

December 2, 2009

## Head's Message: Gratitude

*by Susanna A. Jones*



If you've been reading these columns, you know that expressing gratitude, particularly in a very personal way, exerts a powerful and lasting effect on one's happiness. With Thanksgiving approaching (and the need to write a Thanksgiving Assembly speech!), I began to explore the research on gratitude. While happiness is something that we all probably aspire to, and while its pursuit certainly extends far back into human history (Jefferson's famous assertion in the Declaration of Independence that "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" are "inalienable rights"), gratitude constitutes an even more pervasive topic of interest throughout history and across cultures. Numerous philosophers and theologians from the Greeks and Buddha to contemporary thinkers have written about gratitude. Every major religion embraces and promotes gratitude. Even the United Nations in a 1999 resolution stated that "thanksgiving is basic in human nature and is observed worldwide."

So my quest led me to Robert Emmons, a psychology professor at the University of California, Davis, whose research has focused on gratitude. He has shown that when people are actively grateful, they are healthier, feel better, are more optimistic, and feel more connected to others. He even found that they exercise more and sleep better. These findings came from asking random samples of people to undertake one of three tasks weekly for ten weeks: count five blessings (five things they were grateful for); count five hassles in daily life; simply recount events. A second study had people do the first two tasks with the third being a positive comparison to others (instead of simply recounting events) daily for three weeks. This second study confirmed most of the first study's results while also revealing that those in the "gratitude condition" (the first group) offered more help or emotional support to others, characteristics confirmed by individuals close to them. Even after six months, the gratitude group reported these positive attributes at a rate 25 percent higher than the other groups. A similar study of middle school children produced similar outcomes.

This research mirrors what Martin Seligman found with the "gratitude visit" which Emmons also cites.

However, there are some aspects of gratitude that take us to a different level from happiness, aspects that I would say make the practice of gratitude deeper, more affirming, and even more important than the pursuit of happiness. Unlike happiness, which could be perceived as an individual pursuit, gratitude by definition involves more than one person or being. It requires us to look outside ourselves.

A study at the University of Virginia supported this notion. Participants who were asked to recall something good that happened to them reacted by wanting to tell others how great they felt and wanted to celebrate; they were self-focused. By contrast, those participants asked to

remember something that someone had done for them wanted to share with others the other person's kindness; their reaction was other-focused.

Because gratitude is "other focused," it helps us to build social relations; to form friendships – in sum, to create societies through something psychologists "reciprocal altruism." Reciprocal altruism is the principle that if someone does something nice for you, you tend to do something nice for them in return.

This "other-focused" quality of gratitude implies steps that take us beyond potentially self-focused happiness. To be grateful, we have to acknowledge another person's gift to us. When we are grateful, we are indebted. Likewise, we may need to admit that we must depend on others. These are not conditions that everyone wants or would choose. However, if we look at them in a different light, and apply "reciprocal altruism," we realize that these conditions encourage us to pay forward the good deeds. When we are grateful, we want to help others as we have been helped. From this perspective, gratitude implies humility. By acknowledging others' gifts to us, by being indebted and dependent on others, we create a web of humanity connected by good deeds and gratitude. That sounds like a pleasant society in which to live.

Being grateful takes effort, particularly if we want to move from occasional feelings of gratitude to living in a state of gratefulness – moving from gratitude as an emotion to gratitude as a virtue, the virtue Cicero called "not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others." The benefits of living in a state of gratefulness are many. As Emmons says, "grateful thinking fosters the savoring of positive life experiences and situations, so that people can extract the maximum possible satisfaction and enjoyment from their circumstances."

Next week, I'll explore other benefits of living in a state of gratefulness and some specific actions that Emmons has found can help us achieve that state. In the meantime, count your blessings!

To explore Emmons research in more depth, see Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D., *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (2008).