

What Gets in the Way of Gratitude?

What must we overcome as a culture or as individuals for gratitude to flourish? The key, argues Robert Emmons, is to see all of life as a gift.

About the Author

A [recent workshop](#) sponsored by the the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley showcased the newest and hottest findings in the science and practice of gratitude. Impressive as the advances were, not one speaker (myself included) grappled with what may be the single biggest question that stands in the way of making the basic science useful for practical applications: What must be overcome as a culture or as individuals in order for gratitude flourish?

We live in a nation where everyone is on the pursuit of happiness. Each individual has his or her own path this journey takes. For some, the search begins in books; for others it comes through service.

But perhaps the most popular form of seeking happiness is through the accumulation of "things." Materialism, though,

is bought at a cost. A society that feels entitled to what it receives does not adequately express gratitude. Seen through the lens of buying and selling, relationships as well as things are viewed as disposable, and gratitude cannot survive this materialistic onslaught. The lack of gratitude is contagious, and is passed from one generation to the next.

Conversely, the act of gratitude is also viral and has been found to greatly and positively influence not just relationships, but one's own emotional status.

Research has proven that gratitude is essential for happiness, but modern times have regressed gratitude into a mere feeling instead of retaining its historic value, a virtue that leads to action. Just as great philosophers such as Cicero and Seneca conclude in their writings, gratitude is an action of returning a favor and is not just a sentiment. By the same token, ingratitude is the failure to both acknowledge receiving a favor and refusing to return or repay the favor. Just as gratitude is the [queen of the virtues](#), ingratitude is the king of the vices.

Given its magnetic appeal, it is a wonder that gratitude might be rejected. Yet it is. If we fail to choose it, by default we choose ingratitude. Millions make this choice every day.

Why? Provision, whether supernatural or natural, becomes so commonplace that it is easily accepted for granted. We

believe the universe owes us a living. We do not want to be beholden. Losing sight of protection, favors, benefits and blessings renders a person spiritually and morally bankrupt. It'd be hard to improve upon the [words of our 16th President](#) in 1863:

We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation ever has grown; but we have forgotten God! We have forgotten the gracious Hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.

Saying "no thanks" to gratitude

Perhaps the most famous instance of ingratitude in history is found in the New Testament gospel of Luke. Jesus heals ten lepers of their physical disease and in so doing of their social stigma. Pronounced clean of their contagious condition and no longer social outcasts, they get their old lives back.

Being brought back from near death, you'd think they'd be overwhelmingly grateful, right? Yet only one returned to express thanksgiving for being healed. Knowing full well that only one would come back thankful Jesus asked,

Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? And then he said to them, 'Rise and go; your faith has made you well.' (Luke 17: 16 -18)

Biblical scholars of this passage agree that by "faith," what Jesus really meant was thankfulness, as in, "Your gratitude has made you well." The parable reminds us of just how common ingratitude is and how easy it is to take blessings for granted, and how gratitude is dependent upon unmerited favors.

Were the others ungrateful? Perhaps they were just forgetful. After all, given back their dignity, they were no doubt in a hurry to return to their families and old lives.

Contemporary research, though, paints a more complicated picture of ingratitude. People who are ungrateful tend to be characterized by an excessive sense of self-importance, arrogance, vanity, and an unquenchable need for admiration and approval. Narcissists reject the ties that bind people into relationships of reciprocity. They expect special favors and feel no need to pay back or pay forward.

Given this constellation of characteristics, being grateful in any meaningful way is beyond the capacity of most narcissists. Without empathy, they cannot appreciate an altruistic gift because they cannot identify with the mental

state of the gift-giver. Narcissism is a spiritual blindness; it is a refusal to acknowledge that one has been the recipient of benefits freely bestowed by others. A preoccupation with the self can cause us to forget our benefits and our benefactors, or to feel that we are owed things from others and therefore have no reason to feel thankful.

Entitlement is at the core of narcissism. This attitude says, "Life owes me something" or "People owe me something" or "I deserve this." In all its manifestations, a preoccupation with the self can cause us to forget our benefits and our benefactors or to feel that we are owed things from others and therefore have no reason to feel thankful. Entitlement and self-absorption are massive impediments to gratitude. You will certainly not feel grateful when you do receive what you think you have coming, because after all, you have it coming. Counting blessings will be ineffective because grievances will always outnumber gifts.

Were narcissistic entitlement a condition that afflicted only a small percentage of humankind, then there would be little cause for concern. Indeed, psychiatrists estimate that only one percent of the general population meets the clinical criteria for narcissistic disorders.

However, narcissistic characteristics are found in all individuals in varying degrees. Early childhood is marked by egocentrism, the inability to take another's perspective.

This preoccupation with one's own internal world is a normal stage of human development. Over time, most of us evolve out of this restricted perceptual lens. However those who continue to see the world primarily from the inside out slide down the slope from ordinary egocentrism to entitled narcissism.

The truest approach to life

Is there an antidote to ingratitude? Gratitude is often prescribed as the remedy for the exaggerated deservingness that marks narcissistic entitlement. But what enables gratitude in the first place?

According to Mark T. Mitchell, professor of political science at Patrick Henry College in Virginia:

Gratitude is born of humility, for it acknowledges the giftedness of the creation and the benevolence of the Creator. This recognition gives birth to acts marked by attention and responsibility. Ingratitude, on the other hand, is marked by hubris, which denies the gift, and this always leads to inattention, irresponsibility, and abuse.

In gratitude and humility we turn to realities outside of ourselves. We become aware of our limitations and our need to rely on others. In gratitude and humility, we acknowledge the myth of self-sufficiency. We look upward and outward to

the sources that sustain us. Becoming aware of realities greater than ourselves shields us from the illusion of being self-made, being here on this planet by right—expecting everything and owing nothing. The humble person says that life is a gift to be grateful for, not a right to be claimed. Humility ushers in a grateful response to life.

Humility is a key to gratitude because living humbly is the truest approach to life. Humble people are grounded in the truth that they need others. We all do. We are not self-sufficient. We did not create ourselves. We depend on parents, friends, our pets, God, the universe and yes, even the government, to provide what we cannot provide for ourselves. Seeing with grateful eyes requires that we see the web of interconnection in which we alternate between being givers and receivers. The humble person says that life is a gift to be grateful for, not a right to be claimed.

Humility is profoundly countercultural. It does not come easily or naturally, particularly in a culture that values self-aggrandizement. It requires the sustained focus on others rather than self, or as the Jewish proverb states, humility is limiting oneself to an appropriate space while leaving room for others. Thinking about oneself is natural; humility is unnatural. Perhaps this is why gratitude is counterintuitive. It goes against our natural inclinations. We want to take credit for the good that we encounter. This self-serving bias

is the adult derivative of childhood egocentricity.

Reigning in entitlement and embracing gratitude and humility is spiritually and psychologically liberating.

Gratitude is the recognition that life owes me nothing and all the good I have is a gift. It is not a getting of what we are entitled to. My eyes are a gift. So is my wife, my freedom, my job, and my every breath.

Recognizing that everything good in life is ultimately a gift is a fundamental truth of reality. Humility makes that recognition possible. The humble person says, "How can I not be filled with overflowing gratitude for all the good in my life that I've done nothing to merit?" The realization that all is gift is freeing, and freedom is the very foundation upon which gratitude is based. True gifts are freely given, and require no response. Jesus was free to withhold the gift of healing and he did not demand the other nine who were healed return to express gratitude. The one who did return exercised his freedom as well. Gratitude sets us free.

This essay originally appeared in [Big Questions Online](#), which aims to explore Big Questions of human purpose and ultimate reality and to foster thoughtful discussion of those topics. Please leave a comment [there](#) on this essay!