

## The Medicine of Gratitude by Tami Simon

Tami Simon: You're listening to "Insights at the Edge." Today my guest is Angeles Arrien. Angeles is a teacher, author, and cultural anthropologist, and somebody I am so pleased to be able to call a friend. Her teachings, which connect the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, and comparative religion, focus on humanity's shared beliefs and values, along with ways to incorporate this wisdom into our modern lives. With Sounds True, Angeles Arrien has created the programs *The Second Half of Life: Opening the Eight Gates of Wisdom*, which is both a book and audio series; an audio program called *Gathering Medicine: Stories, Songs, and Methods for Soul Retrieval*; and most recently a new audio program on Gratitude: *The Essential Practice for Happiness and Fulfillment*.

In this episode, Angeles and I spoke about the importance of having a gratitude practice: how to be grateful in difficult situations, where the heart tends to close. We also discussed the exciting adventure of what Angeles describes as the "third act of our lives." Here's my conversation with Angeles Arrien.

I think of you, Angeles, as the Gratitude Lady, and I actually refer to you as the Gratitude Lady when you're not around. And the reason is, you write me so many beautiful notes of gratitude, and I'm sure you must have hundreds and hundreds of people on a list that you write such birthday notes and thanksgiving notes to. And I just want to know, first of all, how do you do it? How did you become the Gratitude Lady?

Angeles Arrien: [Laughs] I don't know how I became the Gratitude Lady, but I just feel so blessed in my life that it's increased my own generosity of spirit, of excitement, and gratefulness about what has been extended to me. And certainly you've extended to me so many wonderful opportunities, as have others, that it's just been really important. And also I think that, I know with my parents that gratitude was always an important action or expression to give. And so I've been raised in a home of gratitude, and I think that's what has sustained and continued through my life.

TS: OK, so unfortunately somebody like me, I don't know if it comes as naturally to me. And I'm curious for our listeners: how can you help people become more grateful in a way that's not saccharine and false?

AA: Well, I love what many traditional peoples have said: that there are really three medicines that you should put in your medicine bundle every day, which are the power of genuine acknowledgment and gratitude, genuine apology, and the spirit of laughter and joy. And cross-culturally, there's not a culture in the world that doesn't have a means of saying thank you. Or cross-culturally, there is all the ritual of gift-giving and acts of generosity. And so it's interesting just looking at, in this culture we have a tendency to look at giving gratitude for our blessings; everybody's willing to give gratitude and recognize what a blessing is. And in other cultures, it's not only blessings, but also giving

gratitude for our learnings, or gratitude for the mercies that we've extended to others or others have extended to us, or gratitude for the protections of our family or our children being protected.

So I think it's inherent in the human being that there's an inherent generosity within that wants to be expressed in a very genuine way. It's always when the heart has been touched or moved that gratitude is elicited.

TS: Now, you used two interesting terms. You said, "Gratitude for the mercies that have been extended to us" and "protections." Can you say a little bit about what you mean about both of those terms?

AA: Sure. In many cultures, there's a lot of practice of gratitude when someone has extended compassion or kindnesses or unexpected forgiveness or mercy toward us; or the practice of gratitude also cultivates our own compassion and kindness and forgiveness work, and the mercies that we might extend to other people. And all the cultures of the world have what are called anointment rituals, or prayers of protection, or invocation for protections of home, protections of family, protections of children, protections of the body. Every culture of the world has anointment rituals for protecting the body, whether it's with water or with powders or with oils. So, many cultures of the world also, besides blessings and learnings, give gratitude for the mercies and for the protections that are available to us.

TS: You mentioned that this generosity of the heart is actually native to us as people. How is it then that it's so covered up so much of the time?

AA: Well, I think it's interesting that so much of generosity lies like a submarine until there's a crisis. And then we get to see enormous generosity extended when there's a crisis or a natural disaster; you see enormous generosity extended to New Orleans or Haiti or the tsunami in Indonesia. Enormous . . . And I think what's interesting is, so much of our generosity up to that time is more transactional: "I'll do this for you if you'll do this for me." But there's something deeper that lies within the human spirit; it's in our deepest DNA to contribute, to help, to support. It's part of the human species, to learn about love and to express love, but it's also about contributing or making a contribution or serving or helping. And I think it's interesting to see when it gets ignited and when it's consciously withheld. But it's there innately, and especially when there are crises.

And I think just the practice of gratitude, if we were just to do that one practice, it keeps the heart open. And when the heart is open, there's more curiosity; there's greater curiosity than there is criticality. And when the heart is open, there's a capacity for generosity that emerges.

TS: And how do you suggest that somebody turn gratitude into a practice?

AA: Well, one of the ways of cultivating gratitude is, at the end of the day, to really look at the blessings and the learnings and the mercies and the protections. To look at the four quadrants of our life that, you know: "What really worked well at work or in my relationship today, or financially or healthwise?" or, "Where did I feel that I had grown today personally in my own character?" or, "Risks that I may have taken." And the process of reflection, of taking a look at even the four universal tracking questions of "What inspired me today?" or, "What challenged me? Who or what challenged me today?" or, "What surprised me today?" or, "What touched and moved me today?" are doorways to integrating our experience. And when we can integrate our experience, then we can

open to gratitude.

TS: Um-hmm. Have you ever found a time in your life where something happened and you weren't able to access gratitude? And then I'd be curious how you possibly broke through.

AA: [Laughs] Oh, there are many times that, you know, we had what T. S. Eliot called "the waste land" or "dark places." Or we just can't understand. And many times, my experience is that they've been blessings in disguise—well disguised! But times where I needed to stop, times where I needed to reflect, times where I needed to embrace humility rather than pride—unhealthy sources of pride—or fear. Places where the heart begins to close down through resentments or disappointments. Or places where we feel harmed by others, or experiences of betrayal. Those are hard places in which to grapple with gratitude, because the heart has begun to close.

But it's interesting that every one of those places is a place of deep learning, so I always go to the portal of learning: "Well, this is a place of learning." And also inevitably in hindsight, it's been a place of deep growth, or having hit a ceiling, or having outgrown something, or stayed in a situation or a circumstance too long. But the learning was invaluable, and the opportunity to course-correct.

I think Cicero, one of the great philosophers, said that gratitude was the "mother of all virtues." And it requires moving through deep states of fear and pride—an unhealthy pride. There's a positive pride of knowing you've done an excellent job, but an unhealthy pride is the need to be right, do it right, to look good, have it together at all costs: a little ego trip. But I find that even with what we know of the Seven Deadly Sins or all states of ingratitude—and we flirt with those states when we go into cynicism or apathy or despair—and yet there's a deeper drive within the human spirit toward wholeness and healing. And it's been well researched that gratitude, just the practice of gratitude, will increase health and happiness and humility.

TS: How is that research done? What kinds of studies?

AA: Robert Emmons, at the University of California, Davis, and also Michael McCullough, at the University of Miami, have been the foremost researchers on the impact of gratitude or the benefits of gratitude. And what they've found is that people who are grateful or happier—they've done different groups, and statistically have beat the laws of chance. And their research is combined in a book called *The Psychology of Gratitude*. And what they've found is that relationships benefit if you have what they call the "five-to-one ratio": it's where you have greater appreciation for each other to one complaint, rather than five complaints to one appreciation. At the University of Washington, John Gotham can predict which relationships will last or not last by their ability to give gratitude and respect and appreciation to each other; that ratio stays five to one, with one being the complaint, rather than five complaints to one appreciation.

There's also been [results that prove] that the practice of gratitude strengthens the immune system; people become healthier. And the practice of gratitude also impacts creativity and productivity and increased financial well-being, as well. They've been the two spearheads on research in gratitude, with some wonderful results.

TS: I'm curious, Angeles: sometimes when it comes to the practice of gratitude, I find that I take a kind of "fake it till you make it" approach, and I'm curious what you think about that.

AA: [Laughs] Well, it's better than nothing!

TS: OK, that's kind of what I thought.

AA: It really is! You know, it's like affirmations. Affirmations work in affirming a possibility as if it exists now. And so "fake it till you make it" is: "At least I'm practicing gratitude, which strengthens that muscle."

TS: Well, yet sometimes when I'm not immediately grateful, it sort of opens the channel if I just start exploring what I might be grateful for. And then before you know it, I actually feel grateful.

AA: Yeah, it's really true, to start somewhere, you know, "for what I am grateful for."

TS: I'm curious, as a cultural anthropologist and someone who loves stories, if there's a story related to the practice of gratitude that is central for you or a touchstone for you?

AA: Well, there's an old Buddhist story about a man who lives with his son and his horses on a farm. And one day, the horse breaks a leg and they can't do farming. And he says, "Well, there must be a reason."

And so about a month later, the horse heals his broken leg, but then when his son's on the horse, he stumbles and falls off the horse and breaks his own leg. So the father says, "Oh, there must be a reason for this," because now he has his horse but his son can't help him.

Then the warriors come to take the son off to war, but they can't because he has a broken leg. And so it was a blessing in disguise.

And so each one of these seems like an obstacle or a hardship, but eventually became a blessing in disguise. And so finally when the son is healed and the horse is healed, then they can go back to cultivating the crops again.

But sometimes when we're stopped or there are places of hardship, there's a blessing there in disguise. And so, often some of our learnings are hard places. They are like that so that we will stop, and something else is shifted in our experience.

TS: Um-hmm.

AA: That's one of the stories that I like. But also I think the incredible thing around every language in the world having the capacity to say thank you, I think there's a mystery to that. I think gratitude is something that's deeply inherent in the human spirit that releases generosity. And that we have rituals worldwide around gift-giving to show generosity of heart, or to show the expression of our love. And sometimes that has a shadow side that people create empty rituals, or they try to manipulate each other through gift-giving. But the purity of heart that really gives in an honest way is something that's in every human being, and is expressed within the lifetime of every human being.

And I see the practice of gratitude as a way of keeping the heart open, but also a way of retaining our humanity in a growing world of neck-and-neck darkness and light, or evolutionary and de-evolutionary forces in a race here. But I'm forever grateful for the great gift of life itself, and also just seeing all the evolutionary possibilities that we have ahead of us.

TS: Now, Angeles, we're having this conversation with Thanksgiving and the Christmas holidays approaching. How do you suggest people relate to these rituals, these holidays, from a place of genuineness? What kinds of practical suggestions do you have, to make the most of these experiences?

AA: Well, I think that Thanksgiving is an incredible opportunity to really give thanks to the people who we love. The holidays, and the practice of really gift-giving, I think is to give what we know would really make someone else happy. And families have their own rituals of gift-giving, and especially in a downturn they're maybe just buying a gift for one family member or drawing names out of a hat or whatever it may be. Or the gift-giving gifts in other ways than materially: you know, it's how to give the gift of time—quality time, not quantity time—but the gift of quality time. Or the gift of running errands or surprise opportunities where groceries have already been taken care of. Or something that would surprise and delight and comfort somebody else by the extraordinary thoughtfulness or expression of love that comes from thinking about what would make another person truly happy or would alleviate more suffering.

TS: I'm curious, Angeles, I know that you're about to turn 70.

AA: Yes! [Laughs]

TS: And I'm wondering if your approach to gratitude or how important it is in your life has changed over the last few decades in any way.

AA: Well, it's just increasing. [Laughs] It's really increasing. I just find that I value the great gift of life itself—it's such a gift. And the gift of friendship, and the gift of collegiality. And the gift of family has become increasingly more and more important. And really, for me, wanting to give gratitude, especially over the last decades, for—going decade by decade—for people who have provided enormous opportunities for me to express my work in the world. And I find myself writing more and more gratitude notes than I ever have before, and wanting to make sure people know how grateful I am for that. So it's all just increased rather than decreased. And wanting, especially in those places where in hindsight I may have taken things more for granted, now I don't take things for granted.

TS: Um-hmm. Now you're the author of a book with *Sounds True on The Second Half of Life*. And there are many interesting themes in that book, but one of them has to do with legacy and the kind of legacy we might leave as individuals. And I'm curious here, as you approach 70, what your thoughts are about legacy and your work?

AA: I think a lot of the legacy I'm consciously working on this time is really doing more intergenerational dialogue and intergenerational work, planting seeds more with the youth than midlifers as a way of giving back, so that they don't really have to reinvent the wheel. The legacy-leaving around just basically working with the four universal archetypes of the way of the warrior, or leadership, or the way of the healer, or the way of the teacher, or the way of the visionary, is an old, old map that's considered the mark of a healthy person—someone whose leadership and healer and teaching and vision are all integrated together. Or that people feel strongly in those four areas.

And there are also the four areas that every culture of the world has cultivated. There's not a culture in the world that doesn't have ways of governance or leadership, which is the way of the warrior. "Warrior" is an old-fashioned word for leadership, and there's not a culture in the world that doesn't have a healing model or modality. And every culture has

two models: they have their traditional-healing model, and then they have their folk-medicine model, as well. And every culture of the world has their means of transmitting their values and wisdom and experience to education models, which is the way of the teacher. And every culture of the world has the creative arts or the performing arts or the martial arts—ways of expressing ourselves through our life purpose and calling. So these four universal ways have been a part of not only identifying them, but also providing a book or tapes surrounding them, and also the eight gates of opening to wisdom, providing a map for the second half of life. Those are two big legacies that I'll be sharing, but most of all I'd like to be more remembered for my personhood than for my work.

TS: Why is that?

AA: Well, I think when you read the obituaries, that's what's remembered in everyone's heart, is either the person's humor or kindness or compassion or generosity. And then down below is, oh, by the way, they taught for 40 years or whatever it was. But we're really remembered in each other's heart[s] for our character or our personhood more than we're remembered for our work.

TS: You know, I'm glad you used that word "character." It's a word that you use throughout the book *The Second Half of Life*, emphasizing that we have an opportunity to develop our character. And I'm curious what you mean by it; it's a word that people don't use very often, but that I quite like.

AA: Well, character is composed of integrity and patience and trust and flexibility and clarity. It's the heart of our moral compass. But what fosters a spiritual growth and development is attending to coming into congruence with who we really are in our own authentic nature. And that's always interested me: what keeps me in my integrity, and what pulls me out of my integrity or my patience or my trust or my flexibility, which are all qualities that foster wisdom. And wisdom develops character or deepens the spiritual maturation. So I've been really interested in that, and that's one of the reasons that I wrote *The Second Half of Life*, is the eight gates of wisdom is really a pathway in the formulation of character.

TS: Um-hmm. Now tell us a little bit what you mean by the eight gates.

AA: There are eight gates of wisdom in the second half of life, and each of these is necessary in the second half of life in order to foster wisdom. It's really a map of going through these eight universal gates on aging and eldering. We've been through some of the gates—most of the gates—in the first half of life, but in the second half of life they're associated with meaning rather than ambition, and authenticity rather than ego development. Those are ways of coming into one's authentic nature or developing character, of approaching these eight gates. And there's a task and a challenge and a gift at each gate, and there's also reflections and practices at each gate. And so, if people want to know more about that they can read the book! [Laughs]

TS: You know, I'm curious, Angeles, so I'm going to use an example of someone I spoke to recently, and she was a 60-year-old woman whose children were now going off to college. And she had been a professional, but in raising her children she had put her professional life to the side for many years. And she was a spiritual practitioner, a meditator, but yet there was something in her that felt a kind of longing for greater fulfillment, I guess is what I would say, a sense of, "I haven't really done everything I came here to do, except I don't really know what it is."

AA: Right. And there's a real longing that's associated with meaning. She's in a perfect place where it's now the beginning of what's called the "real journey" for her, because she's raised her children, and she's also had a taste of career and spiritual growth and development. But in the second half of life, there's almost what I call the "great soul's hunting," of discovering who we really are rather than who we think we are. And it's attached to meaning and a creative fire that takes no wood. And it's a place of looking back on where I've been.

And what's really exciting is, if we take a look at our youth as the first act of a play, and midlife as the second act of the play, then the third act of the play is where all the resolution comes in. And it's the most exciting part of the play: you get to see whether it's going to be a surprise ending, whether it's going to be a comedy or a tragedy. Everything gets resolved in the third act, and it's that longing. And it's like Oscar Wilde says, "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken." And it's an opportunity to find who that self really is beyond cultural expectations or family imprinting. It's the deeper soul's journey of uncovering and discovering what's really important to us as a being.

TS: It's interesting that you use the metaphor of a three-act play because I was thinking that "the second half of life" makes it sound like two acts. But my own experience feels a little bit more like it's going to be three acts. But I didn't know if that was just the wishful thinking of someone in the middle of the second act, you know? But what do you think about that? Here, "second half of life" sort of implies—

AA: Well, the second half of life is really considered 50 to 100, but within our fifties is the decade of review and taking a look at the best of our youth and the best of our midlife, and preparing for the wisdom years, which really begin when we're 60. And then 60 is considered the youth of our wisdom years, 70 is the midlife of our wisdom years, and 80 to 100 are really our wisdom years. But the third act is really probably from 60 to the end of life—that's where you begin to resolve youth and midlife issues.

But it's interesting that cross-culturally, the second half of life is considered as almost a 50-year marker from age 50 to 100. But within that is—you're absolutely right, there is the third act. [Laughs] And that's the exciting, creative part that this woman that you cited as an example of really coming into the longing of that third act.

TS: Um-hmm. Now, Angeles, as somebody who has written about the second half of life and studied the four universal archetypes that you mentioned previously, the fourfold way, I'm curious in your own life, having all of this knowledge about what creates meaning and fulfillment, has it worked? Do you feel a sense of fulfillment, or do you feel that some part of your life has been un-actualized, unrealized?

AA: No, I can't say that I've had the experience of something not being actualized. I realize that if I were to go tomorrow, I have been very blessed to live a very, very full life. I think if there's any longing that I have at this time, it's for more time in silence and in nature. But I've also built that into my work. You know, I made sure that I've taken people in the last 40 years out into nature for three-day, three-night wilderness experiences. And I teach about silence and all. So I've smuggled it in, you know, all the things that I deeply love, I've smuggled into my work. So I feel really fulfilled that way. I just find myself wanting to spend more quality time with the people that I love, and I'm doing something about that, so . . .

I can say that my life has turned out to be one of the biggest surprises to me. There have

been so many surprises in my life. It's been a surprise that I've ever written a book; I had no plans to write a book, no desire to write a book. So that's been a big surprise. It's been a big surprise that I've been able to travel as extensively around the world, connected with my work; it's just been wonderful. It's like an invisible hand has really opened up or guided me in so many rich and diverse ways. And I've had adventures, and I'm very blessed to be beloved by friends and to love many people. So I can't say that there's any pocket of huge, huge longing that I have. I've been blessed to do what I love to do. I think that's a huge blessing. But I'll let you know if one surfaces! [Laughs]

TS: OK. Well, I'm wondering, Angeles, just as we conclude our conversation, in the spirit of gratitude, if you'd be willing to give all of our listeners some kind of blessing?

AA: Well, the blessing that I love the most comes from Nelson Mandela. It was a three-line blessing or invocation that he asked all the townships of South Africa to say during Apartheid:

\*\* Let us take care of the children, for they have a long way to go.

\*\* Let us take care of the elders, for they have come a long way.

\*\* And let us take care of the those in between, for they are doing the work.

TS: Wonderful. Thank you so much.

AA: Yes, thanks, Tami. Thank you so much for the incredible work that you do in the world, and how much solace and comfort and inspiration Sounds True has provided for so many.

TS: Well, thank you, Angeles. I'd say you've moved from being the Gratitude Lady to the Shining Queen of Gratitude.

AA: [Laughs]

TS: It's true! Angeles Arrien is the creator of an audio with Sounds True on gratitude, as well as an upcoming book that explores what it means to live a year in gratitude, a workbook exploring blessing and prayers and, as she mentioned, mercies and protections for gratitude. Angeles is also the author of a book and an audio learning course on *The Second Half of Life: Opening the Eight Gates of Wisdom*.