

# SEIDMAN: Are you a bucket-filler or a bucket-dipper?

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A page from Venice resident Carol McCloud's "bucket" book series, teaching children lessons about kindness, mindfulness and resilience. [Illustration by Glenn Zimmer]

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Posted Nov 18, 2019 at 11:19 PM

**A recent stint of volunteer reading at an elementary school provides a timely reminder about “the three secrets to happiness.”**

Recently I visited Gocio Elementary for “Be a Bucket Filler” reading day sponsored by [Embracing Our Differences](#), the local nonprofit whose work focuses on diversity and inclusion. Like the organization’s annual [Dr. Seuss day](#) in the spring, the event invited volunteers to read to young students throughout the district, in this case from the series written by Venice resident [Carol McCloud \(aka The Bucket Lady\)](#) that begins with “Be a Bucket Filler: A Guide to Daily Happiness for Young Children.”

I can’t say no to these requests. Why? Because I love reading. I love children. Most of all, I love reading to children. And since I have no grandkids (I borrow others’ whenever possible), the opportunity to do so is all too rare.

It turned out there was a substitute teacher in April Ammeson's third-grade class that day, and she knew nothing about my 8:30 a.m. visit. Nevertheless, I was warmly welcomed and invited to lead not only the Pledge of Allegiance, but the "Star Spangled Banner." (Yikes, I signed up for reading, not singing!)

After the students settled on carpet squares in front of my toddler-sized chair, I pulled out a copy of McCloud's "Buckets, Dippers and Lids: Secrets to Your Happiness," a more evolved exploration of a premise first put forth by [Dr. Donald O. Clifton](#), who wrote the first "Dipper and Bucket" story in the 1960s. (Clifton later co-wrote the New York Times bestseller "How Full is Your Bucket?" and became known as "the father of strengths psychology.")

The concept is simple. (So simple, in fact, I wished I'd been the one to imagine its money-making possibilities in the children's book market.) The basic idea is that we are each born with an invisible "bucket" that holds all the happiness and love you receive on any given day. When your bucket is full, you're feeling great; when it's empty, you're probably having a [terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day](#).

Every time someone is kind or nice to you, your sense of contentment grows. And here's the kicker: When you do the same for someone else, it not only makes them feel good, it fills your own bucket at the same time.

This is the kind of ["EQ"](#) (emotional intelligence) learning that's all the rage in early education today. This was character-building and mental health mindfulness wrapped around reading appreciation and story time, with a takeaway that's enduring but not heavy handed.

Just as my Dr. Seuss days had prompted discussions about right, wrong and honesty ("The Cat in the Hat"), the environment ("The Lorax") and being brave enough to try new things ("Green Eggs and Ham"), the fourth volume in McCloud's series — which advances the bucket concept by adding "dippers" and "lids" — was rich with lasting lessons.

Filling buckets is just the first secret to happiness. Unfortunately, everyone is born with a "dipper," too, that can scoop from others' buckets, diminishing their sense of well-being. (This is where we venture into the not-so-idealistic real world.) When you do that, eventually it makes you feel like a slimebucket, so you're actually double dipping.

The second secret involves thinking before you speak and resisting the urge to dip out of someone else's bucket, or even your own. (Some of us are hardest on ourselves.)

The final secret is knowing when you need to shut your lid to protect yourself, or shield others from the dastardly dippers. This one was a little trickier to explain.

When kind, supportive thoughts are incoming — or even constructive criticism delivered in a sensitive, compassionate way — your lid needs to remain open. But you need to snap it shut when you're the target of bullying, discrimination, anger, jealousy and other forms of malice. (This is called resilience, another popular word in social and emotional learning circles these days.)

“Even many grownups don't know they have a lid,” McCloud writes.

My mother was one of the all-time great bucket-fillers, so that part comes easily to me. And with six little dippers, she also had ample opportunity to instill another line from McCloud's book directed at dippers: “If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.”

But I really wasn't ever taught the third secret. And consequently, far too often I can be thin-skinned, overreactive and even self-pummeling.

Thankfully, the kids in Mrs. Ammeson's class didn't seem to have my hangups. Not only could they tell me when they'd use their lids — “When my brother's teases me,” “When someone makes fun of my accent,” “When Mom's had a bad day” — they understood where the dipping was coming from.

“Sometimes people are meanest when their buckets are the most empty,” said the smallest (and maybe sagest) boy in the class.

Simple lessons? Simple to understand. Harder to consistently execute. It takes practice, McCloud writes.

And as a bespectacled, gray-haired man with a hopeful index finger pointed upward who's pictured on the cover of the book reminds us, “Not just for kids!”

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