message for him. It seemed to say: "everything you fear is true. And yet. And yet. Everything you have done wrong, you have really done wrong. And yet. And yet. The world ... has this in it, as truly as it contains your unhappiness. Shut up and listen, and let yourself count, just a little bit, on a calm that you do not have to be able to make for yourself, because

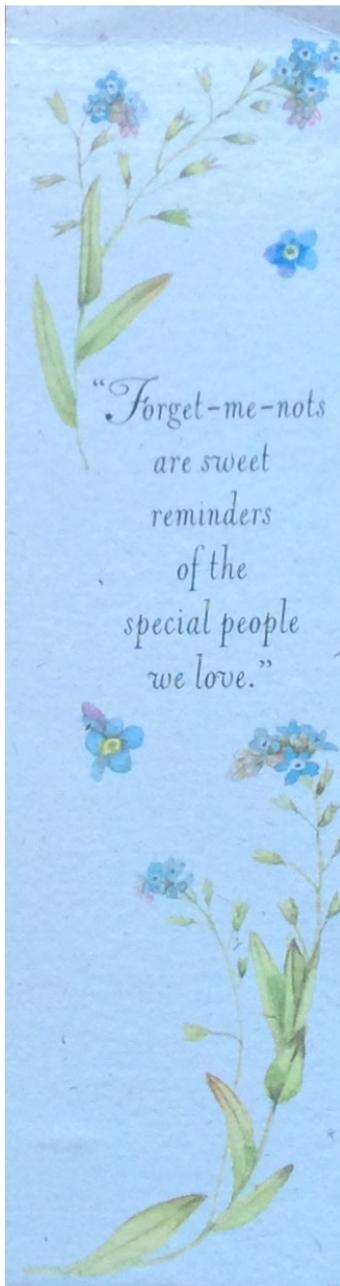
here it is, freely offered. You are deceiving yourself, said the music, if you don't allow for the possibility of this."<sup>2</sup>

There is nothing I hate more than pat, trite answers to complex problems or silly little platitudes offered at moments of devastation. That is not what this is. The idea of cultivating a habit of seeing the positive amidst all the everyday bullshit is not about belittling our troubles or our heartache. It is about recognising the pain and acknowledging it fully and then finishing the sentence with the word: "but". Yes, I hurt **but** there is beauty and mercy that I myself did not create. Yes, I weep **but** there is my husband with a hug, a cup of tea offered by a friend, food in the cupboard, a roof over my head. There is beauty and humour in the world. A bed to lie down in at night. The sun will rise tomorrow. Life then becomes a choice of what I dwell on -- the mountain of my woes or the song or flower that lifts me when everything else seems wrong. Make no mistake about it: that decision is crucial. Focus on what's wrong and I will (and have) become very adept at identifying everything that is wrong in every given situation. There's plenty of crap out there to reinforce a person's pessimism and despair. But to train myself to recognise what's right -- now that is a valuable life skill because even on the bad, bad days it will allow me to see the mercy and blessings available around me.

That is how I seek to derive comfort while in pain and the ability to do it (even in my own half-assed way) was only cultivated by doing it and then doing it again and then making myself do it again. Habit. I never realised that the secret to happiness, to contentment in life, is not the realisation of all my dreams, nor is it the total absence of stress and pain. It is the habit of recognising the gifts that are liberally dispersed throughout this world, that are placed here just for us.

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Spufford, Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense, page 15.



P.S. Just to drive the message home (because, let's face it, I can be a little dense sometimes) I found this bookmark after mom died. She'd given it to me years before and I'd forgotten all about it.