The Lost Art of Gratitude

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Extract

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 It was while she was lying in bed that Isabel Dalhousie, philosopher and editor of the *Review of Applied Ethics*, thought about the things we do. Isabel was a light sleeper; Charlie, her eighteen-month-old son, slept deeply and, she was sure, contentedly; Jamie was somewhere in between. Yet Isabel had little difficulty in getting to sleep. Once she made up her mind to sleep, all that she had to do was to shut her eyes, and, sure enough, she would drift off. The same could be done if she surfaced in the course of the night or in those melancholy small hours when both body and spirit could be at their lowest ebb. Then all she had to do was to tell herself that this was not the time to start thinking, and she would quickly return to sleep.

She had wondered about the causes of her light sleeping and had spoken about it to a friend, a specialist in sleep disorders. She had not consulted him professionally, but had brought the matter up over dinner; not before the whole table, of course, but in the intimacy of the one-to-one conversation that people have with those sitting beside them.

'I don't like to ask about medical things,' she said.

'But . . .' he said.

'Well, yes. But. You see, you doctors must dread being buttonholed by people who want to talk about their symptoms. There you are at a party and somebody says: I've been having these twinges of pain in my stomach . . .'

'Have you?'

'No, I haven't.'

He smiled. 'The old cliché, you know. Somebody comes and says, A friend of mine has this rash, you see, and I wondered what it was. That sometimes happens. Doctors understand all about embarrassment, you know.'

Isabel nodded. 'But it must annoy you – being asked about medical matters.'

He thought for a moment. '*Nihil humanum mihi alienum est*, if I may lapse into Latin. I don't set my mind against anything human. Doctors should subscribe to that, I think. Like priests.'

Isabel did not think the comparison quite fitting. 'Priests *do* disapprove, don't they? Doctors don't – or shouldn't. You don't shake your head over your patients' behaviour, do you?'

'If doctors see self-destructive behaviour, they might,' he said. 'If somebody comes in with chronic vascular disease, for example, and you smell the nicotine on his fingers, of course you're going to say something. Or a drinker comes in with liver problems. You're going to make it clear what's causing the problem.'

'But you don't ladle on the blame, do you? You don't say things like, This is all your own stupid fault. You don't say that, even if it patently is his stupid fault.'

He played with his fork. 'No, I suppose not.'

'Whereas a priest will. A priest will use the language of right and wrong. I don't think doctors do that.' She looked at him. He was typical of a certain type of Edinburgh doctor; the old-fashioned, gentle Scottish physician, unmoved by the

considerations of profit and personal gain that could so disfigure medicine. That doctors should consider themselves businessmen was, Isabel had always felt, a moral tragedy for medicine. Who was left to be altruistic? Teachers, she thought, and people who worked for charities; and public-interest lawyers, and . . . in fact, the list was quite long; probably every bit as long as it ever had been. One should be careful, she told herself, in commenting on the decline of society; the elder Cato was the warning here – a frightful old prig, he had warned that everything was in decline, forgetting that once we reach forty we all believe that the world is on the slide. Only if eighteen-year-olds started to say *O tempora! O mores!* would the situation be *really* alarming; eighteen-year-olds did not say that, though; they no longer had any Latin, of course, and could not.

'You were going to ask me a question,' he said. He knew Isabel, and her digressions, her tendency to bring philosophical complications into the simplest of matters.

'Why are some people light sleepers?' she began, and added hurriedly, 'I'm one, by the way.'

'So am I, as it happens,' he replied. 'It's often respiratory – sleep apnoea, where you keep waking up because you're choking. If not, it may be an idiosyncrasy of the brain. Is it a problem?'

'Not for me. Not really. I go back to sleep.'

He nodded. 'You could get yourself checked for sleep apnoea. It's pretty easy to monitor sleep patterns. You don't look at risk to me, though – it tends to affect heavier people.'

That had been the end of the conversation, as another guest had addressed the table at large and private conversations had trailed off. But now, lying in bed, in one of these brief periods of nocturnal wakefulness that she had decided were

the product of brain idiosyncrasy rather than breathing problems, Isabel turned and looked at the sleeping form of Jamie beside her. She still experienced a sense of novelty, even if they had been together for a couple of years now; a sense of having been given a precious gift. And he felt it too; he had expressed it that way, too, when he told her that he was grateful for her. 'I feel that I've been given something,' he said. 'Somebody has given me you. Isn't that odd? Because it doesn't happen that way, does it?' She watched him breathing. The sheet that he had drawn up to his chest and that lay crumpled about him like a Roman toga moved almost imperceptibly, but still moved. The act of breathing was not really an act at all, as the will played no part. We did not tell ourselves to breathe – except sometimes, in yoga classes and the like – and when we were asleep, as Jamie was now, the system itself remembered to do what was required. And how many of the other things we did fell into that category?

Isabel wondered what a detailed record of our day's activities would look like – not a record of the sort that might appear in a diary: *Went into town. Had lunch.* That kind of thing gave a broad-brush account of what we did but did not list the really particular, the hundreds – tens of thousands probably – of little actions in a person's day. We did such things all the time: tiny movements of the limbs as we sat in a chair or lay in bed, as she did now; little twitches, the flickering of the eyelids, the touching of the fingers, the inclining of the head. Those were nothing really – background noise, one might say – but they would all be religiously entered in this record of the day. And then there were the things we said – the speech acts, as philosophers called them – which ranged from the *ums* and *ers*, the muttered phrases of apology on bumping into somebody in a crowd, the meaningless expressions that lubricated our social

dealings with one another. A transcript of our speech over the space of a day would make sobering reading, Isabel thought; and over a lifetime? What would we have said? What would it amount to? How much energy would we have wasted on the smallest of small talk; how many months would be filled with sheer nonsense?

And then, as often as not, when the time came to talk, really to talk, we were tongue-tied, as could happen to people at the bedsides of the dying, when there was an urgency that cried out for big things to be said, and we found that we could say very little, or that tears made it impossible to speak. Isabel remembered once visiting an aunt on her father's side who did not have long to live; she had wanted to thank her for her generosity to her as a girl, and although she had managed to say the words that expressed her gratitude, the aunt, known for her coruscating wit, had simply said, 'Flattery will get you everywhere,' and later that afternoon had died. But at least she had been thanked. 'Flattery will get you everywhere' were memorable last words, if indeed the aunt had said nothing more after Isabel left her bedside, which she thought was probably the case. It would be a perfectly presentable final sentence, although not as witty, perhaps, as Oscar Wilde's gazing in dismay at the decoration surrounding his deathbed and saying, by way of farewell, 'Either that wallpaper goes or I do.'

If a transcription of our day's speech would make uncomfortable reading, how much more dismaying, perhaps, would be a record of our thoughts. For a moment she imagined how it would look. A mixture of memories, fleeting and prolonged, what-if speculations, idle observations, regrets – that would be its shape for most of us, and for most of us, too, the leitmotiv would be . . . Isabel paused, unwilling to reach a conclusion so

solipsistic, but unable to avoid it; the leitmotiv would be *me*. It was that simple. Most of us, most of the time, were thinking about ourselves.

But was that really bleak, or just human? We were, after all, ourselves; that was all we really knew, and the only point from which we could act. We could think of others, of course, and did, but such thoughts were often about others in the context of ourselves – what they had said to *us*, what they had done to *us*.

She looked at Jamie, who stirred.

'Jamie,' she whispered. She had not intended to, but did. She uttered his name, as if to confirm the fact that he was there; we named things and they became more real.

He stirred again. A person's name is the one thing he hears even in sleep.

'So . . .' he muttered drowsily.

'Are you awake?' Isabel whispered.

'Am now . . .' although his eyes were still shut.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I won't talk to you any more.'

He reached out a hand. There was a three-quarters moon outside and an elongated rectangle of light came in through the chink in the curtains. She would have to replace those curtains; Grace, her housekeeper, had been going on about that for years now. 'Those curtains, they're ancient, Isabel, and the lining has rotted, you know.'

She gazed at Jamie's forearm in the moonlight; flesh made silver. She took his hand in hers and held it lightly. She wanted to cry, from sheer happiness, but he would really wake up if he heard her crying those tears of joy and think that something was wrong. Men, on the whole, did not understand crying for happiness, as women did. There were so many different sorts of tears.

She thought: I shall not think. And that thought, a prompting that denied itself, worked as it always did – she drifted off to sleep, holding Jamie's hand. When she awoke to the sound of Charlie gurgling in his cot in the next-door room, she found that miraculously Jamie's hand was still in hers, as lovers will sometimes find that through the night they have cleaved together and are still thus arranged in the innocent light of morning.

That day was a Friday, a day that Isabel always enjoyed very much, although Saturday was her absolute favourite. She had the usual feelings about Monday, a day that she had never heard anybody speak up for, although it must have had its defenders; workaholics, perhaps, found Monday intoxicating in its promise of a whole week of work ahead, but for others, in her experience, it was more commonly Fridays or Saturdays that were favoured. In her case, Friday had been further boosted by Jamie's usually being free on that day, which meant that they could do things together, taking Charlie off on an outing somewhere, or she could use part of the day to catch up on *Review* affairs while Jamie entertained their son. Whichever of these she chose, there was a very satisfactory feeling of making a choice that was unconstrained by necessity. If she worked on a Friday, she did so because she wanted to, not because she had to; and if she went off somewhere with Charlie, it was similarly a matter of doing what she wished.

Occasionally Jamie had to work on a Friday evening, if he was summoned to play with the chamber orchestra that relied on him when a bassoon was called for. Sometimes he would also be needed on a Friday for session work – a recording of music for a film, perhaps – but that rarely happened, and Fridays had remained more or less free ever since he had given

up taking pupils on that day. These pupils were his bread and butter; he taught some of them at the Edinburgh Academy, the school on the north side of the city where he gave music lessons part-time, and others had their lessons in his flat in Saxe-Coburg Street, round the corner from the Academy. At the moment, he had told Isabel, they were not very good, although one or two of them could be competent players if they tried. But they did not practise, in spite of the exhortations he wrote in their notebooks about scales and exercises.

'Of course, Charlie will practise diligently,' Isabel had said. 'When he starts playing his . . .' She looked at Jamie. He had said something once about miniature bassoons – something called a tenoroon. Somehow she could not picture a reduced bassoon, with miniature levers and shrunken key-work, being played by Charlie in his Macpherson tartan rompers.

Jamie understood her hesitation as a sign that it would be for him to decide the shape of Charlie's musical education.

'Violin,' he said. 'Let's start him on strings. And anyway, they can't blow wind instruments until they're much older. Nine is probably the earliest. Before that their lungs aren't strong enough and they can easily damage their lips. The muscles around the lips are still forming, you see.'

She smiled at the thought of Charlie with his unformed lips and a violin. He would attempt to eat it if she gave him one now, but they could start when he was three, which would come soon enough. And then, after the violin, when he was old enough, ten or so, he could learn the Highland bagpipes, starting on a practice chanter before proceeding to a real set, ebony drones and all, to the full, primeval wail that sent shivers down the spine. He would wear the kilt – Macpherson tartan again – and play the pipes; oh, Charlie, dear little Charlie.

That Friday, Jamie had no commitments and Isabel decided that, although she might take advantage of his presence to do some work in the earlier part of the morning, she would suggest that they should all go into town for lunch together. She had promised to see her accountant, but she had been putting it off; he had telephoned with an offer to come and see her if she would not come to him. She felt guilty about that, as he was a mild man with the air of one who was long-suffering, as no doubt he was.

'I can only do so much with the figures I'm given, Isabel,' he had told her. 'I can't make things up, you know; we don't work that way.' She wondered whether this implied that *she* worked that way – making things up.

She had assured him she would give him what he wanted, and had dutifully put printing bills and postage receipts for the *Review* into a folder . . . until she had somehow forgotten. She had scrambled around and a few missing receipts had turned up, but not everything, she suspected.

'I have to see Ronnie,' she said to Jamie. 'I have to give him some papers. It shouldn't take too long. Then we can go to Glass and Thompson for lunch. Charlie likes their quiche.' And he had indeed liked it on their last visit, even if most of it had ended up on the floor around the table. Charlie had sophisticated likes, his parents were finding out to their surprise; he enjoyed olives, and would wave his hands at the sight of quail eggs. It was almost a parody of the tastes of the privileged baby and Isabel felt slightly embarrassed at the thought of it. She did not remember giving him his first olive – it would never have occurred to her to do so; had Jamie done that? And quail eggs? Would it be oysters next? It was Jamie, she decided; he tended to feed Charlie with whatever they were eating, and Charlie never refused anything from his father.

Jamie was happy with the suggestion. Isabel could make an early start in her study while he took Charlie down to the canal in the jogging pushchair, the one that allowed him to run while pushing. Then Charlie could have his mid-morning sleep and be bright and ready for the outing into town.

They breakfasted together. Jamie, who did not like to eat anything very much before a run, had a cup of milky coffee and a slice of toast spread with Marmite. Charlie had rather more: a small carton of strawberry yoghurt, mashed-up boiled egg on fingers of toast, and an olive, stoned, of course, and cut into four minute parts.

Grace arrived before they had left the table. She fussed over Charlie, who waved his arms enthusiastically, his unambiguous signal of pleasure.

'Pleased to see me?' cooed Grace, hanging her hemp shopping bag on the hook on the back of the kitchen door. 'Of course you are, you wee champion! And what's that they're giving you to eat? An olive. Surely not? Bairns don't like olives, so they don't.'

Isabel glanced at Jamie, who smiled, and looked away; disagreements between Isabel and Grace were not his affair and he tried to keep out of them. Privately he sided with Isabel and she knew that she had his support, but they were both aware that it did not help to declare it.

'Some bairns do,' said Isabel. 'This one, for example.'

Grace ignored this. Still addressing Charlie, she continued, 'It'll be quail eggs next, my goodness! And caviar after that.'

'Small children like all sorts of things,' said Isabel. 'They're people, after all, and people have peculiar tastes and beliefs.' The reference to beliefs slipped in; she had not really intended it, but it rounded off the observation nicely, and was tossed in rather like a depth-charge, thought Jamie. He looked at Isabel

with concern. There had been a discussion between the two women the previous week about feng shui, in which Grace had enthused about chi forces and Isabel had expressed the view that they simply did not exist. If they did, she said, then surely we could detect them with some sort of electronic apparatus. This reference to peculiar beliefs was about that, Jamie thought. The debates about olives and chi forces were minutely intertwined.

Grace had stood her ground during that discussion. 'There are plenty of things nobody can see,' she said. 'What about that particle thingy that they're trying to find. That Higgs bison, or whatever.'

'Boson,' Jamie had interjected. 'Higgs boson. It's a sort of . . .'

'Boson,' said Isabel. 'I saw Professor Higgs the other day, you know. He was walking along Heriot Row looking down at the pavement.'

'He won't find his boson down there,' said Grace.

'He wouldn't have been looking for it,' said Jamie. 'It exists only in the mathematics he did. It's a theory.'

The argument about unseen forces had continued for some minutes and remained unresolved; both sides were sure of their position and both were sure that they had won. This reference now to peculiar beliefs threatened to reopen the issue, which Jamie did not think was a good idea. Fortunately, Grace paid no attention to it and changed the subject. There was a load of washing to be put in the machine and did Isabel want Charlie's clothes dealt with now or later? And there was the question of the vacuum cleaner, which had stopped working the previous day; had Isabel phoned, as she had promised, about that?

'I shall,' said Isabel. 'Today. Definitely. I'll put it on my list.'

Grace had nodded, and gone off to begin her tasks.

'Quail eggs,' whispered Jamie. 'She really disapproves.'

Isabel nodded. 'Mind you, it *is* outrageous,' she said. 'What sort of child have we produced, Jamie? Quail eggs!'

He smiled. He loved her. He loved Charlie. He even loved Grace, in a way. It was a perfect morning, the best sort of early summer morning, and all he felt was love.