

Power of the Word

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The power of the word is often deliberately underestimated by speakers and listeners especially in one-to-one interactions. Many of us can easily trace the influences on our present situations to comments made to us by persons either innocently or intentionally.

I can trace the influences in my own life to either spoken or written comments by persons who were strategically positioned to make an impact on my life, but perhaps were not aware of the far-reaching consequences of their words. As a youngster attending piano lessons I held much promise. In my first practical examination I had done exceedingly well, and my father hugged me and said: “You see, if you put your mind to something you can do really well.” Because my father was not a man of many words, that comment has remained with me until this day, decades later.

As a Form Five student my Literature teacher was my favourite. Once when she was handing back the corrected end-of-term papers, she put mine on my desk and said, “Disappointing!” I was not mortified but, in a strange way, motivated. In my mind, if she was disappointed, it meant that she had expected better of me. In her opinion I was a good student!

Upon registering to do my undergraduate degree in French and English a friend “in the know” opened her eyes widely and exclaimed: “French? That lecturer is a real hog and everybody fails French!” Well I wasn’t going to be “hogged” and fail French. I registered for Spanish instead. That act has shaped my professional life in a dramatic way up till now. This is not to say that my decision to change courses was not impulsive and immature, but it does say that “accidents” can sometimes be fortuitous.

Even a written comment has the capacity to motivate and strengthen. I once wrote an essay on *A House for Mr. Biswas*. I had put considerable effort into it and written a long paper. I was absolutely delighted when the written feedback on my paper said: “A detailed and well-written piece which always remembers that it is a literary essay.” This comment was precious to me because it had come from someone I admired as outstanding in the field.

My movement into postgraduate studies was also catapulted by simple yet significant comments. Sensing my lack of interest, a then lecturer at the School of Education casually said to me, “So aren’t you applying for the scholarship to do the Masters?” I replied that my interest did not lie there. His response was, “Girl, you should apply to do Teacher Education in the scholarship programme. I think you’ll do well in that field.” I did not give it serious thought but at the last minute applied and was accepted. That comment and consequent action have taken me to where I am now professionally. Once more someone had expressed confidence in my ability and charted my future.

A different perspective prompted me to launch into a Ph.D. programme. Although I was very eager to pursue research at that level, the minimum time of four years was a

daunting prospect. When a sensible influence in my life remarked: “If you don’t do it the four years would still go,” I was convinced of the sense of it, and spent four short years working on a Ph.D. in Education.

As teachers and parents, as human beings all, we have the power to empower others by the comments we make to them. Positive comments have taken me thus far. I shudder to think where I would have been without them or with their negative equivalents.

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