

Spotlight on Gratitude

by Shari Swanson

On October 3, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln set aside the last Thursday of November as a day to give thanks, a new national holiday, Thanksgiving. He urged his fellow citizens then embroiled in civil war to not lose sight of the gifts surrounding them, among them "fruitful fields and healthy skies." Lincoln understood that, even in the worst of times, gratitude is essential.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving this year, 153 years after Lincoln's pronouncement, perhaps it is just as important to set aside time for deep reflection and gratitude as it was during the Civil War.

To help you find a deep sense of gratitude in this holiday season, we look back through prior articles on the issue and offer this Daily Good Spotlight on Gratitude.

Science shows us that cultivating a sense of gratitude is beneficial to our health in many interesting ways. People who practice gratitude have stronger immune systems and lower blood pressure. They tend to exercise more and take better care of their health. Their sleep is longer and more refreshing.

Psychologically, those who practice gratitude take more joy and pleasure in life and experience higher levels of positive emotions. They feel more alert, alive and awake in their lives.

Socially, a gratitude practice leaves people more outgoing, forgiving, helpful, generous, and compassionate. Gratitude improves relationships. Focusing on their blessings leaves people less lonely and isolated and more ready to engage in their communities. Indeed, gratitude helps us to deeply care for one another and help our fellow human beings. A focus on the positive things to be grateful for corrects our innate tendency to focus on stress-inducing incidents, the ones triggering the fight or flight response. Being grateful can actually override our habitual and instinctive responses to flee or fight and cultivate a response to be heroic or to counteract racial biases.

Gratitude also encourages us to focus on the present, to appreciate the value of something as we have it. We appreciate things anew that we may have begun to take for granted. We recognize the unexpected blessing in the difficult circumstance. It, essentially, magnifies the pleasures we get in life by focusing our attention there.

Moreover, gratitude can block toxic or negative emotions. You simply can't be envious and grateful at the same time; they're incompatible feelings. Accordingly, your focus is on what you do have rather than what you don't, and your sense of appreciation for your own life deepens. Gratitude has even been shown to have a noticeable effect in helping people to recover more quickly from stress and trauma.

So how do we cultivate a gratitude practice? Many have found gratitude journals to be helpful. By writing down three positive things at the end of the day into your journal, you focus on the positive. You choose to see your daily experiences in a way that makes you grateful even for the challenges and disappointing aspects of the day. If you couple the gratitude journal with a list of things that went well and a guess as to why they went well, you can begin to see how your own actions result in positive consequences.

Imagining your life without something or someone, or mental subtraction, can be a useful tool in cultivating gratitude. Similarly, abstaining from something you enjoy may help you to savor it again when it is reintroduced.

Perhaps, rather than a gratitude journal, you may want to keep a gratitude jar, a place to drop a few coins every time you have a grateful thought. As the jar fills, you will have a tangible offering for someone in need.

Finally, we can be grateful for our opportunities to give as Mother Teresa was when she worked with the sick and dying in the slums of Calcutta. Her work allowed her the opportunity to grow and deepen her spirituality. Our opportunities to care for family members, to tend to the sick, to feed the poor are all things we can be grateful for: we have the ability to help the world with our words, gifts, and actions.

Indeed, as our gratitude practice deepens, it is only natural that we seek out ways to express that gratitude in the world around us. Many people love to write thank you notes to people who have enriched their lives. Some use their gifts to share music, dance, photographs, poetry, art, music, gardening, giving generously, feeding others. Anything you love, really, can be offered to others as an expression of gratitude. The common denominator among them is lifting your thoughts away from your own worries and troubles in order to realize and share the gifts you have received.

So, as we enter the holiday season, reach deep into your heart to count your blessings and let the abundance you feel spill over into your own unique expression of that gratitude.