

Full to the Brim

In Praise of Gratitude

BY CARRIE GROSSMAN

A few years ago during a long plane ride, I accidentally fell asleep on my unknown neighbor's shoulder. When turbulence shook me awake, I offered an immediate apology and snuggled up against the window, hiding my mortified face beneath a shawl.

Shortly after, my seatmate — an elderly woman — reached for the call button, and I feared that she might file a complaint. Instead, she asked the stewardess for a pillow and then tapped me on the shoulder. “Here, dear,” she said. “You can rest on me.” Without thinking, I tipped my tired head to the other side and fell into a deep sleep against her small, warm body. By the time we reached the gate, I felt so grateful for this complete stranger's kindness that I wept all the way to baggage claim.

Gratitude: There's nothing like it. It's one of those mysterious emotions that can transport us from contraction to openness in a matter of moments. Regardless of religious orientation, or lack thereof, we can all agree that gratitude has the power to revolutionize our reality; all we need is a simple shift in perspective. Such a shift isn't always easy, of course. Although most of us know that we “should” feel grateful, the truth is that it's often difficult to focus on the positive. Sometimes our challenges eclipse everything else, and we become blind to the blessings that flicker like stars in the radiant galaxy of our lives. But what if our challenges are, in fact, true blessings?

While in hindsight it may be easy to appreciate difficult times — *Gosh, that dark period was the best thing that ever happened to me!* — in the middle of the fire, it can be hard to see beyond the flames. At moments like these, “fierce grace” just seems plain fierce. Even so, do we ever *really* know whether something is good



or bad? As Swami Ramdas once said: “Good and bad are according to our mental attitude. Nothing is, by itself, good or bad. Everything happens for the best.” This is quite hard to remember when *samsara* — the endless cycle of suffering — swallows us up. Still, there are things we can be grateful for: The brilliant sun that shines upon our skin, the food on our plate, the physical senses that allow us to experience this miraculous world.

In actuality, gratitude is a choice, and something we must cultivate. Much like building a muscle, it isn't enough to exercise it once a year and expect to see results. We must commit to the practice. While it can be difficult to experience this in the rough-and-tumble of daily life, making the practice of gratitude a habit may benefit us in a surprisingly short time.

Behavioral and psychological research suggests that grateful people are more likely to have higher levels of happiness and lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. In one study, positive psychologist Martin Seligman and his colleagues found that participants who kept a gratitude journal for as little as three weeks experienced less stress, more optimism,

and a significant increase in happiness. All they did was write down a few things they felt grateful for each day, and the positive results were evident up to six months later.

Seligman also discovered that when people expressed their appreciation to another person, the impact was even greater. He asked his students to write gratitude letters or testimonials to important individuals in their lives, and then read them aloud to the recipients. Those who did this even one time were measurably happier a month later.

We can probably all admit that it feels good when someone tells us how much our presence means. Such moments of unexpected, unconditional kindness leave a deep impression on the heart. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh refers to this as “flower watering” — consciously *articulating* what is beautiful and marvelous about our loved ones. After all, what good does such appreciation do when trapped inside us? We must let it out and inspire each other with the gift of our sweet words and actions. As Seligman's studies reveal, by doing so *we* are the ones who benefit.

To truly experience the gift of gratitude,

however, we must become receptive. How can we appreciate what comes to us if we don't actually *receive* it? We have to let love in. If we simply look for it, this love is there — in the twinkling stars, the sacred scriptures, or the shade of a tree. Such things are here for us, and by appreciating them we can open up to a new way of being. It's nearly impossible to feel grateful if we don't actually pause and notice the miracles that already exist in our lives. Don't we all take certain things for granted until we realize we may lose them? Waking up next to the same person day after day, we may fall into complacency. *Oh, him again!* This attitude not only destroys the freshness of love, it causes us to forget that our lover's presence is not guaranteed.

Few things remind us to be grateful like our own mortality. Often we wander through life imagining ourselves to be immortal. But no matter how much we deny the truth of impermanence, life manages to remind us — more often than we might like — that indeed, this world is but a fleeting dream. When the awareness of impermanence dawns, we realize that everything is like a delicate flame that can be extinguished at any moment. Our little lives are like embers rising from a fire — here one instant and gone the next. But how easily the mind forgets! If we really lived with this knowing, we would probably all be so much more alive, our senses heightened, our hearts raw. We would probably run to each person who ever touched us and express our deepest gratitude.

In the Buddhist tradition, it is said that this precious human birth we've been given is extremely rare — about as rare as a blind sea turtle coming up for air once every hundred years and putting its head through a single ring floating in the vast ocean. Somehow, all of us have managed to get a hole in one this time around, and it is up to each one of us to make the most of our experience.

It is certainly no coincidence that the word *grace* is etymologically connected to the word *gratitude*. When we feel genuinely grateful, it's as if someone just opened up the windows in our heart and let the breeze in. We can't help but experience a sense of wonder for even the tiniest thing. Such wonder is possible right here and now if we simply open to it. Instead of circling the rim of our lives, we can dive right into the center of the cup. There — in the middle of the miraculous — we may discover that our cup truly runneth over and, in fact, it always has. 🍃

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