

## **Gratitude and Kindness: Small Gestures, Large Impact**

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In reflecting upon my writings and lectures during the past 25 years I recognize that there are certain themes I address and expand upon on a regular basis. These themes tend to be integral features of the strength-based, resilience approach I advocate. I continually discuss these topics given my belief that they deserve to be positioned on center stage and not delegated to the background if we are to lead a resilient lifestyle. Such themes include personal control, charitable or contributory activities, empathy, physical exercise, and connectedness. My hope is that keeping a spotlight on these concepts will encourage people to reflect upon and, when necessary, initiate changes in the ways in which they conduct their lives.

### **Seemingly Small Gestures**

During the past few months several events have prompted me to share once again my thoughts about two themes that permeate much of my philosophy, namely, gratitude and kindness. Let me begin by emphasizing that the actions I take on a daily basis are not for the purpose of garnering accolades or gratitude from others but rather to insure that I am living life in concert with my values. However, that being said, I am always touched by expressions of appreciation, perhaps even more so when they are not expected. This was the case when I received a note from a psychologist whom I supervised when she was an intern at McLean Hospital more than 20 years ago. It was an incredibly kind, thoughtful note about the influence I had on her career. Her words were uplifting. I immediately wrote back to thank her and to recall what a wonderful, caring intern she had been.

A few days later I gave several presentations sponsored by a law firm with the focus on resilience and achieving balance in one's life. A senior partner at the firm introduced me at two of the talks and went beyond a more formal, scripted introduction to tell the audience about having heard me at the firm's Retreat a few months earlier. He directed the audience to my monthly website articles, especially noting how helpful he had found this past November and December articles. His comments were brief and simple, but I believe his personal acknowledgement of my work helped to create a very

welcoming atmosphere in the room, one that I certainly appreciated. I e-mailed him a thank you message the next day.

I was speaking with some colleagues about gratitude and kindness. One mentioned an “inspirational” television advertisement that I had also recently seen but that has been running for a number of years. There are several versions, all involving a person observing an act of kindness by another person, which leads the observer to engage in a similar act that is observed by someone else. This prompts the latter to do the same and the cycle of kindness continues. The commercial was for Liberty Mutual. While people seem to love the message conveyed, one possible problem for Liberty Mutual is that none of the people with whom I spoke could identify the sponsoring group. One thought it was for an insurance company, but could not remember which one, also wondering how the acts of kindness portrayed in the commercial were tied to the activities of the company. However, people did not forget the sentiment being expressed and the ways in which one kind act leads to another.

Years ago I wrote about the importance of the “seemingly small gestures” of gratitude and kindness that enrich our lives and the lives of others. As I delved into the area of resilience and our connections with others I became even more impressed by the power of small gestures. I often like to relate the story of a supervisor I had during my year as a postdoctoral Fellow in psychology at the University of Colorado Medical School. I was asked to present at my first major clinical conference in front of many faculty and trainees. I was not as accustomed to speaking as I am now and was quite anxious. I thought my talk went okay, but I wasn’t certain. Later that afternoon I found that my supervisor had left me a brief note that read, “You did a great job today, Bob.” It took him only a few seconds to write but that note was to set a very positive tone for my entire postdoctoral experience. His actions also served as a model for me when I began to supervise others.

I always appreciate my readers taking time to write to me about my latest website article. A number of people wrote to me in response to last month’s article about courage in children, some sharing their own personal stories of perseverance and courage.

**Studies of Gratitude**

Given these recent events I was very interested in an article written by John Tierney that appeared in *The New York Times*. The title caught my attention: “A Serving of Gratitude May Save the Day.” Tierney sets the tone of the article by noting, “Cultivating an ‘attitude of gratitude’ has been linked to better health, sounder sleep, less anxiety and depression, higher long-term satisfaction with life and kinder behavior toward others, including romantic partners.”

Tierney offers insights from well-known psychologists about nurturing this “attitude of gratitude.” He describes a strategy that several clinicians have advanced, citing the pioneer work of Dr. Robert Emmons at the University of California at Davis and Dr. Michael McCullough at the University of Miami. Emmons and McCullough proposed the creation of a “gratitude lite” that involved people writing in a journal once a week five things for which they felt grateful. They were instructed to keep things brief with just one sentence for each of the five.

Interestingly, when I have described this technique of writing down things for which one is grateful, some people attending my workshops have questioned whether it is just a “gimmick” and whether it can really improve the mindsets and outlook of those engaging in the practice. The answer from the research of Emmons and McCullough is that it is not simply a gimmick. They found significant effects after two months. Those maintaining the gratitude journal compared with a control group were more optimistic and reported feeling happier. They also noted fewer physical problems and an increase in physical activity.

In attempting to explain the power of gratitude, McCullough asserts, “It is the emotion of friendship. It is part of a psychological system that causes people to raise their estimates of how much value they hold in the eyes of another person. Gratitude is what happens when someone does something that causes you to realize that you matter more to that person than you thought you did.” An interesting observation upon which to reflect.

Similar results were noted in a study of polio survivors and other individuals with neuromuscular problems. Those who kept a gratitude journal expressed greater feelings of optimism than those in a control group, an observation corroborated by their spouses. In addition, grateful people fell asleep more easily at night, slept for a longer period of

time, and woke up feeling more refreshed. Tierney quotes Emmons, “If you want to sleep more soundly, count blessings, not sheep.”

Tierney also refers to psychologist Dr. Sonja Lyubormirsky at the University of California at Riverside whose work related to happiness was the basis of my February, 2005 article. Similar to my notion about “small gestures,” Lyubormirsky recommends doing a “small and unobtrusive thoughtful or generous thing” for family members. “Say thank you for every thoughtful or kind gesture. Express your admiration for someone’s skills or talents,” she explains.

Dr. Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, regarded by many as one of the founders of “positive psychology,” is also cited in Tierney’s article. Seligman has recommended an exercise that involves writing a 300-word letter to an individual who has changed your life for the better. Seligman suggests that the letter be very specific, noting what the person did and the way in which their action impacted on you. Seligman proposes that if possible you deliver the letter in person without any advanced warning and then read it to the individual for whom it is intended. He asserts, “You will be happier and less depressed one month from now.”

Similar thoughts were expressed by John Kralik in an article he wrote for *Parade Magazine* titled “Up Your Gratitude.” Kralik, author of *A Simple Act of Gratitude*, describes a time in his life when he was feeling very low, a time in which he was overweight, owned a law practice that was losing money, involved in a divorce, and living in a “depressing” apartment. At that time he went for a hike and heard a voice that conveyed life-changing advice. He writes that the voice said, “I shouldn’t focus on what I wanted or had lost but should be grateful for what I had. The idea of a year of thank-yous popped into my head.”

Kralik made a decision to write a genuine note of gratitude to those who had made a positive difference in his life. He found that the project “transformed” him. “I saw how much I had been blessed by so many people in different ways, and acknowledging their blessings seemed to make them multiply. After I thanked colleagues for directing cases to me, they referred more. When I expressed gratitude to clients for paying promptly, they began doing so even more quickly. Something more

subtle occurred, too. With my thank-you notes, I was trying to tell people how much their kindness meant to me. As they responded, that same message was reflected back.”

Kralik describes that his life has improved immeasurably since his hike. “I’m now in great shape—I ran a marathon to benefit leukemia research in part to thank an employee. . . . I found a small but lovely house, and I was appointed to my dream job, Superior Court judge. Having written my 860<sup>th</sup> note, I can say I keep learning that gratitude is a path to the peace we all seek.”

### **The Alternatives We Face**

Sadly, when I have discussed the benefits of gratitude and acts of kindness at my presentations, I have on occasion met individuals who feel they have little for which to be grateful. I have no reason to doubt them, but as Kralik discovered even during a very despairing time in his life, there were still some things for which to be thankful. What he also did was to adopt a proactive stance—a key feature of personal control—by initiating the practice of writing notes of gratitude. In so doing, his attitude and the attitude of the recipients of the notes improved.

I know when one is feeling depressed, the idea of composing notes of gratitude may seem of little value, serving only to sap one’s limited energy even further. However, in contemplating the different choices we have when depressed, we should think about a quote by Anais Nin that I used in my last article but is equally relevant for this article. “And the day came when the risk it took to remain tight inside the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

Think of even one note of thanks you might write or one act of kindness you might undertake that may be the first step towards a blossoming of hope.

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