



HOW TO CHANGE SOMEONE YOU LOVE

By Susan Vogt

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You can't of course – at least not directly. Any good marriage counselor or parenting educator will tell you that. Change is an inside job. It's hard enough to change yourself, much less make someone else change to meet your fancy. But that doesn't stop us from nagging those close to us to be different. Now, granted, sometimes it's a necessary parental job to point out to a child how he or she needs to change their ways. And of course supervisors at work are charged with accomplishing a task and sometimes that means they must ask people to change the way they're doing something. But this isn't a basic personality change.

I've had some experiences lately, however, that have changed *me* and it's making me think about how people change for the better. Some were prompted by other's good will toward me and that led me to try it out on those close to me. Let me share a few stories:

I was at a weekend retreat recently and at the end of the meeting a friend came over and mentioned three specific things I had said during the retreat that she liked. She later sent me an e-mail reinforcing the same items. Of course, it felt good to have someone notice my contributions, but then I started wondering if this was merely an exercise in self-improvement that my friend had undertaken for herself. My points weren't that stellar! What's more important, however, is what happened next. Even though I realized that the compliments *may* have been calculated and not completely spontaneous on her part, still they were specific enough that they felt authentic. I felt uplifted and kept coming back to the pleasure that someone appreciated me. My care for my friend increased.

Awhile back I was having a problem with a co-worker. It seemed we were always butting heads. As a last resort, I decided to go out of my way to compliment this person at several meetings we had together. The compliments were not related to the content of the meeting, they were just kind words. They didn't come easily either but I decided that the only person I had control over was myself and I would start there. I had to very consciously think of this person and search for something positive to say. Perhaps it was just a coincidence, but it wasn't long before I noticed my colleague being more friendly and complimentary to me also.

On the home front, I've been making a concerted effort for the past six months to compliment one of our teenagers and to overlook some annoying habits that I had been nagging him about. I wasn't feeling too successful since the habits didn't seem to be changing. But now that I think of it, an even bigger miracle has been occurring. Suddenly I notice him complimenting me! "Mom, you look very professional in that suit." is the one that sticks in my mind. Quite unheard of for a 13 year old.

Another child goes out of his way to hug me. I'm not sure if guilt or desire for a favor prompts it. I've discovered it doesn't matter. I find myself feeling more kindly toward him even if it's not the purest motivation.

What I've learned from all this is that changing the way I act toward another, changes *me*! The other may also change, but that's just a bonus. The more important thing is that my attitude changes. What I change about myself is how I look upon the other. I make a conscious effort to see the good within the person and say it. A side effect is that by changing myself, I might end up indirectly changing the other.

I've also learned that saying the compliment to the other can be planned. **It does not have to be spontaneous. It does, however, have to be genuine.** Being specific rather than a vague, "You look nice today" contributes to this authenticity.

As a family minister I often get calls from spouses in unhappy marriages who explain that their partner has this or that troublesome trait and that it's ruining their marriage but the spouse won't listen, won't change, and won't go with them to counseling. The conventional wisdom in situations like this is that as much as one wants to save the marriage, unless both partners are willing to work at it, it's pretty useless. Perhaps this insight about seeking the good in the reluctant spouse and saying it might eventually stimulate the desired change. This of course doesn't guarantee the partner will change, but it at least provides a hopeful step before giving up.

Taking this a step beyond speech, when Pope John Paul II visited the supreme patriarch of the Buddhists in Thailand the custom was that they would start their visit with 30 minutes of silence during which they exchanged what was called "benevolent glances." I've been trying that out lately when I feel upset. It works. I find myself praying for the other person. It changes my heart!

So how might you use this idea in your life? Here's a resolution that's simple enough to do while waiting in line or in traffic: Is there someone in your life that you've been wanting to change? Try commenting on positive qualities of the person or at least try a benevolent glance. It might change you!