

## The Nature of Gratitude by Unknown Yet

The Nature of Gratitude is an ensemble of artists who come together to explore and share their experience of nature and gratitude on stage using music, spoken word, and photography. After five years of offering this program, The Nature of Gratitude has evolved into a core ensemble of committed artists who include accomplished singer/songwriter and Oregon Book Award-winning poet Beth Wood; award-winning singer/songwriter Halie Loren; GRAMMY® award-nominated Native American multi-instrumentalist Gentle Thunder; performance poet Jorah LaFleur; and co-founders Tom Titus, performance prose and author of *Palindrome: Grateful Reflections from the Home Ground*, and Eric Alan, photographer and author of *Wild Grace: Nature as a Spiritual Path* and the forthcoming *Grateful by Nature*. The ensemble believes that art in all of its beautiful variety opens us to the practice of gratitude in our lives.

The Nature of Gratitude is a portable program that has been exported to a variety of venues in communities committed to co-creating an atmosphere of gratefulness. The project also enlists participating artists from within those communities to share their gratitude in words and music. Additionally, the Nature of Gratitude serves as an opportunity to raise funds and awareness for a grassroots nonprofit organization that provides universal human services within that community. Thus, the act of gratitude is manifest physically in these communities. Co-founders Tom and Eric share more about how the Nature of Gratitude connects deeply with audiences through its community orientation and expressive exploration of gratefulness.

What sparked The Nature of Gratitude project?

Tom: The Nature of Gratitude project began nearly six years ago when Eric and I were introduced by a mutual friend at a gathering for McKenzie River Trust, a local conservation organization. We arranged to meet and quickly found common ground in writing that focused on the natural world. Beyond that, we also shared a commitment to using our writing to expand and share our personal experience of gratitude. We felt this could best manifest through an arts-based program to raise awareness of gratitude, as well as funds for a local nonprofit organization. Initially, we saw this as a one-time event, with no expectation that five years later The Nature of Gratitude would be in a continuous process of outgrowing our expectations.

Eric: For me, The Nature of Gratitude also has roots in a related, previous project. For the past decade, I've been a central contributor to *Celebrate What's Right with the World*, led by former National Geographic photographer Dewitt Jones. Looking at the world through a lens of celebration—especially in the most challenging times—taught me the vital nature of finding all there is to celebrate, without turning a blind eye to the world's harder edges. It taught me compassion for the issues of others; it gave me strength to stand steady in kindness through conflict and trauma. As Tom and I began our collaboration in parallel to

my role in the Celebrate project, I found that celebration and gratitude began to merge—not only in concept, but in the way I treated others (and myself) on a daily basis. The Nature of Gratitude merged with my daily gratitude practice, far from any stage.

What is the goal of The Nature of Gratitude?

Tom: The goal of The Nature of Gratitude is to expand the experience of authentic gratitude, regardless of circumstances.

Eric: In expanding our experience of gratitude, one goal is to help us get beyond divisiveness, and back to compassion for each other's beauty despite our failings. We seek to do so through art, music, poetry—all the beautiful expressions that reach into soul beyond intellect. For me, another goal is to share the experience that a return to gratitude is a return to nature, including our own nature. Yet another goal is to illuminate how, through gratitude for even our challenges, we can turn our wounds into gifts.

What do you think moves people to attend The Nature of Gratitude events?

Tom: It's always difficult to ascribe motives for others, and the reasons for attending The Nature of Gratitude are likely as diverse as the individuals who come to our programs. Some love hearing performances from the artists they know in our ensemble. Others are looking for light in dark times. Gratitude brings that light. And because our core philosophy embraces a deeper form of gratitude than simply a positive emotional response when things are going well (because let's face it, things are not always going well!), our artists bring forth an authentic, honest form of gratefulness that rises above head-in-the-sand Pollyanna platitudes. This provides people with a positive experience, and at the same time develops an empathic relationship with our audiences: Hey, you hurt, I hurt, we all hurt sometimes, but we can still choose gratitude to keep our boat afloat! As The Nature of Gratitude spins further into the future, the word is getting out. This is beautiful. This is real. It's worth spending a couple of hours of your time.

Eric: There will always be as many new reasons for attendance as there are attendees—and for each of us, the answer may be different every time! Yet the experience of gratitude—the appreciation of the unlikely miracle of simply being alive—is a universal human need. It's so fundamental to finding moments of peace in the midst of chaos. The more difficult and chaotic that times get, the more our need for gratefulness seems to deepen in response. Authentic gratitude is a real and healthy defense mechanism. It's a true healing strategy in a time dominated by the illusion of aloneness; by disconnection behind screens; by the cynical manipulations of those who foment that disconnection for their own short-term gains. Deep down, somewhere below the roots of consciousness, I sense we all know that in gratitude, in nature itself, we are more powerful than those forces of disconnection. By coming together in gratitude, we rediscover enough shared loving strength to outlast and transcend those negative forces. And we do so in a way not motivated by mere resistance, but by becoming re-centered in the fundamental beauty of life.

How does The Nature of Gratitude inspire gratefulness and related actions (love, kindness, compassion, etc.)? How do you think art brings gratitude to life?

Tom: Participation with art bypasses the judgment centers of the brain. The Nature of Gratitude incorporates a variety of art forms, and because people respond individually to different art forms, we offer a variety of opportunities to take an end-run around the brain's natural inclination to judge. By relaxing judgment, our audiences become more

emotionally open and better able to experience love and compassion. They also open up to a broader, more authentic, philosophy of gratitude that may be new to them.

The 2015 Paris bombings occurred two days before our first program. The room was thick with anxiety. We walked in wondering how gratitude would manifest under those circumstances. But as the program rolled out, we could feel the spirit lift. People were so grateful for the opportunity to be grateful! It was magical, and a testament to the power of art to bring forth positive emotion under trying circumstances.

This open-heartedness coupled with gratitude also manifests in very material support for our community awareness cause.

On a personal level, producing *The Nature of Gratitude* has developed into a practice of gratitude. My career in science has required a certain level of dispassionate objectivity that has transformed itself into cynicism. Gratitude has become the bedrock beneath my writing that has helped me move beyond disconnection and cynicism and into a state of emotional connection to my world. As I was organizing materials for my latest book of short essays and poems, *Palindrome: Grateful Reflections From the Home Ground*, I realized that gratitude, either implicit or explicit, had become the thread that drew all those writings together. I still believe that a little cynicism is healthy in some instances! Our world is not a perfect place. But a foundation of gratitude keeps me from slipping into a ground state of disconnection, anger, and despair.

Eric: *The Nature of Gratitude* engages our gratitude through many senses at once, by artfully expressing it through music, spoken word, photography and beyond. The more that our gratitude is experienced through many senses at once, the more deeply it resonates, and the more it persists. To sing our gratitude turns it into a melody we can carry inside later, which helps inspire our kindness and motivates us in our daily actions. To hear gratitude spoken by others in their own poetic terms deepens our perspective on our own experience. To see gratitude visually represented in photographic images, reminds us of the persistent beauty of the damaged world. It all coalesces.

Personally, I find that *The Nature of Gratitude* has inspired my grateful actions on a daily basis. I've been able to internalize everyone's artful expressions, and draw strength from them in the gritty realities of day-to-day living. Gratitude infuses my daily interactions with more kindness and compassion.

That has been an essential lifesaver for me, as these past few years have been some of the most difficult and painful I've ever experienced, yet also filled with the most gratitude. Gratefulness is what has allowed me to serve with grace, as I've cared full-time for my 93-year-old mother, along her difficult descent into dementia and physical degradation. Gratefulness has kept my spirit from despairing at the degradation of the surrounding climate, both environmental and sociopolitical. It has kept me motivated to get up early every day and continue to work to turn my own wounds into gifts; to take the lessons of my own failings and pains into tools for serving the healing of others.

Every day I rise early, and begin each morning by asking what actions gratitude asks of me today. Sometimes that means taking care of my mother's daunting medical and practical needs. Sometimes it means writing in a way that reflects the world's beauty. Sometimes it simply means singing with the wind off the lake. This morning, gratitude is what will allow me to keep kindness and compassion present while dealing with insurance representatives and medical bureaucracies on my mother's behalf. Though art brings gratitude to life for me, gratitude's applications often manifest in practical sweat.

Gratitude is a precious daily grind.

What is The Nature of Gratitude's philosophy on gratefulness?

Tom: We have adopted a core philosophy in which gratitude is a practice that persists in the face of all circumstances, either daunting or easy. For us, this embodies the ideal eloquently addressed by poet David Whyte that gratitude is "the deep, a priori state of attention that shows we understand and are equal to the gifted nature of life." I liken gratitude to a committed love relationship in which we choose to participate regardless of our constantly changing emotions. This committed form of gratitude means that we can be internally grateful for the gifts of life, regardless of external circumstances.

Eric: My core philosophy on gratefulness is that being grateful is like being a carpenter: the skills are only fully realized when you use them to build shelter for others.

What is the lasting impact of The Nature of Gratitude?

Eric: I don't think about the lasting impact of what we're creating together—only about its impact in the moment, in each of us present. I trust that if we're able to return to gratitude in the moment, then gratitude's impact will ripple outwards in ways I'll never know or even imagine. Every person at every The Nature of Gratitude gathering has gifts and issues that I'll never be aware of in addition to unique personal forms of gratitude. I don't know how their own gratitude will manifest in their relationships, their casual interactions, their work, mood, or spirit. I trust that it will have impact, though. Thus gratitude is an active path of faith, for me. It's a faith that manifests in these events, and in my daily interactions. It's a path of healing.

Tom: The Nature of Gratitude could be on the leading edge of a paradigm shift around gratitude, in which a "grittier" form of gratitude is accepted practice, rather than weird and esoteric. I agree with Eric—we can't know the long term impact of The Nature of Gratitude. But I believe that a gratitude practice heals divisiveness, and I hope that bringing people back into connection with one another and the planet will have lasting and positive future impacts.

What are some of the challenges that have arisen for The Nature of Gratitude? How have they been addressed?

Tom: We have so far donated our time and talent to launch The Nature of Gratitude. The program is now straining at the leash to expand, but this expansion has brought with it twin challenges of finding sufficient time and money to support the endeavor. Our core artists are award-winning professionals with touring schedules and other commitments that generate much-needed income. For The Nature of Gratitude to grow, the program must become fiscally sustainable and able to support our artists in ways that pay for groceries and shelter. To remedy this financial gap, we are exploring selling tickets. We have also adopted a very intentional vision for attracting sponsors and patrons who might financially support our desire to use performance art to bring communities together with authentic gratitude.

Eric: The challenge of money inevitably creeps in. We have people in so many places around the country already asking us to bring The Nature of Gratitude to their area. Without even really seeking it, we have potential opportunities in Colorado, Montana, California, Arizona, Massachusetts and elsewhere. But touring is expensive and time-consuming. How do we find the resources to make that happen, without

compromising the community service and benefit aspect that is at the very heart of our gratitude? It is a new question, and as yet without answers.

How does The Nature of Gratitude plan to grow?

Tom: In 2019, The Nature of Gratitude was held in four cities in Oregon during the months of November and December, the so-called “season of gratitude.” Because gratitude is not time-dependent, we plan to expand the program to a yearly calendar. We have already booked an event in Bend, Oregon for May 16, 2020, and expect this time-independent trend to continue. Gratitude also knows no geographical boundaries. There is keen interest in having The Nature of Gratitude appear in other communities in Oregon and far beyond. These doors are opening with hardly a knock from us. Given appropriate funding, we are open to expanding the scope of The Nature of Gratitude nationally.

Nevertheless, touring is time-intensive and ultimately limiting. We can further expand our message and philosophy of gratitude with workshops, both online and in real time. We are developing ideas for The Nature of Gratitude podcast. Oregon is a diverse and beautiful place, and our name inspires other gratitude programs tied to nature, such as river trips, birdwatching, excursions to old-growth forests, and visits with spawning salmon.

We have found the rapid expansion in 2019 soul-satisfying and evidence that people are hungry to experience more authentic gratitude in their lives.

Eric: As our exploration of gratitude has expanded beyond all expected bounds, I’ve come to think of The Nature of Gratitude as the hub at the center of a wheel. The spokes are the related creative expressions and gatherings, whether individual or collective, which merge to support the complete rolling circle. Spokes include my forthcoming book, *Grateful by Nature*, which should be out before the end of 2020. They include the joyful grateful concerts and musical healing sessions created by Beth Wood, Halie Loren, and Gentle Thunder. They’ll include the workshops and experiential journeys that Tom Titus and I envision. They include the writing workshops that Jorah LaFleur takes into school settings. It’s in embracing the contributions of all the others from the communities in which we visit. It’s in partnering with nonprofit organizations and others of service, to support their own efforts in gratitude. The Nature of Gratitude has already grown beyond plan, so I presume its growth will continue along paths as-yet unimagined.

How does gratefulness inspire you to make change in the world?

Tom: Our world is becoming increasingly divisive. This divisiveness exists between people, and between people and nature. Gratitude inspires empathy and connectivity and is the counterweight to divisiveness. The practice of gratitude brings forth the dissolution of boundaries. Gratitude, and the underlying empathy that it engenders, is fundamental for bringing people together in a more just and humane world and for reuniting us with our natural life support systems. For me, this is vastly important work.

Eric: I tend to think about gratitude as a return to who we already are, rather than as change. It’s a remembrance of our place in nature, of the beauty within and around us. When we reconnect to our fundamental center through gratitude, it leads to the dissolution of the false boundaries that Tom mentions. There’s no separation between people and nature. We have not lost our shared core of compassion and humanity. All of us, including and especially me, merely need to unbury it from all the other layers of extraneous detritus. That is essential daily work—it has become my purpose, and it manifests in all tasks, from caring for my aging mother to these events, from my

almost-finished book Grateful by Nature to how I treat strangers.

If you could encapsulate one message for people who participate in The Nature of Gratitude, what would that be?

Tom: My greatest hope for people who gather with us is that they couple that feeling of spaciousness inspired by our art with an ongoing commitment to live gratefully.

Eric: These are welcoming gatherings, open to all, regardless of who you are, how you feel, what you have or haven't done. This is a celebration of the wholeness within our apparent brokenness. It's a remembrance that we're all enough, all sharing the miracle of aliveness and its challenges. We're not leaders here, nor do we need to be. We only need to let gratitude lead.

If The Nature of Gratitude could share just one message about living gratefully, what would it be?

Tom: Anyone can choose gratitude anywhere, at any time, and under any circumstances. Because gratitude is so fundamental to all of us regardless of our circumstances, it supersedes privilege.

Eric: Not only can we choose gratitude under difficult circumstances, we need to. The more difficult the circumstances with which we're faced, the more useful and essential gratitude is, to help us navigate turbulent days with grace.

To read more about the inspiring work of The Nature of Gratitude, visit the website: [Nature of Gratitude](#)

To learn about other Grateful Changemakers, visit: [Grateful News](#)