



# the MIND reader

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## What is Gratitude

By: Sheri Fluellen

Gratitude is a decision you can make to appreciate and not taking for granted someone, something, or a situation. It isn't ignoring reality or true difficulties; Rather it is choosing to find the good. But why bother? Why bother doing mental gymnastics to get your brain to view a situation with gratitude rather than a more instinctual emotion, like anger?

The idea of gratitude has almost become a fad lately. Because it is "in style" in our culture, it also has received a lot of attention by researchers that can answer the question of "why". Studies are showing that increasing conscious gratitude correlates with having greater joy, determination, attention, enthusiasm, energy, stronger immune systems, lower blood pressure, increased compassion, improves sleep and depression, and indirectly decreases anxiety. Probably not surprising findings, but they sure do help objectively confirm that gratitude should have a place in my daily living. So now that I have a sense of "why", my next question is "how"?

Increasing gratitude in your life isn't like losing 50 lbs. It is actually relatively easy and small simple steps can make a drastic difference both short term and long term. Here are some simple but powerful ideas:

Make a daily gratitude list. Write down 5 things you feel grateful for every day.

Find 3 people each day and tell them "thank you" for something they have done or just being who they are.

Every time you get frustrated with someone or something, challenge yourself to also find something about the person or situation to be grateful for.

Read a biography of someone who had a very difficult life. This can help put things in a different perspective. (examples: biographies of Viktor Frankl, Joni Eareckson Tada, Team Hoyt, or Mother Theresa)

There's no reason to delay making a small change in your day to make a big impact on your day, your attitude, and your future. "Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend." ~Melody Beattie



**I'm Grateful for Gratitude****By: Brandon Dixon**

I'm grateful for getting to be grateful. Given the freedom to choose whether to be grateful or not usually seems easy enough to actually be thankful for in and of itself and, thus, for anything we allow into our lives or even for things that just seem to appear or be there. Yet, there are moments when we feel we are unable to find anything to be thankful for. Sometimes we even wish we didn't have to attribute gratitude to or for anything, it just ought to exist abundantly. Yet it does, when we choose to open our eyes again and choose the freedom that allows us to look again. I could be wrong but I don't think there is freedom without love or love without freedom, no gratitude without either. So what am I grateful for -the gift or the giver? Both, because the giver gives Himself, so, so much, everything we can fathom and more. This existential example enables us to respond with gratitude, empowering us to give likewise, worshipping the giver as we do.

"... some moment happens in your life that you say yes right up to the roots of your hair, that makes it worth having been born just to have happen. Laughing with somebody till the tears run down your cheeks, waking up to the first snow.... whether you thank God for such a moment or thank your lucky stars, it is a moment that is trying to open up your whole life. If you turn your back on such a moment and hurry along to business as usual, it may lose you the ball game. If you throw your arms around such a moment and hug it like crazy, it may save your soul."

This quote, by Frederick Buechner, seemed quite appropriate as I contemplate the idea of what it means to be grateful and to consider what I am grateful for. Since gratitude is a choice to turn towards "what is right" and to turn away (for a time) from what is imperfect or "not right," I am thankful, grateful even, for such an assignment.

Today I am grateful for the chance to live out my calling in the profession of counseling. I guess I am "supposed" to say that, but the beauty of saying it, is that I truly mean it. That amazes me. I am grateful as I contemplate the stories I am so honored to hold and as I think of the sacred moment's when I get to witness someone's heart becoming free. Beauty. Pure beauty.

I am grateful for love of friends and family. I am grateful for HOPE.

I can't help but think of how many people's hearts feel sad and lonely during the holidays as I express all that I am grateful for. It can be hard to read what everyone else is grateful for during this time. We want to be grateful...but the holidays...and families...can be complicated. So, I want to acknowledge and hold that well. And remind myself (again) that gratitude does not mean a denying of sad or lonely parts of our hearts but of turning towards beauty too. I guess gratitude is letting our big messy heart's hold all things at once.

So, back to what I am grateful for...

Today, I am grateful for mochas with whip cream, a short "to do" list, a weekend spent with good friends...and once again...HOPE. Hope that we can be new, that we can love better and hope that we can make it through the holidays holding our complicated hearts kindly and lovingly.

**I'm Grateful for Laughter****By: Lindsay Simineo**

One night a couple of years ago, I was lying in bed with my husband waiting to drift off to sleep. When all of a sudden, a worried thought popped into my head that needed to be addressed immediately.

"Hey, Rick? What are you gonna do when I die?" After a long pause my husband answered, "What do you think I have been saving that refrigerator box for?"

Laughter ensued. The joke went on for approximately 20 minutes before we finally went to sleep. This is not an article about how I am grateful for my husband, though I am. This is an article about how I am grateful for something that has seen me through every area of my life. Humor.

It is my belief that humor has sustained my marriage, made my heart happy, and made my heart persevere when it needed to. This spring I will have been married 9 years; in which some of those years were not so pretty. We have experienced tragic losses, financial stressors, homeowner nightmares, health scares, and career woes. There has been so much that if you ask me to sit down and retell it all to you, I genuinely cannot remember. What I do remember is that laughter saw me through it.

If I could laugh at something in the situation, I was going to be okay. If my husband and I could laugh at something, not only would we be okay but it also showed that we were first and foremost best friends. If we could laugh at something as a family, than our house was full of joy. No matter what occurs in your life, laughter can ensure than joy is still present. Because of that I also wish humor in your lives this holiday season.

## I am Annoyed... and Grateful

By: Sarah Tilley

I am annoyed. I am writing in a coffee shop and am accustomed to the sounds of other patrons enjoying conversation with their coffee at a reasonable volume; leaving me undistracted from focusing on work. Today I can describe to you, in great detail, the sales pitch presented by an independent consultant of a business. Mr. Sales is speaking at a much higher volume. I can also tell you, that the prey sitting across the table from him, is not interested in the product he is pitching. Neither am I; yet I am hearing all about it. I am also treated to the audio of a video presentation. I am annoyed.

I am composing an article about gratitude when I am annoyed. Can these two states co-exist? Sure. I can be grateful and simultaneously experience less pleasant emotions. Life brings about many unpleasant and painful experiences that lead to distressing emotions like grief, anger, sadness, anguish, annoyance and so on and so forth. Finding gratitude in difficult circumstances does not negate the reality of our experience, but it sure can curb the intensity of the discomfort.

I am annoyed. I am grateful. Mr. Sales is loud; so loud that I understand more than I care to comprehend about the product he is pitching. I am grateful to have functioning ears. I am grateful that this sales person has the freedom to pursue a source of income. Although this person's pursuit of the sales in a public place annoys me; I am grateful he has ambition and is free to pursue his goals. I am grateful that Mr. Sales is not pitching his product to *me*. I am grateful that I have a laptop that frees me to relocate and type these thoughts in another venue of my choosing. I am grateful for the healthy legs that will soon take me to that location. I am grateful for the fingers that enable me to type these words. I am also grateful for the warm and delicious beverage that I sip between sulking and searching for gratitude. Though it may seem tedious to acknowledge gratitude for each functioning finger and experience; the acknowledgement of positives calms my frustration and releases tension. It also distracts me from the root of my aggravation, which I have little control over changing anyway. I now feel calmer as I settle back into the work in front of me.

Another opportunity for gratitude grabs my attention as I spot Mr. Sales packing up his gear. He is leaving. Did he make the sale? I have no idea because I was distracted by my brief exploration of appreciation.

Da Da ta Da ta Da Da .....!!!! (My best attempt to portray the sound of Darth Vader's Imperial March) blaring from the cell phone of another coffee shop patron across the room. Momentary silence. "Hi!" greets the phone's owner as they launch into a high volume conversation. Another loud talker.

I am grateful for...



## Remembering the Bad, a Grateful Meditation

By: Julie Kostrey

Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D., is a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, the founding editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, and is the world's leading scientific expert on gratitude (having also written numerous books on the subject). He describes gratitude as having two key components: 1) "It's an affirmation of goodness. We affirm that there are good things in the world, gifts and benefits we've received." Secondly, "we recognize that the sources of this goodness are outside of ourselves. ... We acknowledge that other people—or even higher powers, if you're of a spiritual mindset—gave us many gifts, big and small, to help us achieve the goodness in our lives."

Having gratitude is the key to living life with great perspective, as it benefits us spiritually, emotionally and relationally. Dr. Emmons teaches how to utilize the powerful tool of journaling and gives guidance about how to gain the most from journaling by writing specific blessings, listing people for whom we are grateful, and other fun and easy ideas.

So gratitude can allow us to celebrate and magnify the goodness when things are going well. But what about when things aren't so hot? What if things are downright awful?

Dr. Emmons' research shows that not only will a grateful attitude help—it is *essential*. In fact, it is precisely under crisis conditions, when we have the most to gain by a grateful perspective on life. In the face of demoralization, gratitude has the power to energize. In the face of brokenness, gratitude has the power to heal. In the face of despair, gratitude has the power to bring hope. In other words, gratitude can help us cope with hard times. (Continued on pg. 5)

## Remembering the Bad, a Grateful Meditation (Cont.)

As Emmons describes, "Trials and suffering can actually refine and deepen gratefulness if we allow them to show us not to take things for granted. Our national holiday of gratitude, Thanksgiving, was born and grew out of hard times. The first Thanksgiving took place after nearly half the pilgrims died from a rough winter and year. It became a national holiday in 1863 in the middle of the Civil War and was moved to its current date in the 1930s following the Depression.

"What?!", you might ask. The idea is that when times are good, people take prosperity for granted and begin to believe that they are invulnerable. In times of uncertainty, though, people realize how powerless they are to control their own destiny. You begin to see that everything you have and count on may be taken away and it becomes much harder to take it for granted.

While crisis might make us more grateful, research says gratitude also helps us cope with crisis. Consciously cultivating an attitude of gratitude builds up what Emmons describes as a sort of psychological immune system that can cushion us when we fall. As he puts it, there is scientific evidence that grateful people are more resilient to stress, whether minor everyday hassles or major personal upheavals. The contrast between suffering and redemption serves as the basis for one of Emmons' seemingly paradoxical tips for practicing gratitude: remember the bad!

As he describes it, this process of remembering how difficult life used to be and how far we have come sets up an explicit contrast that is fertile ground for gratefulness. Because our minds think in terms of counterfactuals (mental comparisons we make between the way things are and how things might have been different); contrasting the present with negative times in the past can make us feel happier (or at least less unhappy) and enhance our overall sense of well-being, which can open the door to coping gratefully. (1)

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