

SOURCE LINES

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Gratitude and Thanksgiving

GIVE THANKS FOR A LITTLE AND YOU WILL FIND A LOT."
--THE HAUSA OF NIGERIA

Michael McCollough and Robert Emmons are two psychologists who have researched the effects of gratitude, through the *Research Project on Gratitude and Thanksgiving*. The results of their studies reveal that gratitude is significant in four areas.

- **Well-being**

Grateful people report higher levels of positive emotions, vitality, optimism, and life satisfaction. They also report lower levels of depression and stress. Gratitude appears to enhance pleasant feeling states more than it diminishes unpleasant emotions. Grateful people do not deny or ignore negative aspects of life. They also don't dwell on the negative to the exclusion of the positive.

- **Social interactions**

Grateful people tend to be more empathic; they were viewed to be more generous and helpful by people in their social networks. One act of gratitude generates another. Grateful people bring out the best in those around them.

- **Spirituality**

Those who attend religious services and activities are more likely to be grateful. Grateful people more easily commit to and demonstrate responsibility toward others, underlined by a belief in the interconnectedness of all life.

McCullough, however, says that the results also seem to show that gratitude can work independently of faith.

- **Materialism**

Grateful people are not as caught

up in materialism. They do not judge success by personal possessions. They are less envious of others, and more likely to share.

It's clear from these results that gratitude is an important contributor to contentment, well-being, and good relationships. However, this requires us to be thankful on more than special occasions. Gratitude needs to be practiced on a regular basis for it to become a meaningful part of our life.

The good news is we can all learn to be more grateful and without winning the lottery.

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So, where do we start this new learning? How can we cultivate gratitude in our daily lives beyond religious practices, holidays, and festive occasions, as well as tragic ones like New Orleans that make us more conscious of how fortunate we are?

One good place to start is with our habits of thought. Think about it for a minute. All of us are constantly jabbering away inside our heads, talking to ourselves about this, that and everything. Psychologists refer to this as *self-talk*. When you pay attention to your own self-talk what do you notice? Are the voices saying mostly positive things or mostly negative things? When our self-talk is habitually focused on resentments, envy, anger, or fear these emotions tend to become stronger and more automatic. Our thinking gets stuck in a rut. On the other hand, if we invest more time and energy being mindful of the positive in our life, the journey becomes more pleasant. There are inevitably some situations where it's hard to be grateful, but even in these times gratitude ultimately facilitates well-being.



A friend's wife with a strong dose of Irish Catholic fatalism often says: "The more things go wrong, the better off we are." If this seems like a ridiculous or exaggerated notion stop and think of times in your own life when something really awful and difficult happened that ultimately helped you have a deeper appreciation and understanding of what life is all about.

Gratitude and contentment grow when we stop wishing for what isn't. In other words, we can be more content when our thoughts stop arguing with reality. A clue to help identify when this is happening is to pay attention to how much time we spend talking to ourselves in statements that start with "If only..." or that include the words "should" and "shouldn't" or "never" and "always." When we eliminate some of these from our habitual self-talk we are taking our first steps toward acceptance of what is. This can free us up to be aware of our good fortune and successes as well as our misfortunes and disappointments. It's a matter of achieving balance.

Our habitual self-talk has its origin in the ways in which we view the world around us, other people generally, and ourselves specifically. These core beliefs about life (e.g., Life is Fair vs. Life is Unfair) are referred to as *life scripts*. They guide our responses to life situations. These scripts can either be basically positive, such as:



"I can learn from my mistakes."

"When I am unhappy, I look inside myself for a solution."

"Situations in my life tend to work out for the best"

or basically negative, such as:

"I am always waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"My life would be happier if someone, or something would change."

"Why do bad things always happen to me?"

By identifying our own personal life-scripts and then carefully examining them to see which ones may be flawed, out-of-date or just plain wrong we can take another step toward counting our blessings rather than dwelling on the injustices we feel are our lot in life.

The following are some suggestions for daily rituals to nurture gratitude:

- Gratitude journals have been made more popular through TV shows like Oprah. These involve writing a few thoughts each day about what you are grateful for on that day.
- Make conscious efforts to do a daily act of kindness toward a family member, friend or work colleague.
- Think about nature at least once a day, then marvel about what you are most awed by.
- Identify what you may be taking for granted by asking yourself what your life would be like without something or someone.

Finally, if we go back and review the findings of the studies, we can take the behaviours of grateful people and try to live them in our own lives.

In a short time we will be celebrating Canadian Thanksgiving. It is a national holiday about gratitude. Our wish is for us all to discover a way to give thanks daily as a way of honouring our lives throughout the year.

This newsletter was written by Vince Ferrari and Russell Carpentier

"I HAD THE BLUES BECAUSE I HAD NO SHOES UNTIL UPON THE STREET, I MET A MAN WHO HAD NO FEET."

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