

What Goes Around ...

Perhaps you've heard this fascinating story of the inter-connection of two lives. The story goes that a poor Scottish farmer named Fleming was working in his fields one day when he heard a cry for help. He ran toward the sound and pulled a terrified drowning boy from the pond on his property. The next day the wealthy father of the rescued boy arrived at Fleming's cottage door, offering to repay the farmer for saving his son's life. Fleming refused payment. The wealthy man then offered a different kind of reward. In gratitude for Fleming having saved his son's life, the wealthy man proposed to educate Fleming's son. And so he did. Years later Fleming's son, Alexander, completed his medical school education and went on to discover penicillin, one of the most sweeping advancements in modern medicine.

And what of the boy that farmer Fleming had saved from drowning? His name was Winston Churchill. And as an adult he contracted a serious case of pneumonia that was successfully treated by penicillin. Thus the act of grateful generosity that sent young Fleming to medical school ultimately saved Churchill's life – again.

We fell in love with this tale when we first heard it, but upon further research, we learned that though the story has been told and retold since the 1940's, it's apparently untrue. Fleming's medical school education was not financed by the Churchill family. And though Churchill did contract pneumonia, he was not treated with penicillin.

This got us wondering. Why would this story be so compelling that despite its fictional premise, it has endured for decades? Maybe the story endured because it tells us a truth that is more significant than the bare facts. It teaches a truth about the consequence of actions.

This is a subject we ponder often, isn't it? Cause and effect. Action and reaction. What goes around comes around. Reap what you sow. Karma. These are just a few of the ways we describe the relationship between our behavior and ultimate life consequences. All these sayings and concepts imply that there is a fairly direct and reliable connection between behavior and its consequences. If we behave nobly and admirably, good will result in our lives. If we behave badly or corruptly, we'll feel the negative repercussions.

Have you found this to be so? Do you see good rewarded in your life and in the lives of those around you? Are evil, selfishness, and unscrupulousness punished? There is not always a perfect correlation, is there, between behavior and appropriate consequences? All too often good deeds seem thankless, while unethical behavior goes unchecked or is even glamorized and rewarded.

But we are heartened by the surprising popularity of the story of Fleming and Churchill. It reminds us that we, as a culture, are still striving for, hoping for, and dreaming that kindness and goodness and generosity will be rewarded. And the story implies that our human interconnections run more deeply through the course of our lives than we may guess. An act of goodness today may find its reward many long years later.

That's a good story – and it's true, despite the facts!