

Much Appreciated

WHAT DOES APPRECIATION REALLY MEAN, AND WHY IS THERE SO LITTLE OF IT TO GO AROUND THESE DAYS? DISCOVER HOW YOU CAN PUT GRATITUDE INTO ACTION.

By CAT THOMPSON

ONE NOVEMBER SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I was enjoying a particularly beautiful day. The weather was unseasonably warm, and even though I suspected it was a result of global warming, I was still feeling extremely grateful for the break in the Minnesota cold.

Virtually every person I encountered that day commented about the weather, but each time I expressed my enthusiasm and appreciation for the balmy day, I got a reaction that surprised me. Approximately 90 percent of the people responded with comments like “Yeah, but it won’t last!” and “Oh, you just wait — we’ll be paying for this!”

I was fascinated by these remarks, and when the warm front held, over the course of the next few days, I continued asking people how they were enjoying the stretch of nice weather. Very few people expressed any appreciation for it; instead, I was treated to a large variety of dire predictions that all had to do with “paying” later for each day’s loveliness.

I thought about those responses a lot over the next few years, and I also started observing more and more instances where gratitude and appreciation were rejected and cynical observations or grim warnings were offered instead.

It struck me that people seemed almost *afraid* to express gratitude. It was as though they believed by expressing their appreciation, they would draw the wrath of some jealous deity who might snatch away all they were grateful for. In some cases, I noticed that people only seemed able to enjoy their pleasure secretly, as if expressing their enjoyment openly might jinx them.

I noticed that some people employed cynicism to subtly acknowledge their good fortune without drawing undue or dangerous attention to it, or perhaps to avoid appearing too attached to it. I noticed that others withheld their appreciation for a variety of reasons — as a way of controlling the person who was giving them something, as a way of avoiding vulnerability or the feeling of “owing” someone something, as a way of avoiding loss of face or embarrassment should their fortunes happen to change.

All this made me think a lot about the ways we express ourselves and the way we do or do not give thanks in



moments of satisfaction and happiness. It also led me to explore notions of gratitude and appreciation in greater depth.

FORM AND CONTENTMENT

Looking at the dictionary, I discovered that the word *gratitude* is defined this way: “The state of being grateful: THANKFULNESS.” The definition of *grateful*, meanwhile, is “1. a) appreciative of benefits received, b) expressing gratitude; 2. a) affording pleasure or contentment: pleasing, b) pleasing by reason of comfort supplied or discomfort alleviated; syn. GRATEFUL, THANKFUL: feeling or expressing gratitude. GRATEFUL commonly applies to a proper sense of favors received from one’s fellowmen; THANKFUL may apply to a more generalized acknowledgement of what is vaguely felt to be providential.”

So gratitude — whether for providence or personal favors — is a feeling, a feeling that is meant to be expressed.

Our expressions define us and are a large part of what makes us unique. This is true in terms of personality, but also in terms of our biology.

In the human body, as our cells are formed, each cell contains all the information necessary to become *any* cell. The only essential difference between a liver cell and a brain cell is how it expresses itself. In the same way, human beings are all part of a larger collective body, and our individual expressions determine where we fit into the whole.

It is our nature to express ourselves. But expression is important for another reason: It creates our experiences as we move through life.

Have you noticed that people who continually complain about life seem to have experiences worth complaining about? And that people who are optimistic and cheerful seem to find much to feel happy about? This is because our feelings are “magnetic” — they literally draw experiences to us that mirror our expressions.

So why would we express — or fail to express — in a way that would reduce our pleasure and satisfaction? As children, the first and only power we have is the power of resistance, and one way we learn to resist is by withholding our approval or appreciation. I believe that many of us simply fail

to outgrow this tendency and to replace it with a more expansive and generous range of behaviors.

In tribal cultures, there is generally an initiation process for children becoming adolescents. Part of that initiation process typically involves moving the child from the power of resistance and passivity to the power of creation. In Western culture, of course, these initiations are absent, and the subsequent void allows many children to grow into adults who have never learned to move past their withholding behaviors.

Withholding has, in fact, become a standard, normal behavior in our culture. Yet withholding our gratitude and appreciation can have devastating results on our lives — especially on our relationships. When a person does not feel appreciated, he or she cannot feel “seen” or “known.” Without appreciation, acts of kindness and compassion appear to go unnoticed, and incentives to become a better and bigger person are lost.

Faced with a chronic lack of appreciation from others, people naturally begin “conserving” their own energy. They also begin pulling away — perhaps as a strategy for making sure that others at least feel their absence. Withholding then becomes a tug of war with each person finding new ways to withhold their emotional energy from the other. This eventually results in the magic of a relationship evaporating. Its fuel gets depleted — wasted in withholding and conflict — until there is nothing left to sustain it.

GROWING GRATITUDE

At some point in your life (preferably sooner than later) it is imperative that you examine your beliefs about expression, and your own expressive tendencies. Do you see yourself as an open and communicative person or as a reserved and withholding one? Do you believe that keeping your feelings “close to your chest” gives you an advantage or keeps you safe? Do you believe that making your expressions smaller and quieter helps you conserve power and maintain control? If so, you may want to reconsider and expand those beliefs. (Visit www.spiritualityhealth.com/cgi/gratitude/alltest.cgi to take a self-test and read more.)

Expression leads to evolution. Without expression, your feelings — and you — cannot freely evolve. Without evolution, you are destined to repeat the same experiences over again,

because unevolved feelings continually draw the same experiences to you until they are expressed.

One of the most powerful forms of expression is gratitude. Appreciation is gratitude in action. Appreciation costs nothing to give, yet provides satisfaction to both the giver and the receiver. It feeds and nurtures a vital link in the intricate systems of community relationships. Unlike giving material goods, which may be used up rather quickly, when appreciation is given, it can be replayed and enjoyed almost infinitely, creating a generosity of spirit in the recipient that may cause him or her to pass even more appreciation on to someone else. The more it is given away, the more capacity it has to increase its value.

Think of it this way: Your feelings are currency. In order to earn anything, they must be invested in others through expression. What kind of bank account do you have with your feelings? Are you investing in criticism, judgments and gossip? Or are you investing in optimism, appreciation and joy?

It is a powerful choice to either withhold or invest ourselves in others. Withholding pays no dividends, does not add anything to the world’s evolution and creates a scarcity of resources in our lives. Conversely, investing in others by expressing our feelings of gratitude generates energy that goes out in ever-growing circles of influence, thus creating an ever-larger source of things to be grateful for.

While serving as the nation’s patent commissioner, Thomas Jefferson once wrote, “He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine receives light without darkening me.” The more we share of ourselves with each other, the more we communicate, inspire and improve our ways of being in a relationship. Giving, especially expressions of gratitude, doesn’t have to “cost us” anything.

If our expressions are of gratitude, appreciation and happiness, our life begins to reflect those feelings in our interactions each day. We begin to create new experiences that generate more of the same feelings, and together these experiences and feelings form a life-sustaining loop of wonder.

When we feed the world through our appreciation and gratitude, the world becomes a more wonderful, mysterious and magical place. ●

Expressing Appreciation

NEED HELP learning to express your appreciation? Here are some ways you can practice:

● **Waiting in a checkout line at the store, notice the cashier’s work. If it’s efficient and quick, take a moment to say you noticed and that you appreciate his or her skills. Tell the manager what a great employee the store has.**

● **Develop a habit of leaving little notes for your spouse (or your children) telling them how much you appreciated them cleaning the kitchen, or taking out the garbage or straightening the common space. Thoughtful expressions lead to more inspired behavior.**

● **When tipping an exceptional waiter/waitress, also tell him or her in person how much you enjoyed the service.**

● **Tell people who pack your groceries what a great job they did fitting everything into your bags.**

● **Tell parents how much you appreciate something they did for you as a child, something that you still remember today.**

● **Thank the earth for your daily meals.**

● **Express your appreciation for the weather.**

● **Daily, write down five things you feel grateful for. Once a month, see how many things you can find to feel grateful for in a single day.**

● **Look in the mirror and express your appreciation to yourself for something you have done or given yourself recently.**

● **Imagine how you would like to be appreciated and receive the appreciation of others. Visualize someone spontaneously telling you they are grateful for something you’ve done, or how happy they are just to have you around.**

● **Practice expressing unrestrained gratitude. Let your face light up and break into a grin. Reach out your hand as you say, “Hey, I just want to tell you how much I appreciate you/this/what just happened.” Or, “Wow, this is so great!” Just don’t hold back, and don’t let the moment pass unmarked.**

● **By letting your voice, hands, face and body get into the act of appreciation, you’ll expand the joy of the whole experience — for yourself, and whomever else is around you! And remember, you don’t necessarily have to thank anyone in particular to express your gratitude. To show appreciation for a beautiful day, you might decide to just close your eyes and smile up at the big blue sky.**

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