

Little Things Mean a Lot

By Calvin L Weisberger, MD, FACC, FACP

“Cal’ stands for leadership
 For challenging the status quo, for curmudgeonism.
 He believes in dialogue, debate,
 and its sibling the argument.
 He believes in Ebay, good wine, and grandchildren.
 And that honesty—sometimes painful honesty—
 is a wonderful gift.
 He believes that today’s truth is tomorrow’s error.
 All hail evidence-based medicine, the P&T, and the NPC.
 He’s **anti**mediocrity and **pro**sincerity.
 He believes medicine is both an art and a science
 And that health care isn’t an industry—it’s a cause.
 Cal, may you live long and thrive!”

A while ago, I celebrated a birthday at a National Product Council meeting. My colleagues learned of the birthday and had a small ceremony to recognize the birthday. It was the usual good-natured few minutes, with some special people saying some nice things. Then another special person read the lines above, which she had parodied from the KP *Thrive* ad, some years of knowing me, and some research into my writings. I have not had a greater professional honor or recognition. I will feel fortunate the rest of my life knowing that my efforts and their meaning to me were recognized by some others.

There are many ways to ‘recognize’ people in society. We give pieces of paper, engraved pieces of glass, plaques and various other honoraria. I have received these and have bestowed many on others. Many times they seem obligatory; the person being recognized and their specific efforts almost secondary. Most of these things will hang on a wall or gather dust somewhere. Fortunately, the wonderful words my friend wrote, spoke, and scribbled on a nondescript piece of paper were not discarded. I was able to get the text from her and print it in a form, which now is framed on my wall. The effect of the effort and the personal thought that went into it were immediately felt. That feeling and appreciation remains. I believe it taught me important insights into myself. I suspect those insights are valid for others too. There is the old saying, “It’s the thought that counts.” I appear to be one of those who truly appreciates that sentiment.

On another occasion several years ago, the founding Chair of an important group within our Medical Group was retiring. At that group’s meeting no one said anything when the announcement was made. After waiting some time as the meeting progressed, I broke in and announced that I was incredulous that we were not or had not thought it was necessary to ‘recognize’ this person’s important contributions. The upshot was a ceremony and gift to recognize that person. Afterwards the honoree said to me “You all didn’t have to do that!” I told him I considered that viewpoint to be in error and that we absolutely did have to do “that.” This began a tradition: since then, we have repeated that effort whenever a member of the group steps down or retires. Now, years later, the repetition of that recognition effort has become mechanical. The original recognition was for over 20 years of work. The most recent one was for three. A colleague sitting next to me stated the person had served such a relatively short time that we almost didn’t know who it was we were ‘recognizing.’

For me, the counterplay of the forms of recognition causes some inner conflict. We should be recognized for our efforts that exceed our societal or organizational norms in a positive manner. When such recognition is mechanical, however, its meaning is diminished. I submit that most of the time our intent in recognition is to generate a personal positive emotion in the target. It seems to me that goal cannot be met by a ‘one-size-fits-all’ gift or ceremony. Recognition ideally should be tailored to the individual. When the object is for society to gain appreciation for a particular person, then other additional forms of recognition are appropriate. I suspect that, in 2006, few Los Angeles drivers know that Rosecrans Boulevard, a major thoroughfare, is named after a Civil War General. They could look it up, however, and that may achieve the original goal of recognition.

I don’t anticipate having any streets or buildings or any other lasting monuments named for me. The few lines of meaningful words written and spoken by a sincere friend achieved a target goal for me. I think many others would appreciate and profit by a recognition form specifically appropriate to them. ❖

Calvin L Weisberger, MD, FACC, FACP, is the Regional Chief of Cardiology for the Southern California Permanente Medical Group, the Chair of the InterRegional Chiefs of Cardiology for the Permanente Medical Groups, and Chairman of the Southern California Regional Product Council. E-mail: calvin.l.weisberger@kp.org.

