



Episode 44: The Power of What We Say

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Here's my question today: If you think about all of the interactions you've had with friends and family during the past decades, and all of the things people have said to you in those conversations, what advice stands out?

What wisdom that someone shared with you one time still stays with you?

Usually in my podcasts, we focus on taking action. I usually encourage you to try a new way of thinking or communicating. Today is a bit different. Because today, I invite you to reflect.

Life moves fast. We might feel like we're traveling through our days and weeks at warp speed – we blink and another week is over, and somehow another year has passed.

Being busy without taking the time to pause is a disservice to us. What I do know is that when we can take the time to reflect, to think about our purpose in the world, the beliefs that drive us, and the values that inform our decisions, we have an opportunity to live more intentionally and create more meaning in our life.

So, today is all about pausing and reflecting. In particular, what I'm reflecting about today are the interactions and conversations that have made the biggest impact on me.

Here's what prompted me to think about this. The other day, I was taking a walk around my neighborhood, on a path I had not walked on in a while, and approaching me from the other direction was a woman I hadn't seen in years. She was the parent of a child who was friends with my child years ago, when they attended the same school.

I had always really liked her, and I was excited to stop and catch up, to hear about what her kids were up to. We started talking and after a few minutes, she paused and said, I have to tell you something.

What? I asked. She said, I need to tell you how much you've helped me. Really? I asked. I could not imagine what it was, as we hadn't talked in about 4 years.

She explained, a number of years ago, when you and I were talking about our lives and our life choices, you said something that stuck with me. You were talking about going to Harvard, and you said that it wasn't always a great environment for you. That it was really competitive and that it took a huge toll on you. That really struck me, because I would have thought that someone who went to Harvard would have had a perfect life. Your comments gave me a very different perspective.

She continued to say that she shared those comments from our conversation with her high school children, who were thinking about college and getting caught up in the competitiveness of the admissions process.

She said that she had told them what I said, and how a certain school might not guarantee happiness. That they should look for a college that really speaks to them.

My kids don't always listen to me, she added, but for some reason, when I told them what you said, it resonated. It gave them permission to apply to the schools they liked, instead of where they felt they should go.

As she told me this story, I was really glad that I was helpful in some way, even unintentionally. And here's the interesting thing. When we had this conversation, my intention had not been to help. I was simply sharing a truth about my life. I was being vulnerable and honest with a friend.

We never know where the words we speak will land. We have no idea what or if someone thinks about a conversation with us days or years later. And we certainly don't know which part of that conversation, if any, they hold on to.

Now we do know that some things people say stick with us. And, yet, there's still so much mystery to how and when memories are embedded.

When I think of all the thousands of conversations I'm guessing I've had in my life, I cannot recall most of them. What makes me remember the ones that stand out?

Hearing about the impact my words had on my friend prompted me to reflect on some of the most powerful things others have said to me that I still hold onto and call up from time to time when I need that wisdom.

These days, the one that's top of mind is a comment a teacher of mine made years ago. I was in a spiritual exploration class, and we were talking generally about life and the choices we make.

My teacher said, "Everything we do informs our future. We just might not know exactly how." She said it matter-of-factly, and then moved on to whatever we were discussing next.

I heard those words, turned them over in my mind, and they stuck.

Everything we do informs our future, we just might not know exactly how.

I love this statement. I quote it to many of my clients and sometimes to my children. For me, it's reassuring, it's permission-giving, and it's about trust and faith in our choices. It's a way of saying that all life experiences are valuable, and all will be drawn upon in some way in our future.

I wonder whether the other people in the class took that statement with them the way I did? Likely, their brains grabbed onto something else equally powerful.

Somehow, brains choose what to pay attention to in a moment, and what to let go of. The thoughts our brains encode then form and inform us – as we create and make sense of our life.

So, what do we do with this realization?

Knowing that words have power, and knowing that we are word givers and word receivers, how can we ensure that our words have a positive effect on others?

Well, here's what we can do. We can speak from the heart and from our integrity. We can be authentic, kind, and caring. I do believe that when we speak from our integrity and from our heart, others take note. That's one thing that's in our control.

The other thing that's in our control is to actively practice appreciation.

When my friend thanked me for helping her, it felt great. It made me want to reach out to those whose wisdom I hold close, to share with them how their words made a big impact on me.

So here's what I invite you to do. Think about my initial question – the things that people have said to you over the years that you always come back to. And then reach out to those people. Let them know how helpful they were to you.

The world always needs more kindness and appreciation, and this is a perfect opportunity to brighten someone's day.

Lastly, if you're curious about the ideas you might be leaving others with, you can choose to ask them. Reach out to old friends and ask them what's been most helpful about the conversations you've had together. And make sure to let them know which of their words you've appreciated most, too.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you found today's episode interesting and want to have a thought partner to reflect with on your life, please reach out. Email me at deb@debelbaum.com or go to my website debelbaum.com to schedule a complimentary consult. I look forward to it. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!