

On Gratitude

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At Thanksgiving we feel good about gratitude. We may express the wish that we gave thanks all year round. The good news is that we can develop the trait, the practice, the gift of gratitude.

Recent research shows:

- As a personality trait, individuals vary widely in the amount of gratitude they feel and the frequency they feel it and express it.
- People who feel more gratitude turn out to be more likely to be happy and less likely to be depressed or stressed.
- Gratitude has one of the strongest links with mental health and satisfaction with life of any personality variable.
- Grateful people tend to have better social relationships and contribute more to the harmony of family and community.

And we can learn to be more grateful. A review of the scientific literature puts it this way: “Gratitude interventions lead to greater gratitude, life satisfaction, optimism, prosocial behavior, positive affect, and well-being, as well as decreased negative affect.”

How is gratitude learned? In English-speaking countries, we teach our children relentlessly to say thank you. Do you remember all the time you spent prompting your preschoolers with “What do you say now?” For children in America, thanking is believed to be the very last of the social graces they acquire. Most children don’t manage to produce thank you spontaneously until sometime between the ages of 4 and 6. A study in England asked parents to draw up a list of the most desirable children’s manners learned at the table. “Thank you” was at the top of the list.

As a result of our training, polite native speakers of English may say “thank you” a hundred times or more a day. One scholar estimates that thanking is performed twice as often in English than in other cultures and languages. It becomes ingrained to the point that in aphasia or Alzheimer’s disease, saying thank you is one of the last things that’s forgotten. Our constant reiteration of “thank you” seems odd to foreigners, even to other Europeans. In the novel *The Newlyweds*, a Bangladeshi immigrant in America thanks a cousin in Dhaka for looking after her parents. Her cousin rebukes her for sounding like a foreigner (or “bideshi” in Bangla): “You are becoming a *bideshi* over there—‘thank you’ this and ‘thank you’ that.” Japanese people tend to say “I’m sorry” instead of “thank you.” *Please pass the soy sauce*, one says. *Here you go*, says the other. *I’m very sorry*, says the first.

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But the gratitude I want us to consider today is deeper than custom or politeness. We feel grateful for a gift, be the gift an object or a kindness or a courtesy or sheer grace. Gratitude is a feeling of joy and the desire to reciprocate. Gratitude may sometimes be accompanied by a sense of indebtedness or obligation, but its essence is a feeling quite unlike anything that accompanies a payment or a contract. A disposition to gratitude helps and encourages us to carry out our responsibility in life, which is to grow in love.

The opposites of gratitude are superiority, narcissism, a sense of entitlement, and selfishness. So are thoughtlessness and forgetfulness. In his *Devil's Dictionary*, Ambrose Bierce defines "ingratitude" as "a form of self-respect that is not inconsistent with acceptance of favors." (A great book, by the way. Do you know how Bierce defines "saint"? "A dead sinner revised and edited.")

How do we develop a deeper gratitude beyond saying thank you on cue? The psychologist Martin Seligman was one of those who discovered that people could willfully become more grateful and optimistic and therefore happier and healthier. But he struggled to apply the insight to himself. It took his five-year-old daughter Nikki to generate his "aha." Seligman and Nikki were weeding in the garden.

I have to confess that even though I have written a book and many articles about children, I'm actually not very good with them. I am goal-oriented and time-urgent and when I'm weeding in the garden, I'm weeding. Nikki, however, was throwing weeds into the air and dancing and singing. Since she was distracting me, I yelled at her, and she walked away. Within a few minutes, she was back, saying, "Daddy, I want to talk to you."

"Yes, Nikki?"

"Daddy, do you remember before my fifth birthday? From when I was three until when I was five, I was a whiner. I whined every day. On my fifth birthday, I decided I wasn't going to whine any more.

"That was the hardest thing I've ever done. And if I can stop whining, you can stop being such a grouch."

This was an epiphany for me. In terms of my own life, Nikki hit the nail right on the head. I was a grouch. I had spent fifty years enduring mostly wet weather in my soul, and the last ten years as a walking nimbus cloud in a household radiant with sunshine. Any good fortune I had was probably not due to being grumpy, but in spite of it. In that moment, I resolved to change.

Once we are resolved to be more grateful, here are two things we can do that research has shown to be successful:

- Keep a "gratitude journal" for recording all the reasons, events, and help received that merit your gratitude, past and present and as they occur in the future. A number of studies have randomly assigned subjects to keep three kinds of journals. One group records specific things they are thankful for. Another group records things that have bothered them that day. And a third group receives the neutral instruction to write down some of the things that happened that day.

The results: the grateful group is happier, more successful in fulfilling their goals, exercises more, and reports better relationships with others

- A second idea is to write a gratitude letter. Professor Seligman developed this intervention, which he now uses in class as well. You think of someone to whom you are grateful but whom you have never properly thanked. You compose a 300-word testimonial to that person. And then you deliver it in person, not telling the purpose, just saying “I want to come over and see you.” The results are emotional, and then measurable months later.

What is the essence of these techniques? Let me ask you a question. Does behavior tend to follow attitudes, or do attitudes tend to follow behavior?

William James, writing more than a hundred years ago, found that changing behavior leads to changes in attitudes ... not the other way around. He shared this finding in one of his lectures to teachers.

There is, accordingly, no better known or more generally useful precept in the moral training of youth, or in one's personal self-discipline, than that which bids us pay primary attention to what we do and express, and not to care too much for what we feel...

Thus the sovereign voluntary path to cheerfulness, if our spontaneous cheerfulness be lost, is to sit up cheerfully, to look round cheerfully, and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there. If such conduct does not make you soon feel cheerful, nothing else on that occasion can. So to feel brave, act as if we were brave, use all our will to that end, and a courage-fit will very likely replace the fit of fear. Again, in order to feel kindly toward a person to whom we have been inimical, the only way is more or less deliberately to smile, to make sympathetic inquiries, and to force ourselves to say genial things. One hearty laugh together will bring enemies into a closer communion of heart than hours spent on both sides in inward wrestling with the mental demon of uncharitable feeling. To wrestle with a bad feeling only pins our attention on it, and keeps it still fastened in the mind: whereas, if we act as if from some better feeling, the old bad feeling soon folds its tent, and silently steals away.

One day about eight years ago, our then seven-year-old daughter Kristen came into the study and asked me, “Daddy, what are you reading?” I happened to be reading that essay by William James, and I shared it with her. She liked it. A few weeks later, she came to me again and told me about a project for her second-grade class. Each student was to choose a famous American, dress up like him or her, and in a special class with parents present, talk about his or her life.

“How about if I am William James?”

A week later, there we were in class. She had on a beard and a top hat. She said a sentence about who James was, and then in her own words summarized the idea that if we change our behavior, we change our attitudes. (Elaine and I felt very grateful.)

Act grateful, express gratitude, and we will soon feel grateful. John Steinbeck wrote a remarkable essay about his friend Ed Ricketts, the unorthodox scientist and local legend who was the model for the character of Doc in *Cannery Row*. After Ed's death, Steinbeck tried to analyze “the great talent that was in Ed Ricketts, that made him so loved and needed and makes him so missed now that he is dead.” Steinbeck eventually decided that Ed's talent lay in

his ability to receive, to receive anything from anyone, to receive gratefully and thankfully and make the gift seem very fine. Because of this everyone felt good in giving to Ed—a present, a thought, anything.

Perhaps the most overrated virtue on our list of shoddy virtues is that of giving. Giving builds up the ego of the giver, makes him superior and higher and larger than the receiver. Nearly always, giving is a selfish pleasure, and in many cases it is downright destructive and evil thing. One has only to remember some of our wolfish financiers who spend two-thirds of their lives clawing fortunes out of the guts of society and the latter third pushing it back. It is not enough to suppose that their philanthropy is a kind of frightened restitution, or that their natures change when they have enough. Such a nature never has enough and natures do not change that readily. I think the impulse is the same in both cases. For giving can bring the same sense of superiority as getting does, and philanthropy may be another kind of spiritual avarice.

It is so easy to give, so exquisitely rewarding. Receiving, on the other hand, if it be well done, requires a fine balance of self-knowledge and kindness. It requires humility and tact and great understanding of relationships. In receiving you cannot appear, even to yourself, better or stronger or wiser than the giver, although you must be wiser to do it well.

Accepting a true gift can itself be a grateful act; gratitude is virtue in the receiver.

And a key to this virtue is simply being *aware*. In the epilogue to her wonderful autobiographical book *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard ponders what she as the middle-aged author has in common with the girl and adolescent she has just written about.

...where have they gone, those other dim dots that were you: you in the flesh swimming in a swift river, swinging a bat on the first pitch, opening a footlocker with a screwdriver, inking and painting clowns on celluloid, stepping out of a revolving door into the swift crowd on a sidewalk, being kissed and kissing till your brain grew smooth, stepping out of the cold woods into a warm field full of crows, or lying awake in a bed aware of your legs and suddenly aware of all of it, that the ceiling above you was under the sky—in what country, what town?

You may wonder, that is, as I sometimes wonder privately, but it doesn't matter. For it is not you or I that is important, neither what sort we might be nor how we came to be each where we are. What is important is anyone's coming awake and discovering a place, finding in full orbit a spinning globe one can lean over, catch, and jump on. What is important is the moment of opening a life and feeling it touch—with an electric hiss and cry—this speckled mineral sphere, our present home.

What connected Annie Dillard now with all the other Annie Dillards she was? Two feelings.

One is the chilling sensation of lowering one foot into a hot bath. The other, which can and does occur at any time, never fails to occur when you lower one foot into a hot bath, and when you feel the chill spread inside your shoulders, shoot down your arms and rise to your lips, and when you remember having felt this sensation from always, from when your mother lifted you down toward the bath and you curled up your legs: it is the dizzying overreal sensation of noticing that you are here. You feel life wipe your face like a big brush...

Here is how Annie Dillard concludes the book: “I am here now, with this my own dear family, up here at this high latitude, out here at the farthest exploratory tip of this my present bewildering age. And still I break up through the skin of awareness a thousand times a day, as dolphins burst through the seas, and dive again, and rise, and dive.”

Deeply felt gratitude is a species of awe. It implies a sense of one’s littleness before the wonder of the universe, of the earth and all of nature, of one’s unique self “breaking up through the skin of awareness.” Awe, like gratitude, is the opposite of what we call “taking things for granted.”

Let me conclude with one more story. In 1795, the young Scottish physician and naturalist Mungo Park set off to explore West Africa. Tall, sandy-haired, and quiet, Park was barely 24; he had already traveled to Sumatra. Now his goal was to be the first European to reach the Niger River and the legendary cities of Timbuktu and Haussa. He traveled up the Gambia River 200 miles to an outpost called Pisania, which had three white people, where he spent seven months learning one of the local languages and recovering from malaria. Eventually, he and two bearers headed east. He had many adventures, including four months’ captivity under a Moorish chief. He escaped and eventually reached the Niger River. He went down the river as far as Silla, where, exhausted, he decided to turn back short of Timbuktu on August 25, 1796. On the return journey he was robbed and stripped by Moorish bandits. They took everything—his horse, his compass, his hat, all his clothes except his trousers and his battered boots. They had evidently intended to kill him, but saw him as a feeble white man beneath contempt. They did throw his hat back to him—not realizing that it contained the papers of his travel journal folded up in the band. In what became a famous passage, Park described sitting down in utter despair, believing that the end had come.

After they were gone, I sat for some time looking round me with amazement and terror ... I saw myself in a vast wilderness in the depth of the rainy season, naked and alone; surrounded by savage animals, and men still more savage. I was 500 miles from the nearest European settlement. All these circumstances crowded at once on my recollection; and I confess my spirits began to fail me. I considered my fate as certain, and that I had no alternative but to lie down and perish.

But then something curious happened. As he hung his head in utter exhaustion and misery, Mungo Park’s gaze wandered listlessly over the bare ground at his feet. He noticed a tiny piece of flowering moss pushing up through the stony earth beside his boot. In a flash, his scientific interest was aroused, and leaning forward to examine the minute plant, for one moment he forgot his terrible situation. He carefully described this movement out of paralyzing despair:

At this moment, painful as my reflections were, the extraordinary beauty of a small moss in fructification, irresistibly caught my eye. I mention this to show from what trifling circumstances the mind will sometimes derive consolation; for though the whole plant was not larger than the top of one of my fingers, I could not contemplate the delicate conformation of its roots, leaves, and capsula, without admiration.

In that moment of wonder, Park was transformed:

Can the Being (thought I) who planted, watered, and brought to perfection, in this obscure part of the world, a thing which seems of so small importance, look with unconcern upon the situation and suffering of creatures formed after his own image? – surely not! Reflections like these would not allow me to despair. I started up, and

disregarding both hunger and fatigue, traveled forwards, assured that relief was at hand; and I was not disappointed.

He soon fell in with two friendly shepherds, and continued on his way westwards, towards the sea and the long journey home. Miraculously, he found he could pay his passage by writing phrases from the Koran on loose scraps of paper, saved from his journal, and selling these as religious charms.

He finally reached Pisanía on June 10, 1797, and then Scotland on December 22. He was greeted with delight and astonishment, for people had assumed him dead. Two years later, his book *Travels in the Interior of Africa* was published, and it became a classic.

Mungo Park's awe kindled gratitude. To encourage gratitude, we should develop what G.K. Chesterton called "the ancient instinct of astonishment," the surprise and wonder that quickly turn into gratitude. "There is no way in which a man can earn a star or deserve a sunset."

And so, let us be grateful. Like Mungo Park but without the malaria or the robbers, may we be aware beneath our feet of the wonders of creation.

Tonight, may we, like Annie Dillard, be aware of our legs under the sheets, and imagine the starry skies above.

And right now, may we, like Martin Seligman, resolve to redirect ourselves toward gratitude.

Acknowledgments

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The long quotes are (in order) from:

Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, New York: Free Press, 2002;

William James, "The Gospel of Relaxation," in his *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students about Some of Life's Ideals*, New York: Henry Holt, 1914 (available here: <http://des.emory.edu/mfp/jgospel.html>);

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