

Gratitude: What, Why, and How?

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[prepared text by Karl Perrin – for 4/14 at Beacon UC – edited by Keith Wilkinson]

[\[link\]](#) to a TED talk by Louie Schwartzberg as mood-setting background to the topic]

“The real voyage of discovery consists not
in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

—Marcel Proust

I believe that my daily practice of three written gratitudes has given me new eyes. I believe that a daily practice of three written gratitudes can give anyone new eyes. With a daily practice of written gratitude, we sharpen our perception of the kindness of others, and that makes us happier, that makes us kinder, and we generate a virtuous circle of co-operation. Today I hope to strengthen our gratitude muscle, from the research of psychologist Robert Emmons, and from environmental activist, Buddhist, and author Joanna Macy.

1993 was the year of Clayoquot Sound, and also the year I read Al Gore’s book: Earth in the Balance. That book was excruciating for me. He called our society “dysfunctional” in the face of threats like runaway Climate Change, and wasteful consumption. The message was clear. If we continued with “business-as-usual”, civilization would collapse by 2050. Our son, Ben, will be 66 in 2050. I made a vow to him that I would do everything in my power to prevent such a collapse. Everything in my power. Then in 2030, when I’m 85, I will stand before him and say. “I did my best.”

And so I asked “How could I be effective and not burn out?” First, I joined the Environment Committee of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver, where I could balance cold science with the warmth of community, art, and spirit. I learned about gratitude, by practicing Joanna Macy’s “Work That Reconnects” as a committed environmental activist. In this work there are four stages. One: Gratitude; Two: Honouring Our Pain; Three: Seeing with New Eyes; Four: Going Forth into action.

Gratitude is the first stage, and honouring our pain for the world, is the second. Because gratitude is empathic it generates what Thich Nhat Hanh calls “Inter-being”. Inter-being helps us see our individual joys and sorrows in the context of community joys and sorrows, and community resources. The third stage is seeing with new eyes. Macy writes “In the third stage, we step further into the perceptual shift that recognizes our pain for the world as a healthy expression of our belonging to life. Seeing with new eyes reveals the wider web of resources available to us through our rootedness within a deeper, ecological self. This third stage (seeing with new eyes) draws on insights from holistic science and ancient spiritual wisdom, as well as from our creative imaginations. It opens us to a new view of what is possible and a new understanding of our power to make a difference.”

The fourth and “final station, Going Forth, involves clarifying our vision of how we can act for the healing of our world, identifying practical steps that move our vision forward.” (unquote)

And then we return to gratitude and the cycle repeats, but at a deeper level. In fact, as I will show, a daily practice of written gratitude makes us so happy and healthy, so grateful, that we want to heal what can be healed, we want to serve, and express our gratitude, through well grounded generosity.

Joanna Macy and the Threat of Nuclear War

Joanna Macy's first book was called *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*, written before the end of the Cold War, when many of us despaired of humanity surviving a nuclear war or a nuclear winter. Do you remember those days? Fear was rampant. As she worked with burned-out anti-nuclear activists, Macy did not deny that fear. She showed how fear is the starting point for courage, and practicing gratitude provides ballast, as we venture into the stormy seas of non-violent direct action: such as the Women's Peace Camp at Greenham Common. Let us thank those women who camped in the winter rain to stop a nuclear holocaust. Let us thank the Peace Marchers, the Retired Admirals, the millions of heroes of that battle for sanity.

Climate Change

In our time, we have a different kind of threat to civilization. It's the slow motion train wreck known as Climate Change or Global Warming. Just like the nuclear arms race, the Industrial Growth Society is insane, and yet we are embedded in it, tooth and claw. Digging up the tar sands, steaming out the sand and clay, mixing it with condensate, and pushing it over the Rockies to our coast is insane. It is insane because it fuels the melting Arctic which is releasing vast quantities of the powerful greenhouse gas, methane. The vicious cycles have begun. I was born into this madness in Detroit, now in ruins. And now, here we are, on the edge of the Pacific—fighting pipelines, coal ports, fracking, fighting to preserve Burns Bog, and the Fraser River delta, where five million birds rest on their annual migration, where millions of salmon and other species come home. I would give up, were it not for gratitude.

Robert Emmons, psychologist at the University of California, has spent his life researching gratitude. Emmons encourages us to see what we are grateful for as gifts. These gifts are all around us, the practice of gratitude simply helps us to see them, and accept them, as gifts. The latest book by Robert Emmons, is called *Thanks!: How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. (2008).

Whether you want to practice gratitude to turn despair into empowerment, to be sane in an insane world, or as Emmons suggests, just to be happier, this book has solid recommendations, backed by quality research. As Unitarians we are committed to a search for truth and meaning. We try to combine good science with good religion. As Einstein said, "Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind."

What is gratitude? Why get serious about it? And what is the most efficient, effective way to practice gratitude? "Beth" reviews positive psychology books for Amazon.ca. Beth gives it 5 out of 5 stars. Quote:

"So what exactly is gratitude anyway? (Emmons) tells (us) that it comes (in two stages): (first) the acknowledgement of goodness, and (second) recognizing that the source of this goodness lies at least partially outside

yourself... With that in hand, the book goes on to tell you exactly what gratitude has to do with happiness. ...There are three ... things that determine your happiness: (raise three fingers) circumstances, genetics, and intentional activities. Cultivating gratitude fits into the happiness equation by being an intentional activity—one you can practice that has been shown to increase happiness levels. But does it REALLY work? In a word, yes, and I can say this with certainty because the author himself has conducted randomized controlled trials that have proven this. ...And so, a good portion of the book is spent talking about his, as well as other's research, that cultivating gratitude can not only make one happier, but healthier as well. But while the book contains its share of research, it very much leaves the reader with some practical tools by its end. Obstacles that get in the way of gratitude are discussed, as well as some very practical options to incorporate gratitude into your life, keeping a journal being just one example.

...Here is a simple book that convincingly showed me that something as small and easy to do as being thankful, not only has the potential to change a person, but perhaps the rest of the world too. Thanks for a great book!" (unquote)

One common misunderstanding, which Beth repeats in her review is that "something as small and easy to do as being thankful ..." etc. Emmons is actually quite clear that the practice of gratitude, as a daily practice of expressing gratitude either in a journal or directly to the person or divine presence to whom one is grateful, is neither small nor easy. In defining his "gratitude", Emmons says (quote)

"First, gratitude is the acknowledgment of goodness in one's life...Second, gratitude is recognizing that the source of this goodness lies at least partially outside the self. The object of gratitude is other-directed; one can be grateful to other people, to God, to animals, but never to oneself... Gratitude implies humility—a recognition that we could not be who we are or where we are in life without the contribution of others." (unquote)

"Gratitude implies humility." Humility is rarely a Unitarian strength. Perhaps centuries of non-conformity have made us a bit defensive. We often believe we are smarter, more honest, stronger, more courageous, or more ethical than others. Maybe we are. Maybe we can be. But without gratitude, this self-congratulatory smugness cripples us. Gratitude, according to Emmons, requires recognizing our indebtedness to others. That's not a comfortable feeling. We really are indebted to others: for peace, for our comfortable lives, for our longevity, our food, for our hot running water, for everything. Without others, our lives would be impossible.

We take so much for granted, but the practice of gratitude helps us perceive the innumerable gifts coming our way. Gifts which we gladly and humbly accept. Humility is a good thing. We are blessed. When we perceive that our cup runneth over, we want to give, and we want to serve. When we feel grace flowing into us and gratitude flowing out, we create a pathway for all emotions, and we become patient with bad feelings. We trust that feelings will come and go like cycles of dark and light. When connected, when grounded in gratitude, our hearts soften. We stop

pushing against suffering, we relax, and we become useful. One needs self-confidence to risk humility. Emmons says “Gratitude requires that we affirm our dependency on others...”. So it’s a hit to our ego, that we are not so independent, after all. But gratitude strengthens our interdependent selves. We exist more, not less, when we let go and accept that we are only a part, of the interdependent web of all existence. True humility allows us to see that planetary survival is not only on our shoulders, not only up to us “geniuses”.

All species have a survival instinct, and they are teaching us, inspiring us, working for our survival too. Joanna Macy teaches that we can rest, we can relax, in the great hammock of all species’ survival instinct. We have many allies, and we can be grateful for that. We have to be humble enough to be deeply aware, and deeply grateful, that we really are all connected, well connected.

I will close with this quote from Thanks by Robert Emmons.

“An additional, essential aspect of gratitude is the notion of undeserved merit. When I am grateful, I recognize that I have no claim on the gift or benefit I received: it was freely bestowed out of compassion, generosity, or love... the theological term for this is grace. So we have another trio of terms that go together: grace, gratis, and gratitude. They flow into one another. Perceive grace and you will naturally feel gratitude. Grace is unearned. It is a free gift. If you believe in grace, you believe that there is a pattern of beneficence in the world that exists quite independently of your own striving and even your own existence.”

The poet Adrienne Rich wrote:

“My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.”

Sister cedar, thanks for our oxygen. Brother salmon, thanks for nutrition. Gentle people, thanks for your help. Now let's help each other strengthen our gratitude muscle: Every day write down three things you are grateful for. Every day write down to whom you are grateful.

Carry the flame.

Karl

Additional References

Macy, J. & Johnstone, C. (2012). Active hope: How to face the mess we're in without going crazy. New World Library: Novato, CA.

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Gratitude is often deemed as a key component in creating happiness in one's life. According to the Wall Street Journal, those who keep an "attitude of gratitude" tend to be happier and healthier than those who don't. These statements have been backed by numerous empirical research experiments whose results consistently show that gratitude improves mood, increases energy, and bolsters physical health. While the choice to be grateful should be a no-brainer, being grateful frequently escapes our mental foregrounds due to the demands of everyday life. Why? Quite simply, because we humans are animals. Our brains are hardwired to recognize survival-threatening, negative objects, places, and events. Thankfully, there are many effective techniques to help override nature and cultivate gratitude. One of the most effective is the process of keeping a gratitude journal (or gratitude list). The techniques listed below will help you get the most of the practice of keeping a gratitude journal.

Make Daily Entries

Each morning, pick up your gratitude journal and begin making entries. Start your day on the right foot, in a mode of gratitude. A study by Dr. Robert Emmons of UC Davis showed that when comparing groups of participants who kept daily gratitude journals against those who kept weekly journals, the daily practitioners reported more frequent, positive benefits to their mood and overall well-being.

Start with 3 Things Per Day

Making multiple entries requires you to think outside-the-box and 'reach' for entries that aren't readily on hand. Brainstorm all of the nice things your family has done for you, childhood moments, pleasantries that make your life easier, books and movies that have impacted your life, etc. Try thinking about what your life would be like without various people, places, and things. These techniques allow you to strengthen your gratitude muscles. At first, you may find it difficult to think of three new items per day, but your capacity for gratefulness will improve over time. According to Emmons, eventually you'll find more and more things to be grateful for in your daily life.

Focus on What Really Matters

Reflect on what really makes you happy in life. Are you more appreciative of your family or your GPS? Focusing on people tends to yield a more profound effect than focusing on things. By cultivating gratitude, you begin to focus on what you have instead of what you don't have. Material goods, such as money, cars, and gadgets, begin to be pushed aside for more satisfying blessings, such as fulfilling relationships.

Keep it up

Practice keeping a gratitude journal for a few weeks. Emmons's studies shown that long term effects such as increased energy and alertness start to manifest after gratitude becomes habit. Other studies have shown that

gratitude list keepers report improved sleep, increased frequency of exercise, and decreased stress.

Share

Those who keep a gratitude journal begin to notice a stronger connection to other people. Share your thanks with the people in your life that have helped contribute to your gratitude. Delivering your thanks in person creates a bonding experience that is pleasant for both the giver and receiver of thanks. Friends of those who keep a gratitude journal often report that the journal keeper is more helpful, joyous, and dependable.