

# SMALL GIFTS, LASTING MEANING

*The Value of “Happys” in Serving Adults Experiencing Generational Poverty*

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**“The object is small. Being remembered is not.”**

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## Small Gifts, Lasting Meaning

*The value of small, thoughtful gifts is not found in their price.*

*It is found in the message they carry.*

Adults who have lived for years in generational poverty often carry responsibilities and pressures that are difficult for others to see. Money may be stretched to cover only necessities. Transportation problems, unstable employment, family responsibilities, health concerns, housing challenges, and unexpected expenses can consume both financial and emotional energy. In that environment, something as simple as a small gift—a “happy”—can carry meaning far beyond its dollar value.

**I noticed you. I thought about you. I am glad you are here. You matter.**

A happy is not charity in the negative sense of the word. It is not meant to communicate, “You need something from me.” At its best, it communicates something very different: you were remembered. That distinction matters.

For adults who have spent much of life concentrating on survival, small extras are often the first things eliminated. A new notebook, a favorite snack, a pretty pen, a coffee mug, a small plant, or a modest gift card may seem insignificant to someone with disposable income. To another person, it may be something she simply would not buy for herself.

### Why Small Gifts Can Matter

People experiencing long-term poverty should never be viewed as a single type of person. Every adult comes with individual strengths, experiences, preferences, and needs. Poverty does not determine a person’s character, intelligence, motivation, or ability.

At the same time, prolonged financial hardship can limit opportunities for experiences many other people take for granted. Life may contain many transactions related to need: fill out this application, bring this document, stand in this line, prove eligibility, ask for assistance.

A thoughtful gift changes the interaction. There is no form to complete and nothing to prove. The message is simply, “This is for you.”

**A small gift can create a moment in which a person is not being evaluated, screened, corrected, or asked to prove need. She is simply being remembered.**

Small gifts can also contribute to belonging. Imagine a learner walking into class and finding a small bag at her seat containing a pen, a piece of candy, and a note that says, “We are glad you are here.” The cost may be small. The message is not. For someone who has frequently

felt overlooked, judged, or defined by what she lacks, that moment can communicate: you belong in this room.

## **A Happy Should Never Become a Reward for Worthiness**

There is an important difference between recognition and making affection conditional. We should not teach adults that they receive kindness only when they perform well.

Some happys should therefore be given for absolutely no reason at all—not because someone passed a test, had perfect attendance, or reached a goal, but simply because someone thought of them.

**“No special reason. We are just glad you are part of our class.”**

That kind of gift communicates unconditional regard. In a Christian adult education or compassion ministry setting, it also reflects a central truth of Christian hospitality: people are valuable before they accomplish anything for us.

## **“Just Because” Happys**

These do not need to be expensive. In fact, inexpensive and thoughtful is often better.

- A nice pen with a short note: “For all the good things still ahead.”
- A small notebook or journal.
- A bookmark or Scripture card.
- A favorite candy bar or packaged snack.
- A small bottle of hand lotion or other practical personal-care item.
- Warm socks in winter.
- A reusable water bottle or coffee mug.
- A packet of flower seeds or a small plant.
- A \$5 coffee or fast-food gift card when appropriate.
- A small tote bag for books and class materials.
- A handwritten encouragement card.
- A simple key chain with an encouraging word such as Hope, Courage, or Believe.

An ordinary Tuesday can be an excellent time for a happy. A surprise offered on a day when nothing special is happening may be more memorable than a scheduled holiday gift.

## **Recognizing the Smallest Steps Forward**

Adults returning to education often have a long distance between their starting point and the major goal ahead. Some of these “happys” can be given in the privacy of the office. If the only celebration is graduation, we have missed dozens of opportunities.

**She came to class for the first time.** *Celebrate it.*

**She returned for the second week.** *Notice it.*

She read an entire paragraph aloud. *Recognize it.*

She completed her first book. *Celebrate it.*

She wrote her first complete paragraph. *Recognize it.*

She completed a practice test. *Celebrate it.*

She improved her score by three points. *Notice it.*

She filled out a job application by herself. *Recognize it.*

She opened an email account or created a résumé. *Celebrate it.*

She arrived at class after a terrible week instead of quitting. *That may deserve recognition most of all.*

**Progress is not always dramatic. Sometimes progress is simply: She came back.**

### What Recognition Might Look Like

Recognition does not always require a gift. A handwritten note, a short certificate, a word of encouragement, or a small token can become meaningful when it names the progress that was made.

| Small Advancement                   | Simple Recognition                                                            |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| First full paragraph                | Give a nice pen and say, "You are officially a writer now."                   |
| Ten classes completed               | Give a bookmark: "Ten classes. Ten times you chose to keep going."            |
| Improved a math skill               | Say, "Look what you can do now that you could not do six weeks ago."          |
| Completed a difficult practice exam | Offer a small snack or coffee card with: "You did not quit when it got hard." |
| Finished a first adult book         | Give a simple "I Finished a Book" certificate or bookmark.                    |
| Started a new job                   | A congratulations card, practical notebook, or small lunch gift card.         |

### Celebrate Effort, Strategy, and Persistence

Praise is most helpful when it gives the learner evidence of growth. Instead of praising only intelligence or natural ability, name the effort, strategy, or persistence you observed.

*Instead of: "You're so smart!"*

**Try: "You stayed with that problem until you figured it out."**

*Instead of: "You're a great reader."*

**Try: "Six weeks ago you needed help with that whole paragraph. Today you read it yourself."**

*Instead of: "You're good at math."*

**Try: "You used the strategy we practiced, and it worked."**

This kind of encouragement helps a learner understand that progress is connected to actions she can repeat. The message becomes: something I am doing is working.

### **Consider a "Small Wins" Tradition**

An adult education program can intentionally create a culture of recognizing progress. For example, every Friday could include a brief Small Wins moment.

- "I made it to every class this week."
- "I read to my granddaughter."
- "I understood my work schedule without asking someone."
- "I made my own doctor's appointment."
- "I wrote an email."
- "I passed one section of my practice test."
- "I did not give up."

Sometimes the instructor may recognize something the learner has not recognized herself. A respectful way to do that is to ask, "May I tell you what I noticed this week?" That question alone communicates respect.

### **Birthdays and Personal Milestones**

Birthdays are another opportunity, but they should be handled thoughtfully. Some adults have complicated feelings about birthdays, and some may not want public attention. When appropriate, simple recognition might include a card signed by the class, a cupcake, a favorite snack, or a small gift.

- First day at a new job
- Thirty days employed
- Driver's license earned
- First apartment
- Completed résumé
- Passed an equivalency subject test
- First paycheck
- Opened a bank account
- Read a complete book
- Six months in class
- High school equivalency credential earned

- Beginning college or job training

We should not reserve celebration for the finish line.

## **Protect Dignity**

- Do not publicly identify someone as needy.
- Do not give one learner a special gift in front of others because you know she cannot afford something.
- Do not require a painful personal story in exchange for assistance.
- Do not photograph someone receiving help unless she has freely agreed.
- Do not make a gift feel like payment for spiritual participation, attendance, or a decision of faith.
- Whenever possible, allow choice.

**Choice communicates something poverty frequently takes away: agency.**

## **Avoid Creating Another Financial Burden**

Programs do not need elaborate budgets for happy's. Churches, volunteers, and community partners can help collect appropriate items. A ministry might maintain a small Celebration Closet containing pens, journals, bookmarks, mugs, toiletries, socks, small gift cards, snacks, tote bags, devotional books, and seasonal items.

Quality matters. The question should never be, "What can we get rid of?" It should be, "Would I feel good giving this to someone I care about?" People experiencing poverty should not receive damaged, dirty, expired, or unusable items simply because they are free. Dignity includes quality.

## **The Christian Meaning Behind a Small Gift**

Christian compassion is not merely meeting emergencies. It is seeing people. Jesus repeatedly noticed individuals others passed by. He saw people as persons rather than projects.

A Christian adult education ministry therefore has the opportunity to communicate something greater than, "We are helping you improve your reading." It can communicate, "We are glad God brought you here."

**You were remembered today.  
Someone expected you to come.  
Someone noticed that you tried.  
Someone believes your progress matters.  
Someone is celebrating with you.**

For a person accustomed to being recognized primarily when something is wrong, being noticed because something is going right can be extraordinarily meaningful.

### **Never Underestimate the Small Things**

A five-dollar gift will not eliminate poverty. A candy bar will not remove the barriers facing a family. A new pen will not earn an equivalency credential.

But ministry has never been only about solving large problems. Sometimes ministry happens in small moments.

*A learner comes into class after a difficult week. On her desk is a notebook with a note: "For the next chapter of your story."*

*She smiles. She sits down. She opens the book. And she tries again.*

That little "happy" did not change everything. But for a few minutes, it may have reminded her of something she desperately needed to know:

**I matter here. And someone believes there is more ahead for me.**

## Quick Reference: Thoughtful Happys and Small Wins

*Keep it simple, adult, useful, respectful, and personal.*

| JUST-BECAUSE HAPPYS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | SMALL WINS TO NOTICE                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Nice pen</li><li>• Small notebook</li><li>• Bookmark</li><li>• Packaged snack</li><li>• Hand lotion</li><li>• Warm socks</li><li>• Reusable cup</li><li>• Flower seeds</li><li>• Small plant</li><li>• \$5 gift card</li><li>• Tote bag</li><li>• Encouragement card</li><li>• Key chain</li><li>• Simple devotional</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Came to class</li><li>• Came back after a hard week</li><li>• Read a paragraph</li><li>• Finished a book</li><li>• Wrote a paragraph</li><li>• Improved a practice score</li><li>• Learned a math fact</li><li>• Sent an email</li><li>• Made a résumé</li><li>• Completed an application</li><li>• Passed one subject test</li><li>• Started a job</li><li>• Reached 30 days employed</li><li>• Earned the credential</li></ul> |

**A good happy does not say, “You are needy.”  
It says, “You were on my mind.”**

**A good recognition does not say, “Now you are worthy.”  
It says, “I noticed your effort and your growth.”**

**The object is small. Being remembered is not.**