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Lessons in Gratitude, at the Basement Sink

By BEN STEIN

MY father entered Williams College in Williamstown, Mass., in September 1931. The United States was entering the downswing of a small uptick at the beginning of what would be the worst industrial depression in history.

My father had an unemployed father (a former skilled tool-and-die maker) and a mother who worked as a sales clerk at a department store in Schenectady, N.Y. He had no money, no financial reserves, no social connections.

He told me of many jobs while he was at Williams, but one stays in my memory a dozen times a day, especially when I am working by traveling through a dismal, endless security line or waiting in a line to check into a hotel or noticing that my bed in my new hotel has a ripped sheet and is next to a noisy air-conditioner.

My father had a job thanks to a kindly man named Taylor Ostrander at a fraternity called Sigma Psi. My father's job was to wash dishes in the basement of the frat house as the other boys finished their lunches and dinners. (One of the boys, Richard Helms, went on to be director of the C.I.A., but that's another story.) He toiled down there at a huge sink, with steam rising and detergent getting on his unimaginably soft hands. He wore a stocking cap to keep his already curly hair from going crazy.

It was the 1930's, and Jews weren't allowed in any fraternity at Williams. Many years later, maybe in the 1980's, by which time my father had become a major economist and public policy discussant, I asked him if he felt angry about having to wash dishes to pay his way through school in a fraternity that didn't admit Jews. "Not at all," he said. "I didn't have the luxury of feeling aggrieved. I was just grateful to have a job so I could go to one of the best schools in the country."

I think that this was the secret ingredient - aside from astonishing intelligence and versatility - in my father's success and happiness. He did not feel that he had the luxury of feeling aggrieved. He was just grateful to have a chance. Or, I can say, he was grateful for the opportunities he had been given. I think about this in other situations, too. A few days ago, on a United Airlines flight from San Francisco to Denver, a group of flight attendants gathered near my seat in the last row of first class. One was either wearing or displaying a perfume I was allergic to, and I went into a wild asthmatic attack in which I could simply not breathe for an uncomfortable amount of time.

When I revived, I thought of lodging a complaint and throwing a fit. But then I thought: "Well, these poor people. Think of what United employees are going through. I am just grateful I have a job. Why torture them any more than they are already tortured?"

I was on my way to another job. I got to the next stop in my journey, Baltimore, and my driver could not recall where he had left the car. We had to have the airport police find it for us. He also did not know his way from Baltimore to Washington. (I am not kidding.) Exhausted as I was, I had to guide him all of the way. Never mind. I was grateful that I was in a car with a driver and on my way to a superimportant gig. This man was probably about where my father was in 1931. I decided not to pick on him.

Now, I have found that I cannot predict the stock market except over very long periods. I cannot tell you when the housing bubble will burst - only that it will burst. I cannot tell you when the dollar will stop rallying - only that it will

stop. So I cannot tell you anything that, in a few minutes, will tell you how to be rich.

But I can tell you how to feel rich, which is far better, let me tell you firsthand, than being rich. Be grateful. Be grateful you have a job, even if it takes you to the world's worst airport, Dulles, and to the world's worst security lines, also at Dulles.

Be grateful you have a job to travel to, even if you must travel to a hotel room where the previous tenant was a cigar tester for Fidel Castro. (But do ask for another room.) Be grateful about everything and you'll feel a lot richer than the billionaires I know who are always moaning about everything that happens and who lament, like King Canute, that they cannot control the waves of the market or the business cycle.

When I got to Washington with my novitiate driver, I rested. The next day, I spoke to about 250 kids, perhaps ages 5 to 15, about how grateful the nation was to them. Their fathers had died in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and in training accidents. They were as good, brave, intelligent and yet haunted-looking as any kids I have ever met. Be grateful for their sacrifice and that your son or daughter is not one of them.

Then I spoke to about 500 widows, widowers, mothers, fathers, fiancées of men who had been killed in the war on terror. They were totally devoted to one another and to helping one another through their grueling losses. They were probably the most spiritually fit, unselfish human beings I have ever met. One showed me the contents of his son's wallet when his son was killed. A dollar bill still had a blood stain on it. The father cried when he showed it to me. Be grateful that the armed forces of this country have such brave families.

AS I told them, we could do without Hollywood for a century. We could not do without them and their sacrifice for a week. Gratitude. As my pal Phil DeMuth says, it's the only totally reliable get-rich-quick scheme. Gratitude. Losing the luxury of feeling aggrieved when, if you look closely, you have an opportunity. My father washed dishes at the Sigma Psi house so that he could build an education and a life for the family he did not even have yet.

At my house, I always insist on doing the dishes, and I feel a thrill of gratitude for what washing a dish can do with every swipe of the sponge. Wiping away the selfishness of the moment, building a life for my son. The zen of dishwashing. The zen of gratitude. The zen of riches. Thanks, Pop.

Ben Stein is a lawyer, writer, actor and economist. E-mail: ebiz@nytimes.com.