

Grateful Book Study

Chapter 3 | Habits of Gratitude

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Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. . . . It makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow. —Melodie Beattie

An Ethic of Thanks

“How do you experience gratitude when feelings are elusive?”

Gratitude is, however, more than just an emotion. It is also a disposition that can be chosen and cultivated, an outlook toward life that manifests itself in actions—it is an ethic. By “ethic,” I mean a framework of principles by which we live more fully in the world. This ethic involves developing habits and practices of gratefulness that change us for the better. Gratitude involves not only what we feel, but also what we do. In this way, gratitude resembles love. Love is also a complex set of feelings—desire, passion, devotion, and affection. We feel love. But love is also a commitment, a choice, and a vow, an emotional orientation toward a person or persons that causes us to act in certain ways. Love as a noun, a feeling, surprises us; it shows up and changes everything. As most of us know, however, it is also a bit of a cheat. It can disappoint, fade, or taunt when it seems to hide or move away.

To compare love and gratitude underscores one of the most important things about gratefulness—it is ultimately about connection.... Like love, gratitude multiplies through giving and receiving. Both love and gratitude can become far more than ephemeral emotions—with practice, they become habits. More than anything else, love and gratitude take time to learn, understand, and develop. Only in this process can we experience deep gratitude.

Cultivating Awareness

How does gratitude move from feelings to a disposition of character, from an emotion to an ethic? Perhaps the first task is to be aware of blessings. Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk noted for a lifetime of gratitude practice, has observed: “Ninety-nine percent of the time we have an opportunity to be grateful for something. We just don’t notice it. We go through our days in a daze.”¹ Being in a “daze” is essentially living on autopilot. We follow habitual paths of emotions and actions, the familiar routines and rituals that make up our daily existence.

Many people are far more cued into habits of frustration—

Thus, developing cues to actually initiate thankfulness and establish a routine is a way to foster gratitude.

Social scientists and medical professionals call these gratitude interventions, replacing negative habits that cause emotional harm with more positive ones.

An Accidental Habit

One day you will thank me for this.

But we all need to look at ourselves more honestly. To figure out who we are and where we are really heading. To correct course. Sometimes that only happens in circumstances like this. One day, I bet you will thank him.

When my friend suggested writing down what I was thankful for, he suggested an activity that, as I mentioned, is known as a gratitude intervention in the health-care community. Now, as evidence mounts that journaling about blessings (instead of challenges) reduces stress and improves moods,⁶ psychologists and medical professionals suggest that patients keep gratitude diaries. Indeed, keeping a gratitude journal is one of the most often recommended ways for people to learn gratefulness, and several popular books attest to its power. Although I did not start out to specifically keep a gratitude journal, the act of journal writing itself (along with my friend's mandate for one blessing a day) became a cue to notice the good things in my life. Putting those things on a page became a routine. As the pages added up, day after day, I literally started seeing my life and the world differently. Over time, this habit became a lifeline for me—as I wrote, I knew that I grew stronger, and I developed a clarity of purpose and experienced more joy.

This process was not a magic bullet, like a twenty-one-day diet promising perfect health. I did not begin journaling and discover that all my problems had gone away. Journaling was not a technique for happiness; instead, over three years, I developed a sustained practice that shifted my perspective. I learned to see differently and, as a result, acted in ways that were more forgiving, just, and hopeful. In the process, I learned two important things: first, when you look for things to be grateful for, you find them; and, second, once you start looking, you discover that gratitude begets more gratitude. Like all habits, gratitude builds on itself.

Gratitude is a habit of awareness that reshapes our self-understanding and the moral choices we make in the world. In short, gratitude is an ethic, a coherent set of principles and practices related to grace, gifts, and giving that can guide our lives.

From Technique to Practice

Human beings use techniques to make tasks easier and allow us to accomplish work in—at least somewhat—organized ways.... Techniques provide us with a basic level of capabilities to function in life with a modicum of success.

Practices take us more deeply in a particular activity. For example, when I was a girl, my mother taught me how to cook—how to shop for food, read recipes, and prepare ingredients, how to boil, fry, and bake. She gave me a set of techniques that enabled me to make meals and feed myself and, later on, a family. But I also enjoyed cooking. So I read cookbooks, watched cooking shows, and took over the kitchen with culinary experiments. Soon my kitchen skills outstripped my mother's. I moved from knowing a few basic techniques to being a confident and skilled home cook. I learned how to prepare food in interesting ways, how to combine surprising flavors and spices, and how to work with ingredients I had not known in my childhood. I practiced cooking, and it became an important part of my life, something that gives me joy—and I taught my daughter the same. Cooking together introduced our family to gardening, farmers' markets, issues of food justice, and environmentalism. I will never open a restaurant or win Top Chef, but I am a good cook. Techniques are what we use to make do and survive; practices move us to who we become and how we thrive.

Not every technique we learn will turn into a practice, but some will. So it is with gratitude. Most of us did not completely fail at learning the basic techniques of gratitude. Even if we struggled with writing thank-you notes to our grandparents, many of us learned common courtesies, like saying thank you to someone who holds a door or serves us in a restaurant or bringing a small gift of appreciation to a dinner party, as well as ways of celebrating Thanksgiving Day or donating a thank offering in a religious community. Such small acts make life more pleasant and connect us to others as we recognize daily considerations or gifts. We know enough of gratitude to function. But the techniques of thankfulness also hint at something else: that gratitude might be more than a set of skills, something we do on occasion. It can become a good habit. If we practice gratefulness, it becomes a natural and normal way of engaging the world. With gratitude, our hearts open toward one another. It can make us different and help us prosper. The habit can shape who we are.

Past, Present, Future

Practice takes time. But that is not the only relationship between time and gratitude. When gratitude becomes a habit of being, our capacity to see time—past, present, and future—actually changes. Not only does gratitude open hearts; it also gives us new perspectives on our own lives. It stretches through our experiences—past, present, and future—creating a fabric of appreciation and awareness that forms the story of our lives. When we are thankful for the blessings of what was and see the goodness of what is, what can be comes into view with greater hope and possibility.

Past, or Hindsight: Gratitude is affected by memory. In some cases, gratitude may be blocked by the memory of negative events. Unable to let the past go, we might be caught up in anger or fear, stuck in events that limit the ability both to feel grateful and to develop the moral capacity of gratitude. In one experiment, researchers discovered that negative memories actually fostered negative moods, while positive memories elevated moods.

Honest hindsight does not foster nostalgia. It puts us in touch with gratitude. Looking back offers the opportunity to rewrite our own stories in more constructive and positive ways.

Can you remember an event that was painful at the time, but that now makes you feel grateful?

Remembering the actual past—even if that past was difficult and filled with ingratitude—allows us to see the past from an angle impossible at the time and paves the way for fuller appreciation of present joys. When psychologists speak of resilience, they are referring to our capacity to grow into our best selves—to be healthy, creative, emotionally balanced, and mature people. Positive emotions, like gratitude, foster resiliency, which strengthens our physical health, especially our heart health and the ability to recover more quickly from illness and surgery. Thus, gratitude can actually create better outcomes in our future health. Resiliency also works to improve psychological health.

PRACTICE TAKES TIME. A well-known rule of practice says that to become an expert at something, you need to devote ten thousand hours to doing it. Gratitude is not a practice that can be counted in hours. Instead, it invites us to engage the longer arc of time. In order for it to become a habit, it asks that we attend to seeing time more fully: engaging the past more graciously, living more appreciatively now, and building thanks into the foundation of our future. Attending to our lives with hindsight, wide sight, and foresight moves gratefulness from emotion to ethic. Thus, gratitude may feel good—and those good feelings do good things for us—but as an ethical disposition, gratitude is a strong basis for creating a good life. The habit of gratefulness helps us thrive. It not only takes time, but it can change the way we experience the times of our lives.