

THE SET FREE LIFE

Illumination

My husband and I packed up the car at the beginning of the month and went to two holiday events: first, we took in the Scottish Walk in Alexandria, Virginia. A parade that makes its way through Old Town on the first Saturday morning in December, the Scottish Walk has scores of bagpipers, numerous fife & drum bands, a bunch of kennel clubs, and groups of Scottish family-names (one clan, the family of Hay, shouted "Hey!" to everyone as they passed). It was freezing cold but we joined the crowd in waving at Grand Marshal Willard Scott and loved on as many dogs as possible when the parade came to occasional stops.

Then we drove down to Williamsburg and took in the Grand Illumination. This celebration marks the official beginning of the holiday season in Colonial Williamsburg and is hallmarked by some of the most spectacular fireworks Larry and I have ever seen. The colonial village starts packing people in by early afternoon and at 6:15, when the display begins, the place looks a bit like the Mall on a 4th of July in Washington, DC.

We were dazzled! The fireworks are launched from three different locations and are coordinated so that the same displays explode at the same time, so no matter which way you turn in the park, you can see the show. It's more intimate, too: you're closer to the source and they are not quite as high-in-the-sky as the rockets set off on the 4th, but the phenomenal variations, colors, and dances caused the crowds to shout and laugh out loud.

"Illuminations" such as this were held in colonial times to commemorate events like the birth of a prince or king in England, or the visit of a queen, and you can be sure fireworks thrilled the people of that day as much as they do us. It was truly one of the

most delightful and exciting displays I've ever seen, and I am a huge fan of the DC fireworks on the Mall. This was equal to those, though different.

As I slowly turned in a circle and watched the lights exploding in the sky, I noted the emotional impact this brief but magical moment had upon me. There is something so . . . *expanding* about fireworks. My insides felt like they were being reminded that light is what we're meant to observe; we're not creatures meant for darkness. Something about those astonishingly colorful bursts of light, the way they fall in swirls and shoots and zigzags, makes our hearts race and cause smiles to nearly split our faces. We're illuminated inside, filled with an inexplicable joy, because it's what we're born to receive. When we remain in dark places—places of joyless, purposeless existence—we lose the glimpse of what we were meant to be and often slowly succumb to an indefinable inner despair.

No matter what the world looks like right now, I encourage you to light some fireworks in your life. Search out the simple but profound moments that inspire you. Remind yourself that you were made for better things. Head toward them. Set the match to a display of joy for others, urging them to see their worth and the worth of their dreams. This is a season of illumination, a season of light.

Blessings to all! 🌟



Sue Thompson is a personality expert, etiquette trainer, and an instructor in life lessons. Her seminars on recognizing and developing talent, identifying personalities and working effectively with the people who possess them, responding appropriately to difficult experiences, treating others with respect, and behaving like a professional have caused listeners at companies and business organizations throughout the country to rate her presentations as "the best seminar of the conference!" She trains those entering the workforce how to present themselves with style and authority; new employees in the importance of respecting one's work and the workplace; managers in the value of understanding employees' talent and temperament; and everyone in the timeless rules of behavior that will always bespeak excellence.

Quick Links

- Colonial Williamsburg
- Dr. Martin Seligman
- The Heifer Project
- Adopt-A-Greyhound

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Martin Seligman, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and former president of the American Psychological Association, is known the world over as the father of positive psychology. This article was in the recent newsletter of the International Positive Psychology Association, of which I am a member. I thought it was great and wanted to share it with you, so I got his permission to reprint it here.

This is an exercise for the holidays on giving better gifts.

Fifty years ago the average American family lived in a 1200 square foot house, there was one car per family, and one out of five family members went to college. Today the average American family lives in a 2500 square foot house, there is more than one car per licensed driver, and one out of two people go college. If you had told my parents this (living in our 1200 square foot house), they would have said, "That will be paradise!"

But . . . [i]n spite of the tripling of real purchasing power in the last fifty years, life satisfaction has not budged and depression is ten times more common now. Ten times! — the only tenfold change in mental illness of the 20th Century! This is called the "Easterbrook paradox," after Gregg Easterbrook's revealing book, *The Progress Paradox*.

What is the solution to the Easterbrook paradox? I believe we have squandered our wealth on the wrong sort of stuff, that we have engaged as a nation in "bad consumerism." We have used our wealth to buy more positive emotion. Positive emotion is like French Vanilla ice cream: the very first bite is great but by the sixth bite it tastes like cardboard (and we keep eating anyway). Positive emotion habituates and shows tolerance (smoking more now but enjoying it less?). So the attempt to purchase positive emotion fails in the medium- and long-run because the pleasures evaporate (and the only emotion left is discontent when the new gizmo breaks). Purchasing positive emotion can only succeed in the short-run and it then requires frequent, new, and more expensive purchases to keep any increment in positive emotion going.

The pleasant life cannot be successfully purchased in the long run—but flow and meaning do not have the fading properties of positive emotion. The engaged life (eudaimonia) and the meaningful life are the two alternate forms of happy lives. Can they be bought? Can we spend our funds on getting more flow and more meaning? Yes, and this is your assignment for the holidays.

Give as many gifts to people you care about *that will add to the amount of flow or to the amount of meaning in their lives*. Doing this will add meaning and engagement to your own life, particularly if you avoid shortcuts. In general, the key to this is giving *activities*, not *things*. And for maintenance, follow the effects of your gifts and write them down to use next holiday season. A few examples:

- Give a bridge line (an inexpensive telephone conference call) for a once-a-month call for the next six months to your widely scattered family.

[Sue's note: sign up for a free bridge line at www.instantconference.com. It's easy to figure out.]

- Fund a visit for a friend to see someone he/she loves but has not seen in years.
- Adopt a family you know to be in need and give them grocery store and Target gift certificates.
- Donate bees, goats, llamas to friends through the Heifer Project (www.heiferproject.org).
- Make a "treasure chest" for your child with coupons redeemable for one reading hour with you, one trip to a ballgame with Dad, two games of Monopoly with Mom, etc.
- Give a bird feeder to a friend and mount it in a place that will brighten her day every day. Giving pots of herbs and berries or hundreds of daffodil bulbs works well, also.
- Give your child a complex Lego set that requires building over weeks—with you.
- Give dance lessons or musical instrument lessons to people you love who do not dance or play music.
- Tape a Harry Potter volume in your own voice and give it to a young child to listen to (or tape a radio show from a 1940's script for someone who loves drama).
- Make the gifts yourself (e.g., cookies) and make the cards yourself. It's time consuming, personal, and it gives the people you care about the most precious gift of all—your time. 🍪

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Teddy Bear Says...



I'm a very observant dog; it's one of my best qualities. Greyhounds have sharp eyesight and keen senses. We can spot a squirrel nearly half a mile away, and we just might catch one in a 40-mile an hour burst of speed.

In my observations, I've noticed that at this time of year, people like old-fashioned things. They like scenes from years gone by,

when people dressed up in thick velvets and put their hands in furry muffs and rode through snowy countrysides in sleighs pulled by pretty horses adorned with bells. They love traditions at the table and fill their houses full of delicious smells. References to bygone things seem to make the human heart expand with love.

I like old-fashioned things, too. Once upon a time, people kept opinions to themselves unless they were asked what they thought about an issue. In days of old, men would never think of spitting on the sidewalk, and certainly never in front of a woman. Before my time, folks frequently thought of their neighbors' comfort before they did things like mow the lawn at 7:00 a.m. or conduct loud parties that lasted until well after midnight.

I like it when I see children behave well and speak respectfully to their parents. I like watching people enjoy a meal together, using good manners and engaging with their company instead of putting faces to the food and using a fork like a shovel. I love to see people wait patiently for the elderly, offering to help them when necessary. I like it when things are quiet instead of filled with raucous noise from blasting car stereos and voices raised in decibel levels exceeding the sound of jet engines. I guess that makes me an old-fashioned kind of dog.

I don't think these thoughtful behaviors are completely dead. I've also noticed that there are many who practice lovely, old-fashioned manners all year 'round, and these people seem to have a very good outlook on life. So here is my holiday wish: that you will remember that gracious manners always make others feel comfortable! It doesn't take a Greyhound to see how far this simple rule can take you.

Happy Holidays! 



A year-end note to my friends and colleagues

Within the next few months, I will be moving my email list to an opt-in format, which is designed to protect you from spam messages. It also lets me know that you truly want to remain on my mailing list. This means that when the opt-in format is launched, you will have the chance to quietly bow out. I do hope you'll remain! My connections mean a great deal to me and I am grateful for all of you who support my efforts.

Most of you know that I do consulting. I'd appreciate any leads you might offer! In times such as these, the lessons of life are not only good for us personally; they are also good for business. The keynotes, training, coaching, and consulting that I provide remind people of the things that matter most: the temperament we have to work with, the talent we've been given to develop, the importance of always taking the high road and, through it all, behaving like a professional. Please contact me with the names of people who make decisions in their organizations who might find my services helpful. I'll do the rest, and many, many thanks!

Quotable

In the name of the best within you, do not sacrifice this world to those who are its worst. In the name of the values that keep you alive, do not let your vision of man be distorted by the ugly, the cowardly, the mindless in those who have never achieved his title. Do not lose your knowledge that man's proper estate is an upright posture, an intransigent mind and a step that travels unlimited roads. Do not let your fire go out, spark by irreplaceable spark, in the hopeless swamps of the approximate, the not-quite, the not-yet, the not-at-all. Do not let the hero in your soul perish, in lonely frustration for the life you deserved, but have never been able to reach. Check your road and the nature of your battle. The world you desired can be won, it exists, it is real, it is possible, it's yours.

Ayn Rand



Contact Sue today to learn how she can meet your business needs

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