



Unlocking the Power of Gratitude

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Gratitude and its ability to uplift and enrich our lives is as extremely important and relevant today as it ever was.

As we are constantly bombarded with negative news and dramatic spin; dire messages through various forms of media, we might descend into feelings of anxiety, depression, hopelessness and despair.

And when we are inundated with messages about what we should have or be, or what we are missing out on, it can be easy to get caught up in feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction.

The technology designed to keep us engaged in following our interests has the unfortunate side effect of reinforcing and amplifying, not just our existing beliefs and feelings, but also our fears and apprehensions. This is by design.

Frequently the emotions used to keep us engaged and exploited are those of our anxieties. And yet, as real as they may seem, they are rarely, if ever, based on the whole picture. Fortunately, there is a powerful tool that we can all use to combat these negative feelings: Namely, Gratitude.

Gratitude is a powerful tool that can improve our lives; mentally, emotionally and physically. And perhaps we may believe even spiritually.

So in a world that seems so unstable and full of threat, what have we to be grateful for? We hear constantly, through the many channels of information we subject ourselves to, how dire and dreadful the world that we live in is.

Impending Climate change, we have recent evidence of that. Economic instability, pandemic, pollution, extreme politics, terrorism, social injustice, racism, the propaganda that goes along with it all, we have experience of all that. The threats of nuclear war, the unknowns of artificial intelligence, and surveillance capitalism. They all threaten us daily. The evidence is clear.

Have I depressed you yet?

What positives help balance the dread we languish in? What should we be grateful for? What do we have to be optimistic about?

The concept of gratitude permeates religious texts, teachings, and traditions.

The bible says "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus".

The Koran; "swiftly shall We reward those that (serve us with) gratitude".

Hinduism says, "Whatever is coming to you, you should have gratitude for with gratitude comes contentment".

And so on...

Philosophers through the ages have advised that if we find the positives and acknowledge them with gratitude we will live fuller, happier lives.

We were advised, for example by Max Ehrmann in his famous prose poem "[Desiderata](#)" "*...do not distress yourself with dark imaginings... keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.*" That was in 1927. Does it still hold true?

Louise Hay said more recently...

"Gratitude is a warm, fuzzy feeling. It's that warm feeling you get when you appreciate something, or someone. It's the warm feeling you get when you think about all the good things you have in your life."

Wouldn't it be nice to have that feeling in your life regularly?

Deepak Chopra advised that... "*Gratitude opens the door to the power, the wisdom, the creativity of the universe. You open the door through gratitude.*"

So called, pragmatists on the other hand, have claimed that this is just denial; that to ignore the dire threats is to delude oneself of the reality that life is hell. Many have called it fanciful thinking. One I know calls it "*farting rainbows*".

So what is the truth? Is there benefit in being grateful for small mercies?

The fact is there are *huge* benefits.

Gratitude is the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself. It is a feeling of thankfulness and joy for the good things in one's life. By expressing gratitude, we acknowledge the beauty and abundance in our lives.

To acknowledge these things we must first *recognise* them. Something that can be a challenge in the flow of negativity we tend to be subjected to. So it may take some work to become more mindful and present in the moment. To learn to appreciate the small graces and find the joy in them.

It does not require the denial of the negatives that impinge upon us. It is rather a matter of keeping those things in perspective, along with the positives.

The trap otherwise is that we take the good for granted and focus on the bad, and potential for bad, which is freely fed to us.

As writer ANAÏS NIN said, "**We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are**". So ensuring that we are informed, aware and mindful, more balanced in our perspectives, has the potential to give us a healthier, happier view of life.

While we allow ourselves to be persuaded that life is dangerous and lacking in resources we cannot help but see every situation in that light.

Everyone becomes a competitor and a threat.

Practising gratitude through being mindfully informed helps us find that balance.

All this is very easy to claim. Many have. As many as have called it fanciful thinking. What is the evidence?

Well the accumulated observations of the wise down through the aeons aside, there has been scientific study of the subject.

It's a field of study that has gained increasing attention in recent years.

Gratitude is an emotion these studies have linked to increased personal connection, increased happiness, improved psychological and physical health, greater job satisfaction, and higher life satisfaction. In general, a greater sense of wellbeing. Just as the philosophers observed and predicted.

Finding also that gratitude leads to better sleep, reduced stress and depression, and can even to lowered blood pressure and improved immune function.

Overall, the science behind gratitude confirms that it is an important emotion

to cultivate.

So... why is this? We know it's true. It has been observed by philosophers, incorporated into religious practices and substantiated by science. So do we know why it is so? Does it matter? Well to some it does. And I am one who likes to have some answers for these things.

It's within human nature to focus on the dire and terrible. This is evidenced by the themes of all the most popular books, movies and television series. What is it about the drama of crime thrillers, medical trauma, catastrophe and disaster, murder and mayhem that appeals to so many? Whatever it is, most forms of media, if not all, exploit this desire to be wary, by amplifying the dread.

As we all know, our distant ancestors survived by being alert to the dangers; the shadow in the long grass, the slight movement in the water, which might signify a predator.

So its in our genes to want to know about potential threats. After all, those who were less alert were taken out of the gene pool and ceased to be a genetic influence.

From those early times we gathered around the fire at night to share stories of the snake in the grass, another crocodile on the riverbank or the leopard having returned to the acacia tree.

Now we catch the news in the evening and hear about yet another gunman in the supermarket, another mass shooting, the multi-car pile-up on the motorway or another child abducted from the playground and we let the news feed our fears and wariness.

Unfortunately the amygdala, the part of our neural system evolved for processing fearful and threatening stimuli, does not acknowledge that the gunmen concerned are half way around the world in the US, the motorway in snowbound Canada or Russia and the last abductor to stoke the news was in France two years ago. And although none are actual threats to us personally; none are as persistent a threat as they are made to seem, our primitive brain adds it all up and triggers the anxiety that we are in imminent danger.

The reality is that the risk, while perhaps real, is vastly smaller than the impression given.

Here in Christchurch having experienced the trauma of earthquakes we are

persuaded that they might return at any moment when we see the devastation of Haiti, then again in Indonesia, in China, Chile, Japan, Italy, and the recent quakes in Turkey and Syria. The anxiety may be exacerbated, and yet the truth is that the risk isn't any greater for knowing of those events. It is still usually a once in a lifetime event. The last major earthquake in New Zealand of the scale Christchurch experienced was 50 years ago in a relatively remote part of the West Coast.

And just a few weeks ago as I wrote this I found myself anxiously wondering whether I had done all I could to prepare for a flood as all the warnings for North Islanders to be prepared were constantly repeated on radio and television. While perfectly valid and necessary there, in truth the risk here was minimal.

So, when we take the time to focus on the things we are grateful for, we begin to see the positives in our lives and are less likely to get caught up in feelings of lack and threat. We begin to provide balance to the input we are programmed to seek and which commercial enterprises find profit in providing.

Making oneself aware of, and highlighting the positives in our lives soothes that part of our brain that is on the lookout for the impending disaster. Not to deny reality but to keep it in perspective.

With the rise of social media and other digital platforms, we have the ability to connect with people from all corners of the globe and share ideas and resources in ways that were not possible before 1990. This has the potential to foster collaboration and cooperation on a global scale. Both positively and negatively.

The negative is frequently presented to us but we need to remember the positives. By recognising that although science and technology might provide some avenues for the threats we perceive, they provide a great many more benefits in our lives. Technology provides comfort and security never before known in history. For example, the development of vaccines and other treatments for diseases such as Ebola and COVID-19 give us hope and optimism for the future.

Though there may be political turmoil in the world which can, and occasionally does spill over into our world, day to day we are in a peaceful civilised law-abiding corner of the world, enjoying all the freedoms that provides.

In times of hardship, it's important to remember that we are capable of

overcoming challenges and finding joy in the face of adversity.

We need to be aware of the progress we have made in addressing some of the major threats we face. While climate change and economic instability remain significant challenges, we have made great strides in reducing poverty and improving access to education and healthcare around the world. We are also making some progress in reducing pollution and promoting sustainable development. Yes these remain major challenges but progress is being made.

Despite the many challenges we face, we are still surrounded by an incredible array of flora, fauna, and ecosystems that are a constant source of wonder and inspiration. By taking the time to appreciate and protect these natural wonders, we can find hope and meaning in a world that is often filled with uncertainty.

So, how might we tap into these benefits of gratitude?

Arthur Schopenhauer tells us that...

Each day is a little life: every waking and rising a little birth, every fresh morning a little youth, every going to rest and sleep a little death.

So start each morning with a gratitude exercise. Spend a few minutes each day reflecting on the things that you are grateful for. Meditate, write in a journal, or simply take a few moments to think about the positives in your life. This will help you to start the day off in a positive frame of mind and it can help to set the tone for the rest of your day.

Or perhaps, at the end of each day, take some time to write down three things about the day you are grateful for. They can be big or small, such as a beautiful sunset or a warming cup of coffee. Doing this will help you to recognize the beauty and joy that can be found in everyday moments.

The great religions of the world have recognised the power of this and incorporated them in their practices. With actions such as daily prayers before bed to give thanks for the day's blessings, and appreciation for one's parents and siblings. And such things as saying a grace of thanks before a meal.

Another positive that helps balance the dread we may feel in today's world is the sense of community and support that can arise in times of crisis. For example, during the earthquakes, again after the Mosque shootings, and no doubt now in the aftermath of the cyclones, we have seen countless acts of kindness and

generosity as people come together to support one another and those most affected by the crisis.

We can be optimistic about the resilience and determination of the human spirit. Despite facing numerous challenges and setbacks, people have a tendency to persevere, finding ways to adapt and overcome adversity. We see this in the many inspiring stories of people overcoming personal struggles and working to make positive changes in the world.

It's important to take the time to express your gratitude to those around you. Whether it's family members, friends, or colleagues, letting them know how much you appreciate them. Showing them your gratitude through a simple act, a thoughtful gift, or taking the time for a few kind words to tell them how much you care. Again it just takes a little thought and reflection to recognise these things.

Taking this time to express your gratitude not only makes them feel good, but it also helps to strengthen relationships. In both *your* mind and heart and theirs.

Overall, it is important to remember that despite the challenges we face, there are still many things to be grateful for and to be optimistic about. By cultivating a sense of gratitude and focusing on the things that bring us joy and meaning, we can find the strength and resilience to navigate even the most difficult of times. And to keep the daily struggles in perspective.

Integrating the powerful tool of gratitude into your life increases your sense of joy and contentment. With some intentional effort, you can develop habits that will bring you more satisfaction with your life

As these feelings and this awareness grows, it becomes easier to express these expansive feelings, this awareness, through authentic acts of kindness and generosity to others and the world we live in. Acts which otherwise might be constricted by anxious feelings of risk and scarcity.

Showing kindness and appreciation to others helps you recognise the richness you have in your life in a *compounding* cycle. The responses of others to how you are, and how you make them feel, feeds back and reinforces these feelings and the awareness. Both within yourself and those with whom you share them.

Helping you to be more mindful and connected to the world around you and so on. After all, for all the impending doom around us, it is still truly a privileged state we enjoy.

"...do not distress yourself with dark imaginings... keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy." It does still hold true.

Practising gratitude then not only graces ones own life with a more mindful and balanced life view but potentially enriches one's relationships, in turn enhancing the lives of those around you. And if that influences their lives it may be passed on to others around them too. And so on... thus growing a more connected and joyous community.

"Gratitude opens the door to the power, the wisdom, the creativity of the universe. You open the door through gratitude."

It's important to note that gratitude is a practice, and like any practice, it takes time and effort to develop. It's also important to remember that gratitude doesn't mean ignoring the difficult things in our lives or pretending that everything is perfect. It simply means being thankful for the good things, even in the midst of the difficult.

Given the potentials, how can anyone not value the practice of gratitude?

The alternative to seeking this balance is to sink into the despair that is instilled in us by taking on all the desperate woes of the world. To hunker down and defend our perceived scarce resources against the many small probabilities of doom that pursue us. To withdraw from those around us who represent this threat to our selves.

So surely the wise thing is to consider what we might have to be grateful for. To become mindful and recognise the small graces our lives present us with and acknowledge them with gratitude.

The Dalai Lama said *"Be grateful for the small things, for one day you may look back and realise they were big things."*

And of course being mindful also helps one recognise and maintain a healthy perspective on the true threats and dangers in our lives and the resources we have to combat or realistically prepare for them. Not wasting our internal resources on false threats. In turn this awareness provides a spirit of confidence and resilience.

In conclusion, while there is no denying the many challenges we face, it's important to remember that there are still many things to be grateful for and

optimistic about. By focusing on the positive and taking action to address the true challenges we face, we can work towards a brighter future.

Gratitude has the power to uplift and enrich our lives in profound ways. To shift our focus from what we lack to what we have, increase our positive emotions, and strengthen our relationships, our resilience in the adversity, individually and in community. To help us recognize the beauty and abundance in our lives and find joy in the present moment.

By cultivating a grateful heart, we can find hope and happiness even in the midst of the negatives that we are inundated with by media.

Thank you for listening. I hope you have found this talk useful and perhaps inspiring, and that you will take the time to practice gratitude in your own life.

Quotes

- "Gratitude can transform common days into thanksgivings, turn routine jobs into joy, and change ordinary opportunities into blessings." - William Arthur Ward
- "Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow." - Melody Beattie
- "Gratitude is the fairest blossom which springs from the soul." - Henry Ward Beecher
- "Gratitude is a powerful catalyst for happiness. It's the spark that lights a fire of joy in your soul." - Amy Collette
- "Gratitude is an attitude that hooks us up to our source of supply. And the more grateful you are, the closer you become to your maker, to the architect of the universe, to the spiritual core of your being." - Bob Proctor
- "Gratitude can transform any situation. It alters your vibration, moving you from negativity to positivity. It's the quickest, easiest, most powerful way to effect change in your life." - Rhonda Byrne
- "Gratitude is the healthiest of all human emotions. The more you express gratitude for what you have, the more likely you will have even more to express gratitude for." - Zig Ziglar

- "Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow." - Melody Beattie
- Desiderata by Max Ehrmann ©1927