

# The Challenge of Gratitude

From time to time I receive correspondence from individuals who have become aware of my research on the benefits of gratitude and have become inspired to live more grateful lives. None has affected me quite so much as an e-mail I received in late January 2011 from Clara Morabito of Oldsmar, Florida (a suburb of Tampa). She contacted me to tell me about two events that might seem slight but that had massively changed her life. One of the events was a poem entitled *I Choose* that she composed shortly before her birthday a few years before:

*I choose to be happy  
I choose to be grateful  
I choose to be caring  
And always be thoughtful.*

\* \* \*

*I choose to be well,  
I choose to be fine*

*I choose to be healthy  
All of the time.*

\* \* \*

*I choose to be patient  
I choose to be strong  
I choose to be calm  
All the day long.<sup>1</sup>*

These are simple words but their power has been extraordinary in Clara's life. She meditates twice a day, before breakfast and before supper, always ending with her poem. Right before going to sleep, she reviews how wonderful the day has been and is thankful for it. She has had her share of health challenges but credits her vigor and positive outlook on life to her daily recitations of these words of affirmation. She has told me that reciting the poem leaves her with feelings of strength, wellness, and calmness and has kept her from having any significant illnesses since she wrote it. Although she cannot take two steps without the use of her walker, her energy is boundless. Her doctor was so impressed that he posted a framed copy of the poem in his examining room and gives out copies to his patients. She ends each e-mail with her signature closing: "In gratitude, joy, and with love, Clara."

But why did she write to me specifically? The second event that transformed her life was reading my book *Thanks!* She learned of it from her minister, Reverend Abhi Janamanchi, who, in preparation for Thanksgiving, was leading his Unitarian

Universalist congregation in Clearwater in a study of gratitude as a spiritual practice. A lifelong learner who began college in her forties, earning her magna cum laude BA degree at age fifty-six, Clara was impressed by the body of research I cited documenting the mental and physical health benefits of practicing gratitude.

She had experienced three prolonged emotional downturns: one in her late fifties, another in her mid-seventies, and the last in her mid-eighties. Each incident was triggered by a physical illness and lasted about three months. After she read my book, she understood why gratitude worked. What particularly resonated with her was my contention that gratitude is a choice. Not only that, it may have been one of the most important choices she ever made. She is convinced that the practice of gratitude, in combination with medication, has transformed her life. Clara reports that she feels truly happy and grateful every single day, and has the “compulsion” to spread the word about the power of gratitude to everyone she meets in various activities.

At ninety-two years young, she is a living testimony to the power of gratitude. She has been highly sought after as a speaker in her local community and has given lectures with titles such as “Prolongation of Life via Gratitude.” Her goal is to become a centenarian and she is strongly convinced that gratitude will help her achieve that milestone.

As Clara reveals, gratitude is one of life’s most vital ingredients, and there is a great deal of research that supports her experience. Clinical trials indicate that the practice of gratitude can have dramatic and lasting effects in a person’s life. It can lower blood pressure, improve immune function, promote happiness

and well-being, and spur acts of helpfulness, generosity, and cooperation.<sup>2</sup> Whether it springs from the glad acceptance of another's kindness, an appreciation for the majesty of nature, a recognition of the gifts in one's own life, or from countless other enchanted moments, gratitude enhances nearly all spheres of human experience. Beyond its ability to create tangible benefits, people cherish simply feeling grateful for its own sake. Some of the best moments in life are those in which we sense we have been the beneficiary of goodness freely and generously bestowed on us.

Throughout the ages, in every culture and in numerous different ways, we have been exhorted repeatedly with the same fundamental message: to live in appreciation of life's gifts, to be grateful to those who are good to us, to not take things for granted, and to avoid, at all costs, accusations of ingratitude. Yet genuinely grateful emotions and related attitudes are not as prevalent as we might assume. When was the last time you wrote a letter of heartfelt thanks to someone who had gone out of his or her way to assist you? Most of us recognize the ways in which our lives are supported and sustained by others—close or distant, living or deceased, familiar or unknown to us. But acknowledging this awareness takes effort. We more naturally think of ourselves before we think of others so it should come as no shock that grateful attitudes, along with their numerous benefits, are fleeting for most of us. Feeling grateful too often depends on our self-absorbed view of external events rather than being a basic orientation toward life. Opening ourselves to the majestic moments in our lives naturally redirects our attention to the gifts that surround us.

Most of us find it relatively easy to feel happily grateful when life proceeds according to plan—however, that is rarely the norm. It is too easy to shunt aside, overlook, or take for granted the basic gifts of life. At the other end of the spectrum, a tragedy or crisis can often elicit feelings of grateful relief that the situation did not turn out worse than it might have or incite feelings of gratitude for escaping a potentially life-threatening event. But once the crisis has passed, research has shown that we often fall back into old patterns of self-centered, unappreciative thought and action.

Although most of us intuitively know that we should feel grateful when others do us a good turn and may even realize that we function best when experiencing grateful emotions, why don't we seek such responses more consistently in our day-to-day lives? Why does genuine gratitude remain a transient and unpredictable occurrence for most people? Is it a built-in limitation? Our minds do have a built-in tendency to perceive an input as negative. In other words, our reactions to situations, to people around us, to the events of the day, what we notice and pay attention to more often than not will drift to what is going wrong rather than what is going right. To use an analogy from neuroscientist Rick Hanson, our minds are Velcro for negative information but Teflon for positive.<sup>3</sup> When it comes to sustaining a grateful outlook, this built-in bias does not help. It leads us to either ignore or take for granted the blessings of life although we have no problem harping on what irritates us.

I suspect that the problem is fundamentally about motivation and entrenched thought patterns rather than biology. My scientific study of gratitude since about 2000 has led me to

conclude that a key factor is a fundamental lack of skill in managing our mental and emotional states and feelings.<sup>4</sup> In other words, we generally do not try to actively infuse our daily experiences with gratefulness because we sincerely do not know how. We all have the tools to transform virtually every moment into gratitude. Sometimes we misplace these tools and sometimes we let them become dull from disuse. If you can rediscover and learn to sharpen your gratitude tools, you will realize that nearly every waking moment provides an opportunity to practice gratitude. Gratitude clearly matters but how can we get more of it? Science has begun to illuminate the best practices for creating sustained gratitude but this information has yet to be communicated to a wide audience. That is my goal in writing this book.

There is frequently a divide between what we know we ought to do and how we actually wind up behaving. Psychologists call this the *knowledge to performance gap*. Similarly, there is a gulf between knowing that we *ought* to feel grateful and how we usually *do* feel. The depressing reality is that people often fail to live up to what they know they should do or even want to do. The Apostle Paul confessed long ago,

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who does it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.

For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. (Romans 7:15–19)

At some point in their lives, virtually all people fail to live up to their ideals. I may profess gratitude and then find myself filled with a spirit of entitlement. Instead of counting blessings, I keep (even unconsciously) a mental list of the ways in which life continually disappoints. I might encourage my children to write a thank-you note, then fail to do the same myself. I can give lectures and write articles on gratitude, then forget to thank my audiences or my editor. For gratitude to work, we must identify the barriers to gratitude and develop practical strategies to overcome them. Progress in growing the attitudes and practices of gratitude is anything but guaranteed.

This is a book of practices. It is all about the concrete things you can do to grow your mind and direct your actions toward gratefulness. I have found the organic metaphor of *growing gratitude* to be a powerful way of conveying basic truths about the nature of this quality. It is about *cultivating* a grateful disposition, which is an inclination that can become deeply ingrained. Through practice, giving thanks *grows* from the *ground* of one's being. Grateful feelings, once *buried*, can *surface* if we take the time to notice and reflect. A Russian proverb says that “gratitude waters old friendships and makes new ones sprout.”<sup>5</sup> Gratitude is like fertilizer for the mind, spreading connections and improving its function in nearly every realm of experience. This book provides you many tools for growing your gratitude.

In *Thanks!* I wrote that legendary investor and philanthropist Sir John Templeton had posed the question, “How can we get six billion people around the world to practice gratitude?”<sup>6</sup> Not long after Sir John died in 2008, his daughter-in-law Pina Templeton discovered a curious document in his personal archives. It was a short letter the visionary had included with his family Christmas card mailed out in 1962. Instead of using the letter in the way it is nowadays to showcase his children’s accomplishments or the family’s annual vacation, he took the occasion to encourage readers to think of the mind as a garden and themselves as responsible for tending it:

If you exercise no control, it will become a weed patch and a source of shame and misery. If you exercise wise control, then it will be filled with God’s miracles and become a place of indescribable beauty. You are free to choose which. How can you do it? Simply, for example, develop a habit of looking at each thought as you would a plant. If it is worthy, if it fits the plan you desire for your mind, cultivate it. If not, replace it. How do you get it out of your mind? Simply by putting in its place two or three thoughts of love or worship, for no mind can dwell on more than two or three thoughts at one time.

Circumstances outside the garden of your mind do not shape you. You shape them. For example, if you expect treachery, allowing those thoughts to dwell in your mind, you will get it. If you fill your mind with thoughts of love, you will give love and get it. If you think little of God, He will be far from you. If you think often of God, the Holy Spirit will



dwell more in you. The glory of the universe is open to every man. Some look and see. Some look and see not.

Gardens are not made in a day. God gave you one lifetime for the job. Control of your garden or your mind grows with practice and study of the wisdom other minds have bequeathed to you. He who produces an item of unique beauty in his garden or his mind may have a duty to give that seed to others. As your body is the dwelling place of your mind, so is your mind the dwelling place of your soul. The mind you develop is your dwelling place for all your days on earth, and the soul you develop on earth may be the soul you are stuck with for eternity. God has given you the choice.<sup>7</sup>

My hope is that this book will give you all of the gardening tools that you need to shape and grow your grateful thoughts and to weed-whack the ungrateful ones.

### **\* PRACTICES FOR CULTIVATING GRATITUDE \***

As showcased in my previous book *Thanks!*, groundbreaking research has shown that when people regularly cultivate gratitude, they experience a multitude of psychological, physical, interpersonal, and spiritual benefits. Gratitude has one of the strongest links to mental health and satisfaction with life of any personality trait—more so than even optimism, hope, or compassion. Grateful people experience higher levels of positive emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, love, happiness, and optimism, and gratitude as a discipline protects us from the destructive impulses of envy, resentment, greed, and bitterness. People

who experience gratitude can cope more effectively with everyday stress, show increased resilience in the face of trauma-induced stress, recover more quickly from illness, and enjoy more robust physical health. Many of these effects are quantifiable. Consider these eye-popping statistics. People are 25 percent happier if they keep gratitude journals, sleep one-half hour more per evening, and exercise 33 percent more each week compared to persons who are not keeping these journals. Hypertensives can achieve up to a 10 percent reduction in systolic blood pressure and decrease their dietary fat intake by up to 20 percent.<sup>8</sup> Experiencing gratitude leads to increased feelings of connectedness, improved relationships, and even altruism. We have also found that when people experience gratitude, they feel more loving, more forgiving, and closer to God. Dozens of research studies with diverse participant groups have also revealed that the practice of gratitude leads to the following:

- Increased feelings of energy, alertness, enthusiasm, and vigor
- Success in achieving personal goals
- Better coping with stress
- A sense of closure in traumatic memories
- Bolstered feelings of self-worth and self-confidence
- Solidified and secure social relationships
- Generosity and helpfulness
- Prolonging of the enjoyment produced by pleasurable experiences
- Improved cardiac health through increases in vagal tone
- Greater sense of purpose and resilience

The evidence on practicing gratitude contradicts the widely held view that all people have a set point of, or predisposition to, happiness that cannot be reset. The luck of the genetic draw has some of us happier and some of us less happy from the start. However, the science of happiness has taught us that we can do a great deal about our sense of happiness, regardless of our set point. In some cases, people have reported that gratitude led to transformative life changes, as was true with Clara, whose story opened this chapter. All in all, science confirms that the life-giving practice of gratitude broadens our lives by enabling healing of the past, providing contentment in the present, and delivering hope for the future.

I pioneered the use of gratitude journaling as a research methodology in which people counted their blessings by systematically putting their thoughts and feelings down on paper. This powerful exercise encourages reflection that allows us to regain perspective and a sense of control over the events that move through our lives. Several hundred persons between the ages of eight and eighty have now practiced gratitude journaling under controlled experimental conditions and we have scientific evidence of what works and what doesn't. I will be applying the insights of this research throughout this book.

It might be argued that techniques such as gratitude journaling are so commonplace (and perhaps so patently obvious) that they require no further explanation. Some even think that counting blessings is a corny or cheesy activity. I would beg to differ, based on a number of nonobvious and

even counterintuitive findings that have recently been reported in the gratitude literature.<sup>9</sup> Consider the following:

- Occasional gratitude journaling (e.g., twice weekly) boosts well-being more than the regular practice (e.g., every day) of counting blessings. Sometimes less is more. You avoid gratitude fatigue this way.
- Remembering one's sorrows, failures, and other painful experiences is more beneficial to feeling grateful than is recalling only successes. A reversal of fortune—a redemptive twist in your life when a difficult challenge was conquered—primes the pump of gratitude. Recall a breakthrough you had in what was once an insurmountable problem and be grateful for that breakthrough.
- As an illustration of the previous point, thinking about one's own death (not usually viewed as a pleasant experience) increases gratitude. Imagining a near-death experience increases people's levels of gratitude and at the same time decreases their overall level of unhappiness.
- Becoming aware that a very pleasant experience is about to end enhances feelings of gratefulness associated with it. For example, instead of worrying about all that work that will be waiting for you when you return to the office, really savor the last few days of your vacation.
- Thinking about the absence of something positive in your life produces more gratitude and happiness than imagining its presence. What would your life be like if you had not met your spouse? If you did not live in your current neighborhood? If

- you had not had that chance encounter with the stranger on the plane who later became a business associate?
- Watching a dreary, depressing film will make you feel more joy and gratitude in your life than will watching a comedy.

Gratitude works but not always in the manner that we think it does or for the reasons that we think it does. I would not have necessarily predicted any of these findings, all of which have been verified by controlled experiments. By including surprising research findings such as these, I hope this book will stretch your assumptions about the nature of gratitude and how best to cultivate it. You will get the most out of this book if you try out these ideas yourself. In the final chapter I provide a series of exercises that guide you through a twenty-one-day gratitude challenge. I have organized the practices around a twenty-one-day period because the daily gratitude journaling studies demonstrated that three weeks was sufficient to lead to significant personal changes. At the end of these twenty-one days you will find yourself energized, inspired, and motivated further to make these practices a regular part of your life. People around you will notice that you have changed for the better. You will be better. And you will have accomplished it all yourself.

### **\* DEVELOPING A GRATEFUL DISPOSITION \***

Twenty-one days may not be long enough to enact a change in your fundamental outlook on life but it can set you on the path toward growing in gratefulness. There is a difference between

fleeting experiences of gratitude and sustainable levels of the trait. There are layers and levels to gratitude. To have a momentary experience of gratitude is not the same as having a well-honed grateful disposition. People who are disposed toward gratitude are more apt to notice what is going right in their lives, seeing the role that others play in these good things, and expressing gratitude toward others in words or in deeds. They are prone to not taking things for granted. They have developed the skills of noticing, appreciating, and communicating. Individuals with the disposition toward gratitude would strongly endorse such statements as the following:

- It's important to appreciate each day that you are alive.
- I often reflect on how much easier my life is because of the efforts of others.
- For me, life is much more of a gift than it is a burden.
- One of my favorite times of the year is Thanksgiving.
- I'm basically very thankful for the parenting that was provided to me.
- I could not have gotten where I am today without the help of many people.
- It seems that I can even find reasons to feel thankful for bad things that happen.
- I have been so struck by the beauty or awe of something that I felt grateful in return.
- If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.
- I find it easy to express gratitude to those who have helped me.

You will be able to take a questionnaire to measure your own level of gratefulness in chapter 7.

To illustrate differences between more grateful and less grateful persons, compare a hypothetical child “Bo,” who always seems to have a deeply grateful heart no matter what the circumstance, to “Nathaniel,” who at his best can barely grunt “thanks” after he has been done a favor. I believe most people would agree that Bo and Nathaniel illustrate, qualitatively speaking, distinct gradients of gratitude. At their respective birthday parties, Bo unwraps each present slowly, savoring the experience and his expressions and words reveal joyful appreciation toward the giver. Nathaniel, by contrast, rushes through his pile of presents, tearing off the paper at breakneck speed, and after he has opened the last looks around to see if there are more. Even relatively early in life, the differences in how they respond to situations that call for gratitude are apparent. It would not be fair to say that Nathaniel is an ungrateful lost cause but it is clear that they have two very distinct approaches to life based on how they respond to what they have been given. Because life is mostly about giving, receiving, and repaying based on the reactions to what we receive in life, this fundamental orientation is likely to lead to very different downstream consequences for Bo and Nathaniel. Which one will be happier? More alive and vibrant? Better liked? More effective in life? Who will have more obstacles to being fulfilled? In chapter 6 I explore some of the basic obstacles to gratitude and how these might be overcome.

Bo and Nathaniel would also differ in various components of the grateful disposition. My colleagues and I identified four

different facets of gratitude, each representing a different dimension along which to characterize a grateful person. The first facet of the grateful disposition might be called gratitude *intensity*. A person with a strong grateful disposition who experienced a positive event would be expected to feel more intensely grateful than would someone less disposed toward gratitude who experienced the same positive event. A second facet of the grateful disposition might be called gratitude *frequency*. Someone with a strong grateful disposition might report feeling grateful several times per day, and gratitude might be elicited by even the simplest favor or act of politeness. Conversely, for someone less disposed toward gratitude, such a favor or act of politeness might be insufficient to elicit gratitude. As a result, the person with a weaker grateful disposition might experience less gratitude within a specified time period (e.g., hours, days, or weeks).

A third facet of the grateful disposition might be called gratitude *span*, which refers to the number of life circumstances for which a person feels grateful at a given time. People with a strong grateful disposition might feel grateful for their families, their jobs, their health, and life itself, along with a wide variety of other benefits. People less disposed toward gratitude might be aware of experiencing gratitude for fewer aspects of their lives. A fourth facet of the grateful disposition might be called gratitude *density*, which refers to the number of persons to whom one feels grateful for a single positive outcome or life circumstance. When asked to whom one feels grateful for a certain outcome, say, obtaining a good job, someone with a strong grateful disposition density might list a large



number of others, including parents, elementary school teachers, tutors, mentors, fellow students, and God. Someone less disposed toward gratitude might feel grateful to fewer people.

As you monitor your growth in gratitude, I encourage you to think in terms of these four facets of the grateful disposition. Try to figure out where your weaknesses lie and where your strengths lie. Maybe it is relatively easy for you to feel intense gratitude at times (intensity, a plus), but you do not feel it very often (lack of frequency, which is a negative). Or perhaps you have a very small gratitude span. A student in one of my classes journaled that she was grateful for only three things in her life: her Maine coon cat, her rat terrier, and her apartment where the three of them harmoniously dwelled. If you are like her, try to expand your span by elaborating on your truncated list. Work actively at finding more to be grateful for. When you grow in gratitude, you grow all over.

Surely a deep and abiding gratefulness, the ability to relish the little pleasures that common occurrences afford, is a desirable human quality. Yet inasmuch as gratitude typically is a *response* to a gift, how can one actually cultivate it as a disposition? Doesn't gratitude require another person or being to provide a benefit to the receiver? In that view, I am at the mercy of others to provide or withhold favors. When seen this way, gratefulness can be seen as more like courage because one has to wait until appropriate opportunities arise in which to act courageously or conversely, cowardly. It would not make sense to cultivate a trait of courageousness in any generalized sense.

But can gratefulness be seen differently? Does it have to depend on others or can we cultivate it as a way of being? Among the questions I will explore in this book are the following:

- How do we get from *feeling* gratitude to *being* grateful?
- Is gratitude one of those “unfair” gifts given to those who possess sunny dispositions, those who do not instinctively feel the anxiety, pain, and separation of living in this world?
- Can we choose to cultivate the trait of gratitude?
- Is there a way to lower our threshold to perceive kindnesses or to imbue everyday experiences within an emotional backdrop of gratefulness?
- What are the mental tools that allow this?

A recent study does suggest that there is an influence of genes on levels of gratitude. Researchers at the University of Minnesota estimated the heritability of gratitude at about 40 percent.<sup>10</sup> This indicates that although gratitude may be influenced by genetic factors, the majority of a given person’s disposition toward gratitude is determined by nongenetic influences over which a person has more personal control. So it is not the case that you either have gratitude or you don’t. The genetic programming here is not strong. We can all have it and we can have more of it if we systematically train ourselves to pay attention to what is going right in our lives, to see the contributions that others make in these good things, and express gratitude verbally and behaviorally. It’s my hope that the practices and guidelines offered in this book will have the same impact in your life that it had in Clara Morabito’s life. I urge you to take up the gratitude challenge that this book offers.