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Gratitude-An Educational Difference-maker

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My father was a little boy when the stock market crashed in 1929. By the time he was ten, he knew he needed to make a contribution to the family. He worked for the local grocer pulling weeds from his garden for 10 cents/hour. And he weeded his heart out. When he finally sat down and calculated that he had worked nearly 300 hours, he realized he had earned close to \$30.00. Instead of requesting full remuneration, he asked the grocer for a quarter (25 cents) to join his friends at the local movie theater. He never anticipated the response. “Son, all the money you’ve earned has gone toward your mother’s grocery bill. I do not have a quarter to give you.” The refusal stunned him like a blow. My father still remembers the screen door slamming behind him and his decision never to return. Crestfallen, he recounted the incident to his mother, who dissolved into tears.

He was thirteen years old when my grandfather secured a job that would bring them just enough money to build a bathroom inside the house. For a teenage boy sharing the outhouse and washbasin with his sister and parents proved increasingly difficult. One day at school the physical education teacher asked all the boys in physical education class to sit on the bleachers and take off their shoes and socks for an athlete’s foot check. My father’s cheeks burned as he slowly removed his socks to reveal his dirty unwashed feet. The laughter and taunts were immediate—“Hey Blackfoot,” one boy jeered. He hung his head in shame. He was branded for the remainder of his middle school experience. Having an indoor bathroom with hot running water and an opportunity to shower was the hope he desperately held onto. When his father returned from work one evening and announced the loss of his job, the possibility of funding construction at home and my father’s hopes were both shattered.

Despite these hardships some combination of variables conspired to give my father an extraordinarily grateful heart. Perhaps it is a quality of the generation that suffered through the Great Depression. Perhaps my grandparents’ resilience, fortitude, and generosity—for they had welcomed destitute friends and relatives into their home when they had nothing material to share—impressed him. He never expressed anger or resentment when reflecting on his childhood. The stories he shared with us as we were growing up were tales of his parents’ heroism, spirited family gatherings, experiences in World War II and his courtship of my mother. He always taught us to give people the benefit of the doubt, not to judge a person on appearances, and never to take good things—such as the roof over our heads or the food on our table—for granted. “We have every reason to be grateful,” he would remind us often, “and nothing to complain about.”

In *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946), Viktor Frankl, concentration camp survivor and psychiatrist, citing Nietzsche (1844-1900), writes that we can endure almost any *how* if we have a compelling *why*, a reason to endure. Gratitude is the virtue that helps to keep those reasons before us. My father spent most of his life contributing to his family, work and community. He was not a complainer, never lamented difficulties, and scolded us roundly if we took to whining. He was also not fond of comparisons and discouraged us from trying to keep up with the Joneses, when we worried about the brand of clothing we wore or the kind of car our family drove. He would swiftly remind us to be grateful that we *had* clothes and a means of transportation. It was his

deliberate effort to foster gratitude that kept our family happier and more resilient in the face of hardship.

Cicero (106-43 BCE), the Roman senator and orator, wrote, “Gratitude is not only one of the greatest virtues, but it is the parent of all others.” It is difficult to think about gratitude without considering the sources of our blessings. It requires humility to realize that we are all indebted to others in some way—for our life, our learning, our livelihood, our health and safety, and so much more. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the great saint and theologian, argued in his *Summa Theologica* that gratitude is part of the virtue of justice, rendering what is due to others—especially to our parents and benefactors. Gratitude, he explains, also inspires us to give God the worship and thanksgiving He deserves. In many faith traditions gratitude to God or one’s spiritual benefactors is fundamental to appreciating blessings we enjoy. The Welsh born English poet and Anglican priest, George Herbert (1593-1633) captured this sentiment in the following lines of verse:

Thou that has given so much to me,
Give one thing more -- a grateful heart;
Not thankful when it pleases me,
As if Thy blessings had spare days;
But such a heart, whose pulse may be
Thy praise.

Without a grateful heart, without appreciation for the countless pleasures, conveniences and consolations we experience each day, we cannot truly enjoy them. Gratitude teaches us the difference between feeling entitled to comfort and happiness, which inevitably leads to disappointment, and truly possessing happiness. Again, as Frankl observes, “Happiness is not something we pursue but something that ensues” from within a person. A grateful heart keeps us grounded in reality, cherishing and acknowledging the people, experiences and goods that enable us to rise above our circumstances and make the best of them.

Gratitude strengthens our capacity to live nobly even in the most extreme circumstances. *Left to Tell* (2006, Hay House) is a heart-wrenching autobiographical account of Immaculee Ilibagiza’s survival amidst the horrors of the Rwandan genocide. She hid with seven other women in a small bathroom for 91 days listening to the unspeakable violence just outside the window. She used this time to study English with a dictionary and to drown out evil with intense prayer. It was her focus that enabled her to survive and later secure employment with the United Nations. Her deep faith enabled her to count her survival as a blessing. She began her life anew with a

desire not to harbor hatred but to foster peace by forgiving the individuals who massacred her family.

In 1620 the Pilgrims, a group of settlers who left Europe for America in search of religious freedom, arrived to find a wilderness and a winter so harsh that fewer than half survived to see the spring. They dug far more graves than they built homes, and yet they turned to God with thankful hearts for the blessings they did enjoy. After eventually securing a successful harvest, the Pilgrims hosted a three-day feast in thanksgiving, to which they invited the Native Americans who had taught them to farm, hunt and fish. This feast, proclaimed a national holiday by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, is commemorated as Thanksgiving Day on the fourth Thursday of November. According to a 2008 Gallup Poll, Thanksgiving is the holiday Americans say brings them the most happiness.

From ancient to contemporary times, from psychology to social science, gratitude has been linked to happiness. Albert W. Clarke (1916 – 1944), the professional English football player, put it this way, “In our daily lives, we must see that it is not happiness that makes us grateful, but gratefulness that makes us happy.” Positive psychologists Martin Seligman and Jeffrey J. Froh at the University of Pennsylvania, Robert A. Emmons at the University of California Davis, and others explain that we are happier and healthier when we reflect on the specific things we have to be grateful for in our lives and personally thank people. The results of their research suggest that people who are grateful are more resilient, capable of pursuing worthy goals, more likely to help and support others, and more likely to have a positive attitude.

Gratitude is often referred to as a positive emotion. According to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, the word “thanks,” however, comes from the Old English, *thanc*, which means thought, gratitude. Its Latin derivation is *tongere*, which means to know. In other words, gratitude involves knowledge and mindfulness as well as feeling. And while not highlighted as a virtue in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, gratitude meets Aristotle’s requirements for moral virtue. It calls for our intelligent choice of action and reaction to the goods we receive. Like courage and self-mastery, gratitude requires a proper response to the right object/person, in the right degree and for the right reasons. In the same way that courage lies on a mean between recklessness and cowardice, gratitude lies on a mean between taking all goods for granted and or feeling entitled to them, and seeking to ingratiate oneself with obsequious and excessive thanksgiving.

The virtue of gratitude helps us to know that we stand on the shoulders of giants—our parents and grandparents, our teachers and mentors, our friends and benefactors. Our connectedness to them strengthens and supports us. Additionally, a disposition of gratitude helps us to be mindful of all natural, material and spiritual benefits—including our talents—as gifts to be cherished and shared. As the German Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), argued, “In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich.” When we come to appreciate our *interdependence* as more important than our *independence* and that every good we enjoy is a gift—we are more likely to flourish.

Our happiness is threatened, however, when we focus on what we believe we are entitled to and do not have, such as good health, great wealth, or in my father’s case, just remuneration and a hot shower. We can easily fall prey to bitterness, resentment and envy. Additional threats to happiness include a mistaken understanding of gratitude as an exaggerated sense of indebtedness that incurs onerous obligation. (For example, when someone repeatedly reminds us of all the good he has done for us in order to manipulate us or demand favors in return.)

American author and lecturer, Helen Keller (1880-1968), acclaimed for her valiant struggle with both deafness and blindness, observed, “So much has been given to me, I have no time to ponder that which has been denied.” I am reminded of a colleague who while training for the New York marathon suffered a stroke, which left her paralyzed on one side and unable to speak. After a year of therapy, she gradually began to regain her speech and movement. The speech therapy was particularly grueling, and for a long time she spoke with a pronounced stutter at a painstakingly slow rate. She came to realize that when she could not speak clearly, people not only assumed that she could not hear and began to shout at her, but they also assumed that she could not think and treated her like a young child. Suffering daily humiliation led her to appreciate the situations of individuals who live with similar impediments and permanent disabilities. She developed both patience and understanding. Appreciation expanded her purview.

How do we develop gratitude? Gratitude does not come naturally.. The British author, Aldous Huxley (1894- 1963) once said, “Most human beings have an almost infinite capacity for taking things for granted.” Thus, gratitude must be learned and practiced. What are the implications for policy? Quite simply, educators and schools would be wise to foster a culture of gratitude in schools and classrooms. Gratitude can be developed in many ways. Social scientists advise us to keep gratitude journals and record every day experiences that constitute blessings in our lives.

Leaving spaces and places better than we found them, leaving a job or post ready for the next person to easily pick up where we left off are ways of showing respect and appreciation. Recycling, taking care of the environment, conserving energy, natural and technological resources are among the ways we can show gratitude for the goods available to us.

One of the most practical ways we can develop gratitude is by thanking people for the good they do for us. In the famous parable of the Ten Lepers (Luke 17:12-19), Jesus heals ten men of their disease, yet only one returns to thank him for this miraculous cure. Jesus is grateful for his thanksgiving and asks him, “Where are the other nine?” This story reminds us of the need to express our thanks and not to take the good that happens to us for granted. Thanking people in person and writing notes of gratitude are small gestures of thoughtfulness that convey genuine appreciation. Too often, especially in service industries such as hospitality and education, we fail to pay attention to the thousand and one details professionals get right and only notice when something is missing or has gone wrong.

Writing a note of commendation to the manager of someone who has provided an exceptional service and copying the person on the letter is a great practice. Sending our compliments to the chef for a well prepared meal—whether it is at home or in a four star restaurant—is another tangible way to show our thanks. We can acknowledge the services we receive each day by thanking the cashier at the local grocery store and the mechanic at the garage. Leaving a note for a colleague who helped us across the finish line of a project, returning a favor or writing a letter acknowledging a teacher’s generous assistance are all powerful ways to communicate gratitude. In the words of G.B. Stern, the English novelist, playwright, and literary critic (1890-1973), “Silent gratitude isn’t much use to anyone.” We need to put it in words.

Another practical way to develop gratitude is to refine our lenses of wonder and awe. One of my students, Mary Grace, at age twelve wrote the following as part of her short essay on thanksgiving: “I feel that if wonder did not exist, the world would be bland and monotonous.” Noticing and appreciating the beauty of the natural world around us provides a compelling reason to be grateful. The great scientist and inventor, Albert Einstein (1879-1955), summed it up this way, “There are only two ways to live your life. One as though nothing is a miracle. The other as though everything is a miracle.”

We can also develop the habit of appreciation by learning to choose our words wisely. Proverbs 18:21 reminds us that “the instruments of both life and death are contained in the power of the tongue.” Katharine, a sixteen-year-old student, initiated a gratitude project in her school by asking students to track the number of times they complain and to begin replacing complaints—negative words and reactions—with words of appreciation and thanks. She asked students to wear a bracelet on one arm and move it to the other arm whenever they caught themselves whining or complaining. The longer they could keep the bracelet on the original arm, the better. To foster a spirit of gratitude she challenged the whole school to a “complaint-free” week.

Gratitude is fundamentally a choice of attitude. The American poet and essayist Walt Whitman (1819-1892) said, “Keep your face always toward the sunshine, and shadows will fall behind you.” These are not trite considerations for the foolish optimist; they are dispositions we have the power to cultivate. When a student of mine was diagnosed with a deadly form of cancer at the age of seventeen, she decided that she wanted to dedicate the few hours she had

of feeling well each week to enjoying the simple things of ordinary life: relishing the company of family and friends, doing homework and attending class with her peers. After several rounds of chemotherapy, missed school, chronic weakness and the loss of all her hair, her mother offered to take her on a special shopping trip so she could buy whatever she wanted. Her response was swift. “Mom, I don’t need material things to make me happy...but thank you, anyway.”

We can nurture a grateful heart by taking note of the infinite number of selfless things people do for us. On a train ride from Boston to New York, I was talking with a mother whose son is thriving in a new school. One of the great challenges for her ten-year-old son, however, is abiding by the strict dress code. The boys are required to wear a belt every day, as the school is deliberately countering the baggy pants hanging loose and low, a look sported by gang members. If they arrive without a belt, they must return home and get a belt before they can attend class. When this boy set off for school, he walked a few blocks, greeted the crossing guard, and entered the subway. He realized right before his stop that he was not wearing a belt. He panicked momentarily but knew exactly what he had to do. He exited the train, turned right around and returned by subway to his home neighborhood. As he started across the street back to his house, the crossing guard asked, “What happened? I just saw you leave.” Rushing ahead he responded. “I forgot my belt. Can’t go into school without my belt.” Without giving it a second thought the crossing guard took off his belt and gave it to him. “Here, hurry back to school so you’re not late.” The boy was not only grateful for the belt, his entry ticket to school, but he was also moved by the instinctive response of the crossing guard whom he hardly knew. At the end of the school day he returned the belt with effusive thanks.

Finally, we can develop a keener sense of appreciation by deliberately focusing on the positive and reframing the negative in our lives. A friend of mine is a former Olympic athlete and America’s Cup sailor. She is also an inspired speaker and author of books on performance excellence. One would never know that she was orphaned as a child, lived in several foster homes and endured a painful upbringing. She is living testimony of what is possible if we follow the sage advice of the great English novelist Charles Dickens (1812-1870), “Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has plenty; not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some.”

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