

Who Would You Thank?

April 01, 1999

The call came more or less out of the blue from Art Woodward, the chair of the University of California Los Angeles's (UCLA) Psychology Department. Would I like to attend UCLA's "College Awards Dinner" to be held in a few weeks? He explained that it was a black tie soiree designed to pay tribute to outstanding faculty, students, alumni, and friends of the College of Letters and Science.

With his powers of persuasion, I came to realize that this was not an event I wanted to miss. The Psychology Department would be celebrating some important achievements, including the acquisition of several new endowed chairs, and one of their current graduate students was receiving a major award. Sounded good to me — an appreciative former undergraduate in the department. But, black tie? Living in Seattle, I have few if any opportunities to think about black tie. That nagging question was still there after all these years: What would I wear?

I rummaged through my closet looking for that faithful long black dress that looked really nice in the 70s. The moth holes still seemed small enough that only I would notice. But when I tried the dress on for a girlfriend, she said, "May I be blunt? It's too tight!" Later, I managed to scrounge up something to wear and not look too out of place.

The evening was luxury par excellence. The setting — the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Beverly Hills — is one of the most splendid venues in the city. The meal was chicken, yes, but not your banquet rubber chicken. It was double breast of chicken stuffed with asparagus, toasted pine nuts, and goat cheese, served with a crispy potato tart, baby squash, and carrot puree. The wines were from the Christopher Creek Winery of Sonoma, California. The Master of Ceremonies was billed as "the most successful Academy Awards show producer in history." The Chancellor and Provost were, of course, on hand.

Outstanding students, faculty, and friends received their awards. As I watched each one of them come up to the stage to receive their award, I found myself particularly moved when I listened and read about the people whom they thanked. The faculty award winner — a Chaucer scholar-thanked specific friends and colleagues and his partner. One undergraduate award winner from the Department of Spanish and Portuguese thanked God for blessing her with beautiful friends and mentors throughout her life. She thanked her parents and others whom I didn't recognize.

One of the graduate student awards went to APS Student Affiliate Terri Conley whose research has focused on two topics, namely the relationships between members of different groups and also on social-psychological barriers to the practice of safer sex among young adults. The published tribute to this young psychologist mentioned that both lines of her research address urgent social issues, specifically the issues of prejudice and discrimination. Upon receiving this honor, Conley thanked her mentors — four of them — by name: APS Charter Fellows Barry Collins, Anne Peplau, Shelley Taylor, and APS Member Curtis Hardin. She thanked them for "their wisdom, guidance, and support." I know them all, and couldn't help but think, "They must feel proud. It must feel great to hear something like that."

Well it couldn't have been clearer at that point that it mattered little what people wore. And it didn't matter much what they had just eaten. What really mattered was seeing these scholars and future scientists basking in the glow of their achievement, and hearing their heartfelt thanks for those mentors who played a role.

And it wasn't long before this thought occurred to me: Why wait until you've won an award to say "thanks." Why not thank people now.

If I'd taken my own advice earlier I would have thanked Allen Edwards, my long-time colleague at the University of Washington, for all those articles he used to clip out of the *Wall Street Journal* that he thought I might find interesting. Neatly clipped, he would hand print "Beth, from Allen" at the top of the articles. Unfortunately, I have waited too long to thank him; he died several years ago.

There are many mentors for me, and I have much thanks to give. I hope to thank them soon, one at a time, for their wisdom, guidance, and support (to borrow a phrase from a future leader in our field). For the moment, let me just thank one — APS Fellow Arien Mack, a world class perception researcher, who was my colleague when I first began teaching. Those were the days when I was so nervous that I would forget something that I wrote out every word of every lecture, including the jokes.

Arien taught me that it is ok to be a hard-nosed psychological scientist and also to be caring, sensitive, fun-loving (and in her case, interesting and beautiful). Sorry I waited so long to tell you, but thanks.