

Gratitude

I went on Amazon the other day to find books about gratitude, and I was revolted. What came up were expensive gratitude journals, notebooks that are supposed to help people keep daily gratitude lists. Happiness promises abounded in self-help books which promised joy all day every day for a year, so I felt myself going into emotional sugar-shock. Amazon as a reference source was initially a non-starter. But then I read the research saying that such journals are demonstrably effective in promoting happiness. Just write down three to ten things per day that you are grateful for, and you will be happier. Write a letter to someone you are grateful for and deliver it to them, and your sense of well-being increases.

My resident reference source, Sarita Roy, said that gratitude is a matter of discipline. We are accustomed to avoiding problems. We spend most of our time focused on metaphorically rubber-necking the car wreck by the side of the highway to see what went wrong, so we don't do it ourselves. But we need to remind ourselves to be grateful for all those things that did not, and that do not fall apart, destroy each other, or rot. Thich Nhat Han called it being grateful "for your non-tooth-ache." This attitude brings some balance to our lives, and we are less prone to depression and anxiety. This attitude of gratitude is promoted by the daily lists, and is more a way of being than simply a feeling.

The research, especially that done by Alex Wood and M.E. McCullough, supports that people who are generally grateful are also happier, less depressed and stressed, more satisfied with their social relationships, more joyful, have a higher degree of control of their environments, greater self-acceptance and feel more positive about others, and sleep better. The Twelve Step programs have long recommended a daily "gratitude inventory" as supporting sobriety. Gratitude has even been recommended as having a positive effect on physical and mental health, but the skeptic in me objected. Maybe gratitude could simply be a result of feeling and coping better. I looked deeply into the research and that view was not supported.

So, let's extend this a little. A client told me that she was grateful for her having had a bad brush with Covid, because it got her off of her compulsive ingestion of coffee and sugar. We aren't talking just a little sugar and caffeine, but 8, 9, 10 cups of coffee and massive desserts. Those habits stopped due to her taste buds being temporarily warped by Covid. The operating principle here is that some good can come out of short-term painful experiences, if it doesn't kill us, and recognizing that unexpected benefit consciously helps in the long term. Gratitude for experiences we didn't want but helped change us for the better soothes the hurt a little.

Soothing the hurt is ultimately more comprehensive than a temporary feeling. As the Rev. Diane Heath said:

"I have been fortunate that there were people in my life who have taken me aside explained that the bumps and bruises were PART of life that would strengthen me if I hold on. Oh, yes, some others pointed out perhaps I was at one time inviting myself to be over-bruised, and I didn't need that much "education." Experience in many ways is the most expensive teacher, but the lessons must be taken seriously. This has not meant that in the changes in my life I have had to forfeit stability or consistency, but that I finally developed an ability to lean into the wind, rather than being so rigid every gust of wind that came along blew me over."

Gratitude facilitates that flexibility to "lean into the wind" by reducing personal defensiveness. Everybody wants to be "right," or at least blameless to some great degree, so the bumps and bruises Diane Heath describes are overtaken by gratitude.

Sometimes, that meaning is what in my field we call "reaction formation." "I'm not hurt, I just wanted a reality-check." Frankly, few people can honestly say that something that obviously disappointed, hurt, or damaged them was a good thing. Acknowledging hurt might make it hurt more, at least temporarily. That is just being human. But the theory goes, and it is a pretty good one, that feeling gratitude, if repeated over months and years, accrues into a durable attitude.

Cultivation of gratitude is central to spiritual development. Gratitude is all over the First Testament of the Bible, and deeply ingrained in Judaism. Whether through thanking God or gratitude for acts of human kindness and goodness, Judaism supports frequent prayers and rituals of thanks. Christians have historically seen gratitude as a virtue, because thanking God for grace—“freely given love”—promotes people to shape themselves in the image of that generosity toward others. In the more highly ritualized Christian groups, the Eucharist (during which people symbolically partake of the blood and body of Christ) is the most important rite and derives from the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” Further, Islam is rooted in giving thanks for God’s goodness five times per day in prayer and fasting for Ramadan is supposed to induce gratitude in the believer. The resultant higher self-esteem, generosity, well-being, and lessened stress for spiritual people then functions as a positive feedback loop promoting more gratitude and support for feeling good.

The research also supports what major religions have known for millennia: grateful people are generous to others. Grateful people are more inclined than others to empathize and help others, which is beneficial in both the short and middle terms. As Anne Lamott put it:

Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behavior. It almost makes you willing to be of service, which is where the joy resides. It means that you are willing to stop being such a jerk. When you are aware of all that has been given to you, in your lifetime and the past few years, it is hard not to be humbled, and pleased to give back. (Anne Lamott, HELP THANKS WOW)

And can we receive, truly take into ourselves, gratitude? Receiving gratitude often makes people squeamish, as if they know they don’t deserve praise. When you are thanked, you may also reflect on your unworthiness, as if they REALLY knew who you are . . .etc. Some people recoil from being thanked because they hear it as an evaluation, which makes them self-conscious. I hear you, but you also don’t have the right to decide what someone should feel. They are thankful; give thanks. Ask yourselves to hear and accept that despite your self-perceived flaws you

also did something that was appreciated. Soak it up. It is humbling to know that, despite the odds, you are part of a social group that recognizes you and values you. All those religions I mentioned before ask that you accept being freely accepted unconditionally. As Anne Lamott puts it again:

Most humbling of all is to comprehend the lifesaving gift that your pit crew of people has been for you, and all the experiences you have shared. The journeys together, the collaborations, births and deaths, divorces, rehab, and vacations, the solidarity you have shown one another. Every so often you realize that without all of them, your life would be barren and pathetic. It would be *Death of a Salesman*, though with email and texting. (Anne Lamott, *HELP THANKS WOW*)

There are many kinds of gratitude. People may be grateful for what you did or said to them, or to others. People may simply be grateful for WHO you are, the example you provide for how life can be lived well, and the patience you show for their own efforts at living well. These are all rare, precious gems of social appreciation. What follows is a list of the gratitude statements shared with me by people in the congregation: (read the gratitude statements)

There are many here who have not been recognized by name, whose good deeds and warm words have soothed frightened, hurt, or sad people. There are many whose spontaneous gestures and hard work have been overshadowed by a string of crises. That is why we have a concluding statement in the *Candles of Joy and Concern* honoring those joys and worries too tender to share. Know that you are part of a larger whole that needs your participation and your help moves us toward wholeness.