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Gratitude as the Foundation for Joy By Robert Emmons and Marc Afshar

Introduction

As professors and ministry leaders, we are often inspired by the young people that we teach and disciple. Lisa Vannalee is one of these. In 2008, while watching a movie at home, Vannalee's mentally ill brother attacked her with a machete, delivering life changing injuries and leaving her a quadriplegic at age 16. Her brother was diagnosed with schizophrenia, found guilty and was sentenced to 25 years in a correctional facility that treats the mentally ill. After nearly six months in a hospital, she returned to high school and graduated with a 3.83 grade-point average. She went on to obtain a psychology degree from the University of California, Davis in 2013. Lisa never dwelt on the attack that left her paralyzed or detailed the struggles she's endured. She said she never had to forgive her brother for the attack that took the use of her arms and legs because she didn't have to. She was never angry with him. Lisa wrote about her brother in her blog. "In our case, the voices in his head told him that I was possessed and that he needed to save me," she blogged. Instead, she credited her faith, thankful that God had given her and her family hope and inspiration to press forward in the aftermath of this family tragedy. It was gratitude that empowered Lisa to overcome the awfulness of her circumstances. "There is not enough gratitude I can express or praise I can offer to God..." she wrote nearly a decade after the attack. "I have witnessed the amazing things that happen when we choose to lift our hands to help instead of hurt, to open our hands to receive or give, and to spread out fingers to grasp our loved ones who are unable to do the same."

In this collaborative volume, the authors are exploring dispositions and practices that enhance or inhibit young people in living flourishing lives. Our thesis in this chapter is that gratitude is fundamental and foundational to flourishing. Each of us, whether we are aware of it or not, tend to look at life through one of two prisms. We either see life through a lens of abundance,

sufficiency, surplus and security or through a lens of scarcity, deficiency, deficit, and insecurity. The former outlook leads to freedom and joy; the latter bondage and oppression. The difference between these default modes is gratitude. In gratitude, we experience an abundant life. In gratitude, we experience freedom and fullness. Gratefulness leads to joyfulness. Gratitude literally breathes new life into us, as it did for Lisa Vannalee.

Gratitude is a human quality with unusual power, so much so that it would not be an overstatement to say that the good life is impossible without it. As the moral memory of mankind” gratitude makes life better for self and others. Awareness of its importance raises inescapable big questions: How gratefully or ungratefully will each of us live our own lives? Why will we choose to do so, and what effects on ourselves and those around us? Writing in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics, and Public Policy*, Elizabeth Loder noted “Gratitude affects how a person conceives the world and expects others to behave. It increases interpersonal receptivity. It seeps into one’s being and affects all dispositions pervasively.” As the positive emotional response to benevolence, gratitude is perhaps the quintessential positive trait, an amplifier of goodness in oneself, the world, and others.

Throughout history, the concept of gratitude has been seen as central to the smooth running of society, a mainstay of philosophical and religious accounts of living, leading it to be deemed by Cicero not only “the greatest of the virtues, but the parent of all others.” Gratitude speaks to a need that is deeply entrenched in the human condition—the need to give thanks. It is a basic instinct—but one that is easily trampled on in a consumeristic culture. And we are worse off because of this. Without gratitude we fall prey to envy, greed, resentment, and entitlement. Gratitude, on the other hand, generates a positive ripple effect through every area of our lives, potentially satisfying some of our deepest yearnings—our desire for happiness, our pursuit of better relationships, and our ceaseless quest for inner peace, health, wholeness, and contentment. Gratitude is more, though, than a tool for self-improvement. Gratitude is a way of life.

A Closer Look

It took me a dozen years after completing my doctorate to conduct my first scientific experiment. Let me explain. As a personality psychologist, I studied what people were like, not what they could do under laboratory conditions. My methods were surveys, interviews, and experience sampling (beeper) studies. This was until I decided to study gratitude.

Well, I didn’t exactly decide. It was an assignment. In 1998, I was invited to a small conference focused on the virtues: Wisdom, hope, love, spirituality, forgiveness, gratitude, and

humility. Each scientist was given the charge of presenting the known body of knowledge on the topic and developing a research agenda for the future. My first choice, humility, was taken; instead, I was assigned gratitude. I discovered that there was virtually no scientific research on it. I set out to alter this state of affairs by conducting the first randomized controlled trial on the effects of gratitude using journaling as a technique.

We randomly assigned participants one of three tasks, each of which created a distinct condition. We encouraged some participants to feel gratitude, encouraged others to be negative and complaining, and created a third, neutral control group to compare the others with. Every week, the participants kept a short journal. They either briefly described, in a single sentence, five things they were grateful for that had occurred in the past week or, they did the opposite, describing five daily hassles from the previous week that they were displeased about. The neutral group was simply asked to list five events or circumstances that affected them in the last week, and they were not told to accentuate the positive or negative aspects of those circumstances.

The experiment lasted for ten weeks. A wide range of experiences sparked gratitude: cherished interactions with other people; awareness of physical health; their ability to overcome obstacles; and simply being alive, to name a few. At the end of the 10 weeks, we examined differences between the three groups on all of the well-being outcomes that we measured at the outset of the study. Participants in the gratitude condition felt better about their life as a whole, and were more optimistic about the future than participants in either of the other control conditions. To put it into numbers, they were a full 25% happier than other participants. They also reported fewer health complaints and spent more time exercising than control participants did. We discovered scientific evidence that when people regularly engage in the systematic cultivation of gratitude, they experience a variety of measurable and sustainable benefits.

Our results have now been replicated and extended in labs around the world. Study after study declares the benefits of gratitude for psychological, physical, relational, and spiritual flourishing. People who live gratefully are more generally appreciative of the positive in themselves, others, and the world. Research and practice suggests that setting aside time on a daily basis to recall moments of gratitude associated with even mundane or ordinary events, personal attributes one has, or valued people one encounters has the potential to interweave and thread together a sustainable life theme of highly cherished personal meaning just as it nourishes a fundamental life stance whose thrust is decidedly positive.

Making Grateful Youth

Jeffrey Froh is a former school psychologist who is now a research professor at Hofstra University and *the* worldwide expert on teaching kids to think gratefully. He claims that his son wrote his first thank-you note at the age of 6 months. Along with colleagues Giacomo Bono and Alex Wood, Jeff designed an experiment where elementary school classes were randomly assigned to a gratitude curriculum in which students were trained to think about the intentions of someone who had provided them with a benefit in ways that have been shown to foster deeper gratitude and appreciation of the giver's efforts. The instructions read:

Pretend that you were out sick from school for an entire week. Your friend knows that you have been out sick, so he goes to your house to bring you his notes and any assignments you have missed while you were out. In this example, your friend went out of his way to help you on purpose. He did not accidentally come over to your house. He thought about how you have not been to school and needed your school work, so he intentionally helped you by bringing you your assignments. In a subsequent session, they were trained to think about the cost incurred by the person who provided a benefit:

“Can anyone tell me what the word cost means?” Just like we learned last week, when someone intentionally helps us, they also give something up to help us. A possible example may include: ‘your sister helps you to do your homework and by helping you she gives up some of her time doing her own homework.’ In this example, what did your sister give up? Possible answers may include her time doing her homework, her knowledge, and her help.”

A second classroom of students of the same age was assigned to an “attention-control” curriculum in which they focused on topics that were emotionally neutral and unassociated with beneficial interpersonal exchanges. Students in both groups read vignettes depicting three different helping situations. They were instructed to imagine they were the main character in the stories. Following each story, students were asked four questions. The questions for each vignette were tailored to the respective benefactor (i.e., sister, friend, and parent) and situation (i.e., help studying, lending cleats to play soccer, and sharing the computer). Froh and colleagues attempted to measure three grateful cognitions across the three vignettes. Using “sister” as an example, the questions about a sister helping with homework were:

- “How much did your sister help you on purpose?” which aims to measure intent;
- “How much did your sister give up to help you?,” which aims to measure cost; and
- “How much did your sister (quizzing) you help you?”

The students in the gratitude group also read *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. This classic book about a tree that starts out as a leafy playground, shade provider, and apple bearer for a rambunctious little boy and ends up making many sacrifices for him, was used to further illustrate the role of intentionality and cost in gratitude.

The teachers who participated in the study then gave their students the opportunity to draw a picture or write a letter as an expression of gratitude to the parent-teacher association (PTA) for their presentation. After the activity was over, the teachers collected the pictures and letters and identified the students who participated by circling their names on a class roster. The teachers then gave the pictures and letters to the building level school psychologist to mail to the PTA. We found that the children who had been in the gratitude curriculum wrote 80% more thank you cards to their Parent Teacher Association than the control group. Their teachers even observed them to be happier and more giving compared to those in the control group. This demonstrates clearly that we can teach children to become more aware the costs and intentions of those who help them and cultivate the habit of expressing gratitude.

In another study, eighty-nine children and adolescents were randomly assigned to either write or not write a gratitude letter. They were asked to “think of the people—parents, friends, coaches, teammates, and so on—who have been especially kind to you but whom you have never properly thanked. Choose one person you could meet individually for a face-to-face meeting in the next week. Your task is to write a gratitude letter (a letter of thanks) to this individual and deliver it in person.” Here is an excerpt from a 17 year-old female student’s gratitude letter to her mother:

I would like to take this time to thank you for all that you do on a daily basis and have been doing my whole life ... I am so thankful that I get to drive in with you [to school] every day and that you listen and care about the things going on in our lives. I also want to thank you for all the work you do for our church. Every week you work to provide a great lineup of worship that allows everyone to enter in and glorify God every Sunday ... I thank you for being there whenever I need you. I thank you that when the world is against me that you stand up for me and you are my voice when I can't speak for myself. I thank you for caring about my life and wanting to be involved. I thank you for the words of encouragement and hugs of love that get me through every storm. I thank you for sitting through countless games in the cold and rain and still having the energy to make dinner and all the things you do... I am so blessed to have you as my mommy and I have no idea what I would have done without you. I love you a million hugs and kisses.

Students in the control group were given the following instructions: “Expressing your feelings is a good thing to do. Think about yesterday. Write about some of the things you did and what you felt like when you were doing these things.”

Students were given 10–15 minutes daily for 5 days to either write their gratitude letter or journal about daily events. Findings indicated that youth who initially scored low in happiness reported greater gratitude and happiness after the research project as well as at the 2-month follow-up. This was a powerful finding because youth feel more positive emotions are more intrinsically motivated, think more critically and flexibly, are more active planners, and monitor their own learning. Their unhappy peers, in contrast, tend to be disengaged from school, withdrawing from and resisting activities and people associated with it. The research on the benefits of gratitude in youth is clear and unequivocal. Gratitude works.

The benefits of developing gratitude early in life are amplified over time. The results of a recent 4-year long longitudinal study found that changes in gratitude predicted change in prosocial behavior overtime. Furthermore, the results of this study also demonstrated that gratitude development predicted reduced antisocial behavior change over time in that grateful people were less aggressive and less likely to get into arguments or fights. Antisocial behaviors are disruptive acts of covert or overt hostility and intentional aggression toward others – including violations of social rules, defiance of authority, deceitfulness, theft, and a reckless disregard for self and others. Youth deserve chances to become the best versions of themselves, and those versions include positively benefiting others around them, building the life management skills and motivation to achieve, and maturing into adults who contribute positively to society at large. The practice of gratitude helps youth meet key developmental challenges and establish a foundation for flourishing.

Gratitude as the Foundation for Joy

Is there a connection between living gratefully and experiencing joy? Absolutely! Gratitude is foundational for joy. Grateful people appreciate the good in their lives and view life through a lens of giftedness. This way of thinking and seeing should enhance joy because one has to first be able to find and recognize the good and then incorporate and absorb this good before they can experience joy. Moreover, seeing the good as gifts that are neither deserved nor earned based on personal efforts amplifies the experience of joy. Both gratitude and joy reflect a fully alive, alert, and awake state of attunement between the self and the world.. The cultivation of joy can be fostered by activities designed to increase the grateful awareness of the giftedness of one’s existence. Because

joy depends on construing the world a certain way, the cultivation of joy can be formed by intentional gratitude practices. Theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Miroslav Volf theorize that joy is an awareness of the world as creation and creation as gift. As a way of opening up to the world, gratitude not only makes joy possible, but nearly inevitable, in that they each result from construals of goodness, giftedness, and unmerited blessing. Joy is being in a state of enjoying being a recipient, where being on the receiving end of a gift is not a resentment of being indebted but an open welcome of such gifting. Joy has to do with a reading the world—as gift, as good (now or in the future), as abounding and overflowing, as connection with the sources of goodness. Gratitude is a foundational aspect of this hermeneutic, and is likely one of the final links in a causal chain that ends in joy.

Our theorized link between gratitude and joy is based on the amplification or magnification theory of gratitude. Just as an amplifier increases the volume of sound coming into a microphone, gratitude “turns up the volume” of the good in one’s life. Just as a magnifying glass enlarges the text it is focused on, so gratitude enlarges the good that it is focused on. With gratitude there is amplification, strengthening, and deepening of the entire awareness of life. Stated differently, gratitude increases the signal strength of what and who is good in one’s life. Perceiving a positive experience as a gift may be a form of cognitive amplification.

Amplification theory implies that it is the grateful processing of positive memories that should be important in building joy. If gratitude amplifies the good in cognition, when one recalls a positive event and then processes it in a grateful fashion, this should enhance the event in memory. Amplification theory suggests that it was the grateful processing of positive memories that is of prime importance, and research has verified this hypothesis.

Another result of gratitude that speaks to another major societal challenge is in helping young adults develop purpose. Using a national sample of youth ages 12 to 22, Stanford University psychologist William Damon found that almost 25% are “rudderless” and have little to no direction in life, putting them at serious risk of never fulfilling their potential. Another 25% have purposeful goals but have taken few if any steps towards those goals, and about 31% have actively tried several purposeful pursuits but without knowing why they are doing so or whether they will continue with these interests in the future. Only 20% have a clear vision of what they want to accomplish in life and why and have realistic plans for

developing purpose. Gratitude, which helps individuals capitalize from the formative benefits of others, helps spur the formation of purpose. Thus, gratitude may help provide the broad character support needed to effectively engage in today's rapidly increasingly complex world.

As young adults develop serious purposes and goals in life, they experience the deepest sense of gratitude, insofar as they are able to connect to something larger than themselves to be grateful for – and this, in turn, makes gratitude and its myriad benefits more likely to be passed on to others and to future generations. Although gratitude promotion may support positive character development in children, it is important to recognize that helping children to a grateful perspective may also be challenging, especially if young people are experiencing stress and anxiety. Children can be made aware that they are quite capable of gratitude too, even when circumstances make it difficult. Gratitude and purpose are strongly interconnected insofar as they help humans live meaningfully in the world. Philosopher Martin Heidegger reflected on such concerns and held that a sense of thankful connection to others and to the world was vital for society to deal with the challenges of modern post-industrial life. This is more relevant today than ever. Gratitude may help young people to think of the world, less as a source of instrumental benefit, and more as a home that requires responsible respect and care. By fostering grateful attitudes and practices from early years, we may help the young to appreciate the world as caring place for which they may also care in return.

Theological Dimensions

“A true Christian is one who never for a moment forgets what God has done for him in Christ, and whose whole comportment and whole activity have their root in the sentiment of gratitude” wrote John Baillie in his 1961 Gifford Lectures. In the Christian worldview, gratitude is the appropriate response to the benevolence of a Creator whose purposes are the flourishing of the world and its inhabitants. Because of its centrality in Christian theology, it would not be an exaggeration to say that gratitude is *the heart of the gospel*. Not surprisingly, then, Reformationist Martin Luther referred to it as “the basic Christian attitude” and theologian Karl Barth remarked that “grace and gratitude go together like heaven and Earth; grace evokes gratitude like the voice and echo.”

The word “thanks” and its various cognates (thankful, thankfulness, thanksgiving) appear over 150 times in the Hebrew scriptures and New Testament. Gratitude and thanksgiving are central motifs in Pauline theology. Pauline thanksgiving focuses on who God is and what God has done for

His people. There is also a strong imperative component to gratitude in Paul's letters where the phrases "be thankful" or "give thanks" occur multiple times in multiple contexts. Christians are called on to live lives of thanksgiving as a glad acknowledgment of God's generosity; this then provides a model for how Christians are to deal with each other. Christians are urged to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18), "give thanks to God the Father for everything" (Eph. 5: 19-20), present prayers and petitions "with thanksgiving to God" (Phil. 4: 6-7) and separate themselves from those who have been ungrateful (Rom. 1: 21-22). Ingratitude, the failure to acknowledge God as Lord of all and to worship him is a profound spiritual failure and seen as the root of all sin. In Paul's writings there is a strong link between the awareness of grace and the resulting experience of gratitude, in that a theology of grace that emphasizes God's unmerited favor cannot fail to lead to an ethic whose basic motive is gratitude. At least since the Augustinian era, this bond between grace and gratitude has been the foundation of entire systems of theological ethics, as in John Calvin's Eucharistic theology. Within these perspectives it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to envision gratitude without first presuming the need for divine grace. Gratitude as the human response to divine grace permeates understandings of what it means to be a human in a right relationship with God.

Dallas Willard has had worldwide influence through his writings and teachings on how to grow in the "fruit of the spirit," namely love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23). Growth occurs through the intentional spiritual disciplines of prayer, fellowship, service, study, simplicity, chastity, solitude, and fasting, as well as others. Some years ago at a conference I had the fortuitous opportunity to be seated next to Willard during lunch. I asked him where he thought gratitude fits in among the disciplines. Willard gave my question some serious reflection and answered, "Celebration. Gratitude is about celebration." We engage in celebration, he told me, when we receive life and all its gifts with enjoyment as we dwell on the greatness of who God is and what he has done for us. "Holy delight and joy is the great antidote to despair and is a wellspring of genuine gratitude," writes Willard in *The Spirit*.

Theologically, celebration is an act that ties us to the Source of all pleasure, the Giver of all good gifts. Celebration is also what the great teacher of gratitude Brother David Steindl-Rast identifies as the core of gratefulness. By celebration he means "an act of heightened and focused intellectual and emotional appreciation." We receive a gift, we recognize its worth, and we appreciate its value. Our intellectual focus is sharpened and our emotional response intensifies in the act of (spontaneous or deliberate but in either case willing) appreciation, which we call gratitude.

A theological understanding of gratitude is essential if we are to understand how grateful thinking can transform difficulty into opportunity, adversity into prosperity. Here is a historical example. In October of 1929 the stock market crashed and people throughout this nation began to feel the effects of what was to become known as the Great Depression. Life savings were wiped out and jobs and incomes that were taken for granted dried up overnight. Bread lines formed in the streets of cities across the country. One of the darkest times in this nation's history was upon us. In mid-November of that year, a group of church leaders came together in Boston to determine what message they could give to their flock at the upcoming Thanksgiving services. Some wanted to skip the topic altogether, thinking that it would not be appropriate to ask people to focus on gratitude in the midst of their suffering. However, Pastor William Stiger rallied the troops and told them this was not the time avoid the topic of thanksgiving, this is exactly what people need to hear at this time. In times like this, he told them, is when we need to be most thankful and most need to affirm the goodness that remains despite current afflictions. The spiritual and emotional prosperity brought by a celebration of thanksgiving was just the remedy needed for the economic devastation that was gripping the country.

This is just one illustration in a long historical tradition of the juxtaposition of suffering with thanksgiving. Gratitude starts with remembering, and memory of adversity serves as a basis for thanksgiving. In his book *The Good Life*, the late Rev. Peter Gomes of Harvard University cites the 19th Century Pilgrim Baptists whose theme of the first service in their new sanctuary following years of adversity was "our years of affliction serve to enhance our present joy." In ancient near Eastern culture, the Israelites celebrated deliverance from oppression and slavery with public proclamations of God's faithfulness as written about in the Hebrew scriptures. In these stories, affliction or suffering are redeemed by the recognition of goodness received, accompanied by powerful feelings of contrast and relief. When times are good, people take prosperity for granted and begin to believe that they are invulnerable. In times of uncertainty, people realize how powerless they are to control their own destiny and this realization can lead to the perception of a deeper reality. If you begin to see that everything you have, everything you have counted on, everything that you think matters to your well-being may be taken away, gratitude becomes a way of rebuilding one's foundation so that it can never be demolished.

The joyful act of praising God is a thankfulness flowing nearly automatically from a recognition of divine gifts. In keeping with our desire to bridge theological and psychological

understanding of gratitude and joy, we are inspired by C. S. Lewis's *Reflections on the Psalms*. In trying to understand the function of praise, Lewis observed:

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete until it is expressed.

Here, Lewis suggests that those providing the praise may actually benefit as much if not more, than those receiving it. Thus, expressing gratitude may provide direct emotional and social benefits for those who express their thanks. In suggesting that expressions of gratitude complete the enjoyment of a blessing, it follows that gratitude benefits insofar as it amplifies the good in one's life.

As an integral element of moral character, gratitude is an open and receptive stance toward the world that energizes a person to return the goodness they have received. Gratitude's intrinsic function is to affirm the good in life, embrace that good, and then transform the good in purposeful actions to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self. The late moral philosopher Charles Shelton captured the essence of gratitude as a way of life:

Gratitude is an interior depth we experience which orients us to an acknowledged dependence out of which flows a profound sense of being gifted. This way of being, in turn, elicits a humility just as it nourishes our goodness. As a consequence, when truly grateful, we are led to experience and interpret life situations in ways that call forth from us an openness to and engagement with the world through purposeful actions in order to share and increase the very good we have received.

From a psychological perspective, this fullest sense of gratitude represents a substantial altering in a person's outlook. To elaborate, to experience this degree of gratitude brings about an expansive enlargement of a perceptual hermeneutic. In short, this degree of gratitude nourishes a more or less all-encompassing hermeneutics of appreciation. This appreciative lens fosters within individuals a radical openness to and receptivity of the world. This openness and receptivity allows for an altruistic acuity that enhances the giving away of goodness. Stated succinctly, as one experiences life, gratitude's intrinsic function allows one to approach the world by embracing it, nourishing it, and transforming it. Authentic gratitude leads people to experience life situations in ways that call forth from them an openness to engage with the world to share and increase the very

goodness they have received. It is the feeling of connection with humanity emerging from a sense of wonder and joy that participating in an intricate network of existence brings. When embraced, gratitude's essence can be construed not only from behaviors which are measurable, but from ways of living that are both pathways for aspiring to the good life and passages for attaining it.

Summing it Up

In July 2016 I had the privilege of attending a very special 90th birthday party, honoring Brother David Steindl-Rast. Brother David, psychologist and Benedictine monk, is the world's leading ambassador for gratefulness and has written and lectured extensively on inter-religious dialogue, particularly between Buddhism and Christianity. About 100 friends, colleagues, and students of Brother David gathered on a sparkling clear afternoon in San Francisco, with views from the venue of the Golden Gate Bridge in one direction and Alcatraz Island in the other. Audience members were invited in advance to submit a question to be posed to Brother David, and a select few of these would be presented to Br. David for his response. The question I asked was the following: "Do you believe that gratefulness is crucial for the survival of the human species and survival of the planet, and if so, how can we encourage billions more people to practice gratitude?" As someone who has participated in the science of gratitude science for two decades, I have been encouraged by the growing acceleration of research studies and accumulated knowledge, though nevertheless concerned that we are collectively no more grateful as a species than two decades earlier. In fact, when people were asked in a survey if they believed there is more or less gratitude than there was 20 years earlier, the vast majority answered "less" (even though they themselves thought they had become more grateful)! Therefore, I was eager to take this opportunity to learn from Br. David's fount of wisdom. The key to progress, he replied, is education. Teach gratefulness to children. Teach it in schools, teach it homes, teach it in ministry settings, teach it in each and every setting where youth reside.

We are at the dawn of a global gratitude renaissance. There is unprecedented enthusiasm for new scientific information on the science and practice of gratitude. Br. David has said that what gives a movement its impetus is not information, but enthusiasm and commitment. The spark that can ignite a global gratitude movement is the enthusiasm of youthful men and women who discover that grateful living makes life meaningful and fulfilling. Gratitude elevates, it energizes, it inspires, it transforms. Without gratitude, life can be lonely, depressing, impoverished. In the face of demoralization, gratitude has the power to energize. In the face of brokenness, gratitude has the

power to heal. In the face of despair, gratitude has the power to bring hope. Gratitude is the best approach to life. When life is going well, it allows us to celebrate and magnify the goodness. When life is going badly, it provides a perspective by which we can view life in its entirety and not be overwhelmed by temporary circumstances. People who live under an “aura of pervasive thankfulness” reap the rewards of grateful living; conversely, those who fail to feel gratitude cheat themselves out of their experience of life.

Curricular Suggestions

1. *Self-examination.* Find ways to practice gratitude intentionally through both private activities and public expressions. Journaling, prayer, fasting, worship— all these become ways that we can practice thankfulness. Start with journaling. In the tradition founded by St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, the examination of conscience (the *Examen*) is a specific method employed to assist in acquisition of one particular virtue or in the elimination of one particular vice. As such, it is very useful for anyone who wants to grow in gratitude. This prayer can be made anywhere: on the beach, in a car, at home, in the library. Many people make the Examen twice daily: once around lunchtime and again before going to bed. There are 5 steps in the examination of conscience:

- a. *God's presence:* no matter where you are, whether you are in front of a computer screen, in freeway traffic, mowing the lawn, in a crowd or alone, in the city or in the country, you become aware that God is present within you.
- b. *Thanksgiving:* Spend a moment looking over your day with gratitude for this day's gifts. Be specific and let particular pleasures come to mind. Recall the morning dew, the smell of freshly cut grass, a strength you discovered you had. Give thanks for favors and blessings received.
- c. *Self-knowledge:* Take a look at look at your actions, attitudes and motives with honesty and patience. Be open to growth and learning something new about yourself.
- d. *Now review your day:* Consider is a gentle look at how you have responded to God's gifts. Did you receive them without grumbling or complaining?
 Could you have chosen gratitude rather than complaint in specific situations throughout the day?
- e. *Communicate with God:* You share your thoughts on your actions, attitudes, feelings and

interactions. Perhaps during this time you may feel led to seek forgiveness, ask for direction, share a concern, but above all give thanks for grace.

2. *Write a letter of gratitude.* Recall someone who has had a major impact on your life but whom you have never properly taken the time to thank. Remember a time in your life when you were grateful for something that another person did for you and then write a letter to that person. It is up to you whether you send the letter or not. In the letter, describe specifically why you are grateful to this person and how they have affected your life, and how often you reflect on their efforts. What did he or she do, and how does that still affect your life? This should be someone that you have never properly taken the time to thank, and could be a parent, teacher, friend, relative, coach, or someone else. Choose someone who is still alive. You can compose it using whatever medium (stationary, e-mail, video) that you feel comfortable with. Spend at least 10-15 minutes on this letter. Your letter should be around 250 words. Whether or not you actually send it, imagine how reading the letter will make the recipient feel.
3. *Remember the bad.* Gratitude starts with remembering, and memory of adversity serves as a basis for thanksgiving. Bad to good thinking works this way: Think of your worst moments, your sorrows, your losses, and your sadness and then remember. Focus on how you got through the worst day of your life, the trauma, the trial; you endured the temptation; you survived the bad relationship; you're making your way out of the dark. Remember the bad things, and then look to see where you are now. Try now to focus on the positive aspects or consequences of this difficult experience. As the result of this event, what kinds of things do you now feel thankful or grateful for? Has this event benefited you as a person? How have you grown? Were there personal strengths that grew out of your experience? How has this event helped you appreciate the truly important people and things in your life? In sum, how can you be thankful for the beneficial consequences that have resulted from this event?

Additional Resources

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