

Getting to Cleveland: Seth Godin on Gratitude by Katie Steedly

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Katie Steedly: Having studied wide-awakeness for a long time, gratitude was everywhere in the literature. I also found it in life. Whether talking about presence, or positivity, or happiness, or even success in general, the subject of gratitude kept making itself known to me from all directions. It became obvious: gratitude is the key that unlocks life’s doors.

I thought it would be interesting to talk with people about gratitude. My hope was to learn more about gratitude, and share what I learned with others. We would all live more gratefully. I invited artists, philosophers, psychologists, politicians, professors, yogis, writers, clergy, and others into a dialogue about gratitude. We spoke about gratitude in the fullness of day-to-day life. Below is my first gratitude conversation, with Seth Godin. Being my first interview, this conversation holds a special place in my heart...

Seth Godin is the author of eighteen books that have been best sellers around the world and have been translated into more than thirty-five languages. He writes about the postindustrial revolution, the way ideas spread, marketing, quitting, leadership, and most of all, changing everything. You might be familiar with his books Linchpins, Tribes, The Dip, and Purple Cow.

KSC: What role does gratitude play in your day-to-day life?

SG: I think that gratitude is a profound choice. It is not just something that some people do. There is a way to look at life as a “have to” or a “get to” there are all these things in life we could do because we have to do them, or there are things in life we do because we get to do them. What is fascinating is it has nothing to do with the truth of what is in the world. It has to do with our narrative about what is going on. Someone who loves being a surgeon says, “I get to do surgery tomorrow.” Someone who is just grinding their way through exactly the same job says, “Ugh. I have to get up early tomorrow and do surgery.” Same hospital. Same kind of patient. One person has a “have to” posture, one person has a “get to” posture. What we know is that people who have a “get to” posture are happier, and they do better work.

Let me now take that and say we can agree on that living life knowing you “get to” do something is better. How do we evoke that feeling? What is the easiest way to do it well?

The question I would ask is, "What is the opposite of gratitude?" I think the opposite of gratitude is entitlement. People who are entitled to something, walk around expecting that the world owes them something, whereas the people who are grateful for something are eager to share that gratitude with others, and that lines up exactly with "have to" and "get to."

Gratitude is a clue to our brain about adopting a posture that makes elements of our life better.

If you think about all the things in your life, whether there are things in your life that everyone can agree are amazing, like some stranger walks up to you and hands you a dozen roses, to things that are much more problematic, like chemotherapy, we get a choice with how to interact with those things. If someone hands you flowers because you are an opera diva, you say, "Well of course I am entitled to get flowers because I practiced for eighteen years, and I just gave an amazing performance and gave an amazing speech." Whereas if you are truly grateful for someone doing something they did not have to do, it gets better. It gets better if you can be grateful that you have chemotherapy. How is that even possible you could be grateful? I will tell you how it is possible. In most of the world, chemotherapy is not an option. You are just going to die, and those people would be super grateful to have a chance not to be dead. So we momentarily say, "I did not ask to be in this situation. Given that I am in this situation, I am grateful that I get to make this choice." The long answer to your question, I think, [is] that gratitude is a clue to our brain about adopting a posture that makes elements of our life better.

KSC: That makes sense, and translates to the daily choices that we make. The day-to-day work is the choice to see what is in front of us as an opportunity.

KSC: What are a few things for which you are grateful?

SG: The obvious ones are the things that show up whether I need them to or not. I am grateful that I am mostly healthy. I am grateful that I have such an extraordinary family. I am grateful that I was born in the right decade, in the right country, to the right family, in the right town, with the right parents, but those things just show up on time anyway. I am also grateful for the fact that not everyone reads my blog. In fact, almost no one does. That gives me the chance to dig in a little deeper, and see if I can reach other people. I am grateful that people don't always get a new idea as fast or as quickly as they could, because that gives me the opportunity to do my work. I am grateful that there are people in our political discourse who are completely wrong, because it means that people who aren't wrong get a chance to sharpen their message, and not take it for granted, and hold themselves more accountable. That is the work. To be grateful for things that ordinarily we think are just annoying.

Part of what we do as humans is we construct this narrative. We spend a lot of time trying to teach people a lesson, and people don't want to be taught a lesson. It is not worth it. It is just not worth beating yourself up to beat somebody else up.

KSC: How do you do that?

SG: This is the thing about neurology. What we know from MRIs, and the brain, and everything else. We know that if you spend the whole day, never mind all day, that if you spend thirty seconds making a sad face, you will become sad. We know this is true. We know that if you get all worked up, without having anything to be worked up about, so many hormones will be released in your body that you will be the kind of person who is now worked up about everything. I did not have to do a lot of work. I just started faking it. Fake being grateful for things, and then you are.

KSC: You get there eventually.

SG: It does not take that long. Part of what we do as humans is we construct this narrative. We spend a lot of time trying to teach people a lesson, and people don't want to be taught a lesson. It is not worth it. It is just not worth beating yourself up to beat somebody else up. That person who cut you off in traffic doesn't even know you exist. That twenty minutes you spent hyperventilating and cursing him out, they don't even know it took place. Instead, you should be grateful for that person who cut you off in traffic, because it is better than not being grateful. You can hear all sorts of narratives as to why you are grateful. Well guess what? He slowed me down, which meant that at that next intersection where there was an accident, I did not get killed. Thank you for saving my life.

I live fourteen miles from ground zero, and there used be a cafe about five miles from here, near the train station. For a long time, there was a handwritten letter on the bulletin board in the café. It said "I was here a few weeks ago and I ordered a decaf coffee with bagel and butter. The idiot behind the counter gave me regular coffee, and put cream cheese on my bagel. As a result, I got all frustrated, and as a result he had to make it again, and as a result I was kicking and screaming, and as a result I missed my train, and because I missed my train, I got to the World Trade Center thirty minutes after the plane crashed into it and I am alive today. Thank you to the person who messed up my coffee order."

But the thing that is important is not cosmic coincidence, because I think cosmic coincidence is ridiculous, what is important is even if a horrible thing had not happened, and a building had not fallen down, would that guy's life have been better if he had just said 'thank you' anyway? He is going to miss the train no matter what. Why not, before you miss the train, say "You know what, I am really grateful that for a buck I get someone to take beans from Africa, roast them in Boston, mix with purified water and blah, blah, blah, and hand a cup to me on demand. Every once in a while it comes out wrong. I am still grateful. Thank you. You get the chance to buy that coffee, if you want to. That is an extraordinary privilege."

KSC: Are you grateful for failure?

SG: I would not be one-tenth of what I am today if I had not failed. I have failed more times than most people. I am grateful for every one of them. I have learned so much more from failure than from success.

KSC: What have been some failure lessons?

SG: Well you know the first 800 book proposals I sent out got rejected. 800 in a row. What I discovered was I was not very good at telling my story. I was not very good at understanding my customer. I was not very good at realizing that I needed to become a partner in an industry that did not like people who were acting the way I was acting. Once

I learned those things, which took a couple years, I stopped getting rejection letters. If I had not exposed myself to failure I would still be an idiot.

My point is that acting “as if” is way underrated. Acting “as if.” If you start acting grateful, you will be grateful. If you are grateful, you will start feeling confident. If you are confident, you will start feeling safe. If you feel safe then you will be creative.

KSC: You learned from it, and did things differently. You did not keep making the same mistakes.

KSC: In what ways can gratitude be connected to entrepreneurship, creativity, and thought leadership?

SG: If you watch MacGyver or thriller movies, it seems like James Bond is always solving problems just before he gets cut in half by a rotating saw, but in my experience, that doesn't really lead to a lot of generous creative insight. Generous creative insight tends to come from people who feel safe at some level and have some level of confidence, not completely safe, and not completely confident, but safe enough and confident enough. The only people who are capable of saying thank you are people who feel safe and confident.

KSC: That is the intersection. People who feel safe to explore an entrepreneurial project are not guided by fear. Safety allows you to be creative, and to think outside of the box.

SG: My point is that acting “as if” is way underrated. Acting “as if.” If you start acting grateful, you will be grateful. If you are grateful, you will start feeling confident. If you are confident, you will start feeling safe. If you feel safe then you will be creative.

KSC: Do you have any advice for people who are new to mindfulness, paying attention, and gratitude? Are there steps people can take to cultivate those capacities?

SG: I will start by saying advice is overrated. That is the best advice. The second thing I would say is you don't drive to Cleveland by knowing every turn from here to Cleveland. You start driving and get directions as you go. The cost of being wrong in your path there is very low, so begin. It is not fatal. Begin and practice being grateful for no recompense, and then repeat it. It turns out that when you make art, the audience will appreciate it for what they could. When you make art, the world won't give you what you are entitled to. You know what you get when you make art? You get the chance to make more art. That is its own reward.

KSC: I love the notion of just start. It is simple. Just start. Begin.

KSC: What inspired you to ask the audience to send thank-you notes at the end of the Tim Ferris interview?

SG: I could not believe how it was misinterpreted by hundreds of people. I understand now why, because people have a different narrative than I do. More than a hundred people thought I said send me a thank-you note. Why would I say that? First of all, I don't need thank-you notes. Secondly, if you say send me a thank-you note it does not count for anything.

I said send someone a thank-you note, because it is really uncomfortable. It leads to a connection that opens a door that most people are afraid to walk through.

So why did they do it, because I did not say it? Why did they do it? They did it for two reasons.

Most people in the West grow up with a quid pro quo when they are looking at the world. Someone does something for you. You have to pay it off by doing something for them. I had done an interview that was worth something. They felt uncomfortable owing me something in their minds, so they wanted to get even-Steven. That is not the way I look at the world. I am doing this so people will seek to give to other people. So that people will help other people. That is how it multiplies.

The second thing, which is the real reason, is this. I said send someone a thank-you note, because it is really uncomfortable. It leads to a connection that opens a door that most people are afraid to walk through. If you send a note to the doorman of your building, or a note to a politician, or a note to newscaster, or a note to an author who is not me, saying 'your work made a difference to me and here is why,' a new channel has been created. Are they going to write back? Are you going to be exposed? Is there a risk? Do we fear this intimacy? That is what I wanted people to experience. If you write to me, you are safe. You are off the hook because you know I am not going to write back, or I will say 'thanks a lot.' Done. But if you write to your peer, if you write to your sister who you have never once said thank-you to, that is hard. That is scary. That is what I am looking for. Juiciness.