

**Honorable Mention – Informal Essay**

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*Under the Rainbow*

People are uncomfortable with compliments. I know this because I am so uncomfortable when people tell me I look nice that I always immediately blurt out, *I showered today*.

Not *everyone* showers every day. Some people don't have access. Others want to protect their skin and hair from being stripped of natural oils. Me, I don't like moving my hands that much.

I do have rules for myself. I don't allow physical dirt to build up on my skin. If I can't neutralize my body odor with deodorant, a clean shirt, and a light spritz of perfume or smell-eradicating furniture spray, I know it is time for a shower. I do wash my face every night. And, obviously I wash my hands after using the toilet or eating pancakes, or before holding newborn babies. If I don't smell bad, though, I don't see a reason for all that extra hand movement and scrubbing. And while I am aware showering can be an enjoyable act, I prefer to save my energy for other things, like sleeping in or sitting.

Cleanliness is a theme in my life. On my second date with my now husband, I went to use the restroom at the little restaurant where we were eating. I came out, walked politely past the jazz musicians we came to see and sat back down at our table. My husband pressed his shoulder into mine, leaned his red-haired head close to my ear and whispered, *Did you wash your hands?*

I guess basic sanitation was on his list of what he wanted in a woman. I was offended and confused. Yet, here we are, married for 13 years. Mr. Clean-Hands got himself a gal who doesn't like to shower.

The trick, I guess, to giving a compliment to someone like myself — someone who quickly deflects nice words with cheap jokes— is to catch them off guard with kindness. I might say *You look nice!*, and then quickly turn around and make a phone call, so they are forced to sit in their discomfort and newfound knowledge of themselves. I did this to a drive-through employee recently. He handed me my chicken. I said, *You have nice eyes*, then zoomed away.

I enjoy complimenting people. On birthdays, I like to text the birthday person a note. I take a deep breath, center myself, and try to name the truest positive things I know about them: *You're nice. You listen when I talk. You have a knack for wearing orange! We laugh so much together. Your hair is the perfect length. I like how you seem to really enjoy dancing! Happy Birthday!* Almost like a short, celebratory eulogy.

One day, I was standing with a group of my friends at the vintage store I used to own when my friend declared, *Any time I want to feel good about myself, I talk to you.* I'm flattered. One of the hundreds of promises I made to myself as a child, and one of the few that I have actually kept, is to say out loud the good I see in people. When I was twelve, I told a bookstore employee that I liked her hair, and she responded that she had really needed that kindness. *Say the good. Say the good. Say the good.* I promised myself.

And so, surrounded by used sofas smelling of the same odor-removing spray I use on myself, my friends stood discussing how great my compliments are, but also how uncomfortable they can be. *The allure is there, and I want more,* one said. *But I am also freaking out as your words come out at me.*

We all laugh. Another friend, one with questionable business savvy, says, *You should sell compliments. People need this. Make a business of it!*

So, I did. But I decided people are more likely to play along if it's for charity. For one strange day, my fellow Tulsans could solicit feel-good words about themselves for a mere \$10 under the guise of donating to the Equality Center. A compliment booth. I'd set it up at our annual maker's market, which this year would feature locally made macrame, pottery, journals, stuffed animals, knives, and nice words.

I called up the fundraising department of the Equality Center to verify they didn't mind me mentioning them in my promotion of the Compliment Booth. Yes, I explained, politely, for the fifth time, *I will sell compliments to willing customers and donate my sales to your cause.*

*Sure, I guess, they say.*

*Great, I reply, I'll make you proud!*

*Sure. Thank you. They hang up.*

I knew exactly what my booth should look like. It was all cardboard and hot glue. Three pieces of cardboard forming a large window I could sit on a tabletop and look through at people. A hand painted rainbow across the top, two cardboard strips as the sides, some cotton fluff for clouds at the ends of the rainbow. I think a friend added twinkle lights. And why not?

When I was in seventh grade I was chosen to give a group of visiting administrators a lively tour of our large school. I enjoyed myself so much, I couldn't wait to tell my mom that I'd figured out what I wanted to do for a living: become a tour guide! *Nope*, she said, matter of factly, *People don't get paid to do that.* I'd clearly moved on to more profitable career choices — acquiring an

English degree, owning a small retail business, asking for money in exchange for compliments. At the very least, I'd clearly not lost my youthful optimism.

Certain I needed to be wearing a vest, but unable to find or fashion one in time, I sat at my booth wearing a bright red cardigan and a smile. I'd decided to shower that morning. It was a special occasion. Now I want the world to be more full of people able to love themselves, but I also like situations where it's impossible to know what's going to happen. This setup was ripe with unpredictable outcomes and I felt uncertainty tingle all through my limbs.

*THIS is how to live*, I whispered to myself.

The nerves set in. I hoped people would show up to be told nice things about themselves. I feared they'd not want to appear attention-seeking. I feared they'd think \$10 for a few words was a total ripoff. I feared they wouldn't be up for what amounted to certain vulnerability for them, so I tried to double down on making myself look more vulnerable. This is why I wished I had a vest. A vest is just about the most vulnerable addition to any outfit I can imagine. A vest or maybe the little hand-stitched felt cat pin I often wear as a badge of welcoming. It's like a "Safe Place" sign that a gas station has in its window to let runaway kids know they can get help there. A vest is as close to literally wearing your heart on your sleeve as one gets. Mostly though, I think nothing says "I am more likely to be embarrassed than you" than sitting eagerly under a cardboard rainbow sign hoping to raise money saying compliments to strangers.

People showed up.

There was an architectural preservationist who seemed unsure — a friend had brought her to my booth, and I held her gaze so carefully as we talked. I praised her commitment to tending

the art in our town. After leaving the table, I saw her quickly exit my shop and start sobbing outside the window. Did people not often celebrate her work? Was she not already proud of her endeavors? If someone doing obvious good needed it so badly, what about people who don't so clearly deserve to be proud of themselves — thieves, murderers, or men who ask women if they've washed their hands?

Another woman, a friend's mom, approached. *Hi! You look so great in red!* No sooner had her butt grazed the seat when she sprung up and walked away.

*Wait! I can do better!* I called after her.

She yelled over her shoulder, *That was my compliment! It was enough. Thank you.*

The majority of people let me shower them with attention, careful words of care, excessive eye-contact. They complimented me back. I told them I showered. It was sweet and fun.

One younger man showed up to see if I really could come up with something nice to say about him, as if that might be rather hard and even embarrassing for me to fail at this effort. He sat in the chair across from me with such bravado, the smirk on his face challenging me to find something nice to say.

*Hello!* I said, pleased with this unexpected twist.

*So, like, am I going to pay \$10 for you to just compliment my shirt?* He sneered.

I tilted my head and grinned. *Well, your shirt's OK. But I'm trying not to hand out surface-level observations. I want to give you something better for your money. I want to offer you a really genuine, really good compliment.*

I smiled bigger, ignored his provoking presence, and asked this man about his work and hobbies. I don't remember now what he did or really anything about him, but only how boppy and certain he was that I couldn't say something nice about him. Once we got to talking, I'm sure I found out he took his mom to lunch every Wednesday or recycled regularly or maybe I just told him he was brave to come find out if he was in fact as unlikeable as he thought he was. I had a few like him. I'll be damned if they didn't leave broken down and then built back up.

I complimented 79 people that day, and more often than not, towards the end of each chat, we'd look down and realize we were holding hands. All four of our combined total of hands, outstretched and together, a lifeline between us. We didn't even know each other's last names! Words brought us together. And, surprise at the unexpected tenderness would help us to pull apart.

Somehow in one to five minutes, it felt like I was summer camp friends with these people. I wanted to promise to write to them, to see if our moms would let us visit over the school year.

A few days before the maker market, my family was sitting up at my shop just before closing time. I was putting the finishing touches on my cardboard office, glue-sticking some cotton in all the right places. My four-year-old daughter helped. I told her about my plan and, with the urgency of youth, she asked if she could host the booth right then. I plopped her in a chair under the humble rainbow, and alerted those left in the building that Harriet needed a customer or two.

She sat in her red dress and pigtails, waiting eager and hopeful — a smaller version of her mother.

One of my friends taught sewing lessons in the corner of our store. Her burly, sweet husband had come to help her load some sewing machines into her car. Her husband is a welder with hand tattoos. He rides motorcycles. He doesn't talk much. On occasion, he would sit and color with my daughter to avoid talking to people at the shop. This evening, he noticed that no one was following through on the request for visitors, and wanted to save my daughter from any disappointment. He came over to sit in front of her. *Hello*, he smiled. My daughter seemed nervous but sat up tall, looked him straight in the eyes, and said in her small, sweet voice, *You're a really nice man.*

A few tears welled up in his eyes. He looked at me and nodded his approval for what I know looked like a silly game.