

# MORE POWERFUL THAN YOU THINK

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“Writing is not a job; it’s a hobby!” thundered my father when I told him about my plans for college. “You need to get a profession—medicine, law, engineering or accounting.”

I cheerlessly acquiesced and enrolled in a Pre-Med program, but at the end of my first year, after struggling through Chemistry, I changed my major to Philosophy. When I told Dad, he grunted, “That and a dime will get you a cup of coffee.” He passed away shortly after that but his words echoed in the back of my mind for years.

After graduation I searched for a job in writing. At the same time, I wrote short stories like crazy and sent them off to dozens of magazines. Years passed and I failed to find a job in writing, so I supported myself by waiting tables and bartending. Meanwhile, rejection letters from the magazines began piling up, and I was beginning to get discouraged.

Then one day, I met a friend for a beer in a bar near the campus of my *alma mater*. When I visited the restroom, some graffiti written on the wall with an arrow pointing to the toilet paper dispenser caught my eye. It read: “Bachelor of Arts Degrees—take only one, please!” Rather than laugh, I grimaced and thought, “Boy, does that sound like my Dad.”

Five years had gone by, and other than a few freelance jobs in advertising, I had not made a penny from writing. I was beginning to re-think my life, when I recalled the encouraging words from my ninth-grade English teacher.

She had assigned my class with several essays to write. I remembered the glowing paragraphs of praise she wrote in bright red ink at the top of all my papers. There must have been a dozen of those compositions, and just recalling them gave me hope. I thought, “At least one person in the world believes in my writing.”

It was just the encouragement I needed, and I doubled my efforts to find work. Soon I was getting a great deal more freelance work. Enough that I was able to quit working in restaurants. Enough to make a down payment on a house. And whenever I needed a boost in confidence, I would think again of those glowing paragraphs of praise written in bright red ink at the top of my essay papers.

Suddenly everything seemed to gel. I sold my first book; I won several very important advertising awards—and three



colleges were asking me to teach a class in copy writing. I felt very good and once again, I thought of my ninth-grade English teacher and her praise written in bright red ink. I decided to look her up and give her a call.

When I got her on the phone, my first shock was that she did not remember me. I was certain I had been one of her favorites. My second was when she told me that she never wrote paragraphs of praise. “There were simply too many papers to grade to write more than a word or two,” she said. “I would write ‘Nice Work’ or ‘Good Job,’ but never anything more.”

Not convinced, when I got off the phone, I went up to the attic and dug out the box that held my old school work (yes, it’s true—I’m a pack rat—especially when it comes to things I’ve written!). It took a while, but I finally found those old papers. She was right; there were no paragraphs. And, there was far less than a dozen—only two. About the only thing I remembered correctly was the bright red ink. I did, however, rate more than one or two words. On the first one she wrote, “Nicely written—well thought out.” On the other, “Good sense of humor!”

Nine words! Nine little words which were so heartening that over the next 15 years they grew into hundreds in my mind. Nine words that motivated me to stick to my dreams. My point? Even the least bit of praise can be powerfully motivating. So, don’t keep it in—use your power!

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