

ADMIRAL BRYSON AND HIS HIGH EXPECTATIONS

I don't know if Admiral Bryson was a bona fide U.S. Navy admiral or not. But we all referred to him that way—at least behind his back. What makes him memorable is the funny way he had of turning a phrase. Chuckling in muffled tones, his students couldn't believe anyone would talk that way on purpose.

Finding flaws in a problem solution would quickly spawn an exposition of the particular "chinks in the armor." And to take a roundabout approach would be tagged as a "fair festoon of foolishness."

My recollection of his famous sayings has eroded with time, but I do recall with great clarity a particular incident. Trying to be invisible, a new student slipped into the back of a classroom filled with folks who were mostly strangers to him. Unfortunately, the Admiral spotted him—and loudly announced his presence. "Mr. Jones, raise your hand. Gentlemen, this is Mr. Jones. I've had him in class before and want to warn you about him. I expect Mr. Jones to set the curve in this class. Be on your toes."

Jones oozed lower in his seat, pretending not to notice the daggers from others' eyes. He was a marked man. He did, however, make the highest grade, just as the Admiral expected.

In another class, Jones and a friend would frequently compare test papers. Essay exams had no precise right or wrong answers, so the professor's judgement ruled. Somehow Jones consistently received the better scores. Why? Because the professor expected Jones to do better—and marked his work with a broader brush. His minor infractions were overlooked, but not his friend's. Was that fair? No, but expectations were the controlling factor.

A man wrote me, "I never really knew my mother, but she was on drugs. All my life people told me I would be just like her." It's not surprising that he followed her footsteps all the way to prison. What if he had been expected to do better?

Anne Sullivan once said, "I am beginning to suspect all elaborate and special systems of education. They seem to me to be built upon the supposition that every child is a kind of idiot who must be taught to think." But she fully expected Helen Keller, her blind and deaf pupil, to learn. Propelled by high expectations, Anne's perseverance eventually hit pay dirt. "My heart is singing for joy this morning! A miracle has happened! The light of understanding has shone upon my little pupil's mind, and behold, all things are changed!"

The "Non-Reciprocal Law of Expectations" tells us that negative expectations yield negative results. The converse is also true. Positive expectations bring positive results.

If I expect to be in the mulligrubs, burdened down with cares, I'll not likely be disappointed. But if I expect miracles to happen, I'll wake up looking for them. I may just find—as Anne Sullivan did—that all things are changed for the better.