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OPINION | COMMENTARY

# *A Thank-You Note Helped Me Find My Calling*

It spurred a friendship, then, years later, a visit to a clinic. There I realized I was to become a doctor.

By Michael P.H. Stanley

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PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

It's a season of thanks—and also of interviews for medical schools and residency programs. I share the pros and cons of my hospital's residency program with applicants who are neatly dressed in the same clothes, with the same résumés, from the same prestigious institutions. Any one of them is a stronger candidate than I was a few years ago. In addition to the usual platitudes about how well-fed we are, how diverse our patients are, and how expert our experts are, I like to make one other claim on their appraisal of programs.



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that you can tell a lot about a man by what he laughs at. So while you’re visiting with us, judge us on what makes us jolly and learn what makes us thankful. Our gratitude reveals our values.”

At the postinterview dinner, one applicant turns to me and asks: “So what are *you* thankful for?”

I open my backpack to show him my latest purchases—boxes of stationery. Then I tell him two stories.

One summer during my middle-school years, my hometown put on a series of concerts in the park. I played the keyboard, and a reporter from the local paper interviewed me. My father’s friend Don Hardy cut the interview out of the newspaper, laminated it, and mailed it to me. It was a nice thing for him to do, and I told my dad to tell Mr. Hardy “thank you” from me.

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I quickly forgot Mr. Hardy’s act of kindness until two weeks later, when I received a strange package in the mail. It contained an envelope, a stamp, a blank sheet of paper and a golf pencil. “What’s the meaning of this?” I asked my dad, who chuckled and told me I’d have to figure it out on my own. Eventually, I realized that Mr. Hardy was sending me a message: Always remember to write a thank-you note. Later, my father told me that Mr. Hardy had given him advance warning of the lesson. He thought I might be destined for big things in a world where those little touches would make a difference, and so he wanted to fortify the habit of giving thanks.

A thank-you note, Mr. Hardy taught me, can be as meaningful as the gift that inspired it. Using his materials, I wrote him a thank-you note. Then I penned another to Shawn, the reporter who’d interviewed me. Shawn and I became

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A few years later, I was a college student in Boston, interested in science but still not quite sure what I was going to do for a career. Meanwhile, Shawn's father had developed amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and came to Boston every few months to see his doctor and participate in research. He also volunteered with a nonprofit association of patients, families and advocates touched by ALS in Maine.

Shawn and his father asked if I was interested in seeing the ALS clinic, and I said yes. I shadowed them through their visits with the nurse practitioner, the speech-and-swallow pathologist, the physical therapist, the research coordinator and finally the neurologist. She showed me how to use a reflex hammer, how to interpret what Shawn's father's increased reflex here and atrophy there meant for the diagnosis.

To me it was like remote viewing with extrasensory perception—trying to spot where the problem was in the “3-pound universe” of the brain, only by glimpsing at seemingly unrelated signs. Shawn's father and the neurologist talked about how new bed sheets would help him to turn more easily, how he could adjust his orthotics to walk more comfortably, and how telemedicine was helping ALS sufferers in Maine.

Then Shawn's father turned to the neurologist and said: “Well, Mike's a smart enough guy and has nothing to do this summer. Could you put him to work?” She did. By the end of the summer, I knew medicine was my calling. Now, during my clinic, I see patients in the same room where my path to neurology began. When I see Shawn, I remind him of my gratitude to him and his late father.

I finished my answer to the residency applicant's question with this observation:



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The last thank-you note I wrote was to a widow whose husband was once my patient. When I cared for him, she believed in me—a strange honor and burden. When he was readmitted some time later to a different ward, the resident caring for him notified me that the couple wished to see me, so I paid them a visit. Not long thereafter the patient died. When word reached me, I wrote his widow my condolences. It's a note I never get used to writing. I closed by telling her how much it meant to me to have entertained her confidence.

We who live in an achievement culture risk forgetting that our merits derive in no small part from gifts and graces granted us by others. Sending a thank-you note is an act of not only gratitude but also humility. Merit and meekness meet this time of year around the dinner table, on TV specials—and, for me, in little paper promises never to forget what I owe.

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