Looking for the best in others -- and in ourselves

A week or so ago, my wife and I sat down on a Friday evening to view a movie. The movie I chose was "Pollyanna."

I first saw Pollyanna, a feel-good Disney flick from the era when the term "wholesome entertainment" was a good thing, when I was only six years old. I still remember the scene where -- well, perhaps you haven't seen it, so I won't spoil the suspense.

At any rate, I seem to watch it every few years or so -- and as I've gotten older, I continue to find useful lessons from the homespun philosophy that Pollyanna taught.

Anyway, as I was watching it this time around, I took special note of a quotation from Abraham Lincoln. The quote occurs at a pivotal point in the show.

"If you look for the worst in people and expect to find it, you surely will." -- Abraham Lincoln

Truth be told, like many people, I'm sometimes guilty of this sin -- I don't always look for the best in the people I meet.

And frankly, I also don't always look for the best that's in me.

Sometimes, ignoring Lincoln's advice, I look for the worst in people -- including myself.

I doubt I'm alone in this problem -- looking for the best that people have to offer is often one of the most difficult habits to cultivate -- and looking for the worst in others is often one of the most difficult bad habits to break.

How can we cultivate the habit of looking for the best in the people we meet each day?

Og Mandino, in his bestseller, "The Greatest Salesman in the World," had one of his "Scrolls of Success" suggest we should walk up to a person, and say (to ourselves, of course) "I Love You."

I probably wouldn't go that far -- but let me suggest some ideas that have worked for me.
1. **Look for what you can learn from a person.** Even the worst person can be a "bad example" to help you avoid pitfalls in your life -- but most people have a great deal of useful information that we can learn.

To understand what you can best learn, try observing the person for a while, and then ask questions about their areas of strength. For example:

"I notice you seem to be able to outsell many of the other salesmen in our organization. I'm interested in learning more techniques -- is there anything you would be willing to share with me?"

or

"I am always amazed by you! I know your family life growing up wasn't that good -- and yet you always seem to have a positive outlook on life. How were you able to overcome all the demons that you must have in your past?"

or

"I'm always trying to get to know other people in the office better. It seems like we've never taken the time to get to know each other. What made you take this position?"

The key, as always, is to get the person to talk about himself or herself -- and in the process, you can decide what areas to pick and choose from their strengths.

I've always believed that gaining an understanding of a person is the key to learning to like that person.

2. **Look for how you can help a person.**

This is the flip side of the coin -- and it has to be handled wisely. Nobody likes a know-it-all, and you don't want to come off as someone who goes out of his/her way to lecture others.

I believe that one of the best ways to find the best in someone else is to serve them. That may mean you give them help in times of trial -- or it may mean that you help them grow and learn during everyday times.

Nobody in this world knows everything. Your experiences and training have taught you different things than anyone else in this world. Nobody has your unique viewpoint on life. No other person has your mix of talents, techniques, and experiences. Nobody else can offer the same things as you can offer.

That said, few of us ever offer anything of ourselves.
Did you ever stop to think that your personal mix of talents and experience may be just what someone needs? Have you ever realized that you could help others -- sometimes in a vastly important way?

Your influence may be the determining factor that makes the difference between a worthwhile career and a dead-end job. Your listening ear may make the difference between a divorce and a good marriage. Your help may make the difference between a wonderful life and a suicide.

We never really know the effect we have on other people -- but that shouldn't stop us from trying.

3. Actively keep your outlook positive towards other people.

I know it's hard to keep your outlook positive towards someone when he pulls in front of you on the freeway and then slows down. It's difficult to keep a positive outlook when you feel you're being used and abused by your co-workers. Still, try to keep your outlook positive -- and if you need to, cut back on interaction with the seriously negative people you work with.

It really doesn't matter what other people are like -- since you have control over your thoughts and emotions, you can choose how to see them.

I used to work with a person who irritated every fiber of my being. I just didn't like him. He used people, he was arrogant, abusive, loud, and combative. And yet, he was one of the most talented web designers I've had the privilege of working with. I don't miss him -- but I miss his design skills.

My boss found him to be a different sort of individual. The man billed himself as having a "good sense of humor," but I never saw it -- and yet my boss did. My boss had chosen to see this person from a positive outlook. I must say he was one of the few who could.

4. Expect the best from people -- and you'll quite often get it.

Here's where Lincoln's quote comes in. When you look for the worst, you find it.

Conversely, when you look for the best in others, you find it, as well.

Most of us see the bad things around us, and start to believe that's all people have to offer -- and yet there's a lot of beauty surrounding us every day -- and there's a lot of beauty in people, as well.

Many people have been worn down so far in their careers, -- especially nowadays where employees are expected to do their own work, plus the work of
the two other people who've been laid off -- that they have lost all excitement. That may mean they're hard to get to know -- but it's usually worth the time and trouble.

5. Look for the best in yourself -- and keep doing it.

Sad, but most of us treat other people better than we treat ourselves. The great hazard of this approach is that we empty out our souls, so to speak. We get to the point where we start criticizing ourselves, but never seeing the strengths that other people can so readily see.

In our quest for seeing the best in ourselves, it may be necessarily to enlist the aid of a loved one, who can help us to see where our strengths lie -- but afterwards, concentrate on looking for the positive in your life.

Ask yourself this question: **What do I have to offer to humanity? What is my personal path to a more positive life?**

Pollyanna is just a movie, (and a book, and several other movies) but the lessons from it can be used in our daily lives. As Abraham Lincoln suggested, when we look for the worst -- or the best -- in others, we're going to find it.

We should always look for the best in other people -- and in ourselves.

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