

Ten True Things About Gratefulness by Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health

Gratefulness not only changes your life, but also extends beyond your intimate sphere. It gives rise to compassion, kindness, forgiveness, and empathy, and thus informs how we treat others and how we act in the larger world. ~ Kristi Nelson

The benefits of gratitude range from deeper sleep and better health to higher self-esteem and enhanced stress resilience. Gratitude has also been shown to enhance our relationships. And, if that's not enough, gratitude makes us happier. As Brother David Steindl-Rast writes, "The root of joy is gratefulness ... For it is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful."

Kripalu presenter Kristi Nelson has experienced this truth firsthand. A nearly 25-year survivor of Stage IV cancer, Kristi has put gratefulness at the center of her life and work. The executive director of A Network for Grateful Living, founded by Brother David almost 20 years ago, Kristi is a passionate advocate for integrating gratitude as a practice into our everyday lives.

Kristi shared her reflections about how cultivating gratitude can transform the way we see ourselves, our relationships, and the world. Here are 10 true things about gratefulness.

Gratefulness is not circumstantial or conditional.

Though they're often used interchangeably, Kristi differentiates between "gratitude" and "gratefulness." Gratitude, she says, is more transactional and reactive—a response to a specific incident or circumstance: "I feel grateful when X happens."

"We experience gratitude when we get or experience something we want," she explains. "It's much more difficult to experience gratitude when life delivers us less—or more—than we bargained for. Having more gratitude can be like another thing that we put on our to-do list, so we end up trying to orchestrate experiences in order to feel more gratitude, and we're often disappointed if we don't have those experiences."

Kristi thinks of gratefulness, on the other hand, as an overall orientation to life. "When we wake up in the morning and experience a sense of gratefulness just for the fact of being alive, with our heart and senses open to the gifts and opportunities of another day, it's a more radical approach to gratitude that's not contingent on something happening to us,

but rather a way that we arrive to life.”

We can practice being grateful for what we take for granted.

Thich Nhat Hanh famously said, “When we have a toothache, we know that not having a toothache is happiness. But later, when we don’t have a toothache, we don’t treasure our non-toothache.” Or to put it the other way around, in the words of Joni Mitchell, “You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone.”

“What people often experience when they’ve lost something is gratefulness when it returns,” Kristi says. “When you lose your electricity for two days, you’re so grateful when it comes back and you can flip the light switch and get light. Or you almost have a terrible accident but you’re saved by grace, and you sit there and say, ‘I’m so grateful to be alive.’”

But, in a surprisingly short time, that feeling can go away and we default to our baseline expectations, assumptions, and even entitlement. A daily practice of gratitude, Kristi says, is the key to appreciating all the things we tend to take for granted. “The core practice of gratefulness is to truly notice, to be present to the gifts of our lives from the moment we wake up in the morning until the moment we go to bed at night,” she says.

Kristi suggests this practice as a reminder of all that we have at every moment: “When you wake up in the morning, before you even get out of bed, pause to think of five things you’re grateful for. It could be: My lungs are breathing. The air temperature is comfortable. I had an interesting dream. My eyes can open. I get to put my feet on the floor and walk out of the room. There are people I love. I’m still here. You’re calling forth those things that you don’t have to do anything to earn, and that remind you that this day is a gift.” In this way, she says, we remind ourselves that gratefulness is an internal approach to life that we can cultivate and reference at any time; we’re not waiting for anything to happen.

There is always something to be grateful for, even in the midst of fear and pain.

After her cancer diagnosis at age 33, Kristi underwent multiple surgeries, chemo, and radiation. “I faced my mortality pretty squarely,” she says. Yet, even in this most challenging period of her life, she looked for opportunities to cultivate gratefulness.

“I was in the hospital, separated from all my friends and family and tethered to all kinds of IVs and dealing with pain,” she recalls. “And yet, I had nurses and technicians and doctors and cleaners who came into my room every single day. I remember thinking, what if this is my whole world now, what if this is all I have? And then I thought, I can always love these people.”

Gratefulness asks: Where can we find opportunities to grow and learn and love, even in the darkest moments? And, once the darkness has passed, how do we live fully and deeply in the present while also remembering that we once had a toothache, and now we don’t? “Part of being human is that we remember and forget, remember and forget,” Kristi says. “The work is to remember more often than we forget.”

Gratitude requires vulnerability.

Gratefulness is perhaps the most un-ironic feeling we can have, and that can lay us bare in a way that many people may find uncomfortable.

“We don’t get joy without feeling grateful, but being grateful also induces a kind of vulnerability that some of us find at times somewhat intolerable,” says Kristi, noting the work of author and researcher Brené Brown on this topic. “When we’re grateful, we’re more present and less defended. We are more likely to wear our hearts on our sleeves. We recognize our deep belonging and the tenderness and strength of truly treasuring life and one another. This is a transformative capacity to develop in ourselves.”

Expressing gratefulness can change your relationships.

Gratefulness has the potential to transform your intimate relationships with a partner, friends, or family members, and can shift a casual or even a difficult relationship with a colleague or acquaintance.

“Notice something you’re grateful for or appreciate about a person, and actually say it out loud to them,” Kristi advises. “Take the opportunity to express the gratefulness that’s in your heart. Offer this appreciation often, and with details. Take less for granted about the people in your life. You will watch your relationships change so quickly it’s stunning.”

Gratefulness can drive social action.

Gratefulness not only changes your life, but also extends beyond your intimate sphere. It gives rise to compassion, kindness, forgiveness, and empathy, and thus informs how we treat others and how we act in the larger world. Gratefulness makes us better citizens, according to Kristi—more concerned about the well-being of others and the planet.

“We open the door to that generosity of our heart, and find we’re able to impact the world in a much different way,” she reflects. “For me, because I’m an environmentalist, when I feel grateful for the Earth, I want to take care of it. Whether it’s the environment, democracy, or your community, when you feel grateful for something, you notice what it needs and you do what you can to take care of it.”

We can reframe our everyday lives toward gratefulness.

Kristi offers a simple yet powerful practice that can change the lens through which you view your days. Here’s how it works: Think of all the things on your to-do list today—maybe “I have to go grocery shopping” or “I have to finish a project at work” or “I have to clean the house.” Now, change the words “I have to” to “I get to.”

“It’s a totally different frame around the things we do in our lives, a way to shift obligations to opportunities, responsibilities to privileges,” Kristi says. “When we see

what we have to do in life as a privilege rather than an obligation, it opens up a new energy with which to approach the moments and tasks of our lives. This practice also helps us model gratefulness for others, and can help us approach our circumstances more graciously and generously.”

The most meaningful moments of gratefulness don’t get “likes.”

#Gratitude has become ubiquitous on social media—an excuse to humblebrag about your island vacation, your amazing kid, or your fabulous new job. Such posts may express genuine gratefulness, Kristi says, but the deeper, rawer moments often come in between the status updates.

“The kind of gratitude we’re talking about here is often a much bigger embrace of life than what we can take a picture of and post on Facebook or Instagram as a cause for gratitude,” she says. “It can contain that, but it’s deeper than that, and it’s much more vulnerable than that. You know when you are so present and feel so grateful you just want to cry? When the gifts of a moment are truly moving and turn you inside out? That’s the kind of gratefulness I’m talking about. And it’s not typically found in those moments that people are hashtagging.”

Gratefulness doesn’t mean being okay with what’s not working.

Practicing gratefulness isn’t about forcing ourselves to accept the things in our lives that we know aren’t good for us. Rather, it awakens us to the possibilities for positive change.

“In order to tolerate a substandard life, we can numb ourselves and tamp ourselves down,” Kristi says. “But when we practice gratefulness and become more alive and awake, it doesn’t make things that aren’t acceptable more acceptable—it makes them less acceptable. We create a new frame of reference for what’s possible in our life and in the world, and the things that don’t fit, that don’t match up, that are not in alignment, become more of a struggle to tolerate.”

Practicing gratefulness now means having fewer regrets later.

Kristi thinks of the practice of living gratefully as “regret prevention.”

“When you live fully inside your vulnerability, feeling grateful for the gift of life, you’re much less likely to say and do the things—or not say and do the things—that will lead you to regret,” she says. “When we embrace the poignancy and vulnerability that come with gratefulness, we’re reminded that time is limited and experiences are fleeting, so we had better treasure deeply what we have now and live more fully into what we know really matters.”