

## Queen of the Virtues? Gratitude as a Human Strength

Robert A. Emmons

Gratitude is much admired. A small sampling of recent quotes reveals the power and potential of this virtue. “Whatever you are in search of—peace of mind, prosperity, health, love—it is waiting for you if only you are willing to receive it with an open and grateful heart” writes Sarah Breathnach in the *Simple Abundance Journal of Gratitude*. Elsewhere she refers to gratitude as “the most passionate transformative force in the cosmos.” Another popular treatment of the topic refers to it as “one of the most empowering, healing, dynamic instruments of consciousness vital to demonstrating the life experiences one desires.”<sup>1</sup> Lock-and-key metaphors are especially common; gratitude has been referred to as “the key that opens all doors,” that which “unlocks the fullness of life,” and the “key to abundance, prosperity, and fulfillment.”<sup>2-3</sup>

Feelings of gratitude can be powerful, overcoming its possessor with an intensity that rivals any other human emotion. It was this feeling of being overwhelmed with gratitude that the Catholic Saint, Ignatius of Loyola, was well familiar. His prayer life was said to be so intense that during Mass he often had to pause as his eyes filled with tears and he could not see. After a while, the constant tearing began to adversely affect his eyes. He sought a special papal dispensation to relieve him of some devotional duties so that his health might be preserved. In his spiritual diary he wrote, “because of the violent pain that I felt in one eye as a result of the tears, this thought came to me: If I continue saying Mass, I could lose this eye, whereas it is better to keep it.”<sup>4</sup>

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How do these extraordinary claims regarding the power and promise of gratitude fare when scientific lights are shined on them? Can gratitude live up to its billing? In this article I review the growing database on gratitude and human flourishing, explore mechanisms by which gratitude promotes flourishing, and conclude by describing some methods to cultivate gratitude.

#### WHAT IS GRATITUDE?

Gratitude has a dual meaning: a worldly one and a transcendent one. In its worldly sense, gratitude is a feeling that occurs in interpersonal exchanges when one person acknowledges receiving a valuable benefit from another. Much of human life is about giving, receiving, and repayment. In this sense, it, like other social emotions, functions to help regulate relationships, solidifying and strengthening them. There is an energizing and motivating quality to gratitude. It is a positive state of mind that gives rise to the “passing on of the gift” through positive action. As such, gratitude serves as a key link in the dynamic between receiving and giving. It is not only a response to kindnesses received, but also a motivator of future benevolent actions on the part of the recipient.

Gratitude’s other nature is ethereal, spiritual, and transcendent. Philosophies and theologies have long viewed gratitude as central to the human-divine relationship. As long as people have believed in a Supreme Being, believers have sought ways to express gratitude and thanksgiving to this Being, their ultimate giver. In monotheistic traditions, God is conceived of as a personal being that is the source of goodness and the first giver of all gifts, to whom much is owed. In these traditions, gratitude is a quite likely a universal religious emotion, manifested in the offerings of thanks described in ancient scriptures, the daily ceremonies and rituals of Native Americans, and the contemporary praise and worship music of the evangelical tradition.

Though the concept of a personally transcendent God is not relevant in non-theistic traditions, gratitude retains its spiritual nature. This fundamental spiritual quality to gratitude which transcends religious traditions is aptly conveyed by Frederick Streng: “in this attitude people recognize that they are connected to each other in a mysterious and miraculous way that is not fully determined by physical forces, but is part of a wider, or transcendent context.”<sup>5</sup> This spiritual core of gratefulness is essential if gratitude is to be not simply a tool for narcissistic self-improvement. True gratefulness rejoices in the other. It has as its ultimate goal reflecting back the goodness that one has received by creatively seeking opportunities for giving. The motiva-

tion for doing so resides in the grateful appreciation that one has lived by the grace of others. In this sense, the spirituality of gratitude is opposed to a self-serving belief that one deserves, or is entitled to, the blessings that he or she enjoys. Rather, it is in knowing the grace by which one lives, which is itself a profound spiritual realization.

#### FINDINGS FROM THE SCIENCE OF GRATITUDE

Examinations of gratitude in the history of ideas come from a number of perspectives—philosophy, theology, and political economy, to name a few. Each of these is valid and valuable in their own right. However, only a scientific perspective can provide an evidence-based approach to understanding how and in what ways gratitude brings benefits into the life of the practitioner. Recently, the tools and techniques of modern science have been brought to bear on understanding the nature of gratitude and why it is important for human health and happiness.

Gratitude is foundational to well-being and mental health throughout the life span. From childhood to old age, accumulating evidence documents the wide array of psychological, physical, and relational benefits associated with gratitude. In the past few years, there has been a tremendous increase in the accumulation of scientific evidence showing the contribution of gratitude to psychological and social well-being.<sup>6-7</sup> Gratitude has been shown not only to contribute to an increase in positive affect, but also to a decrease in negative affect as demonstrated in diverse samples such as among patients with neuromuscular disease<sup>7</sup> and early adolescents.<sup>8</sup>

Based on Erika Rosenberg's hierarchical levels of affective experience,<sup>9</sup> gratitude has been identified as a trait, emotion, and mood. The grateful disposition can be defined as a stable affective trait that lowers the threshold of experiencing gratitude. As an emotion, gratitude can be understood as an acute, intense, and relatively brief psycho-physiological reaction to being the recipient of a benefit from another. Lastly, as a stable mood, gratitude has also been identified to have a subtle, broad, and longer duration impact on consciousness.<sup>10</sup> Gratitude is not just a transient emotion, but is also a virtue. Grateful people are more prone to emotion, are more prone to respond with gratitude to a wider range of beneficent actions, and are more likely to notice beneficence on the part of others. In particular, they are more likely to respond to beneficence with the emotion of gratitude rather than with alternative emotions like resentment, shame, or guilt. Grateful people are likely to agree with state-

ments such as “It’s important to appreciate each day that you are alive; “I often reflect on how much easier my life is because of the efforts of others;” and, “For me, life is much more of a gift than it is a burden.” Comments such as these come from personality questionnaires designed to measure trait levels of gratitude; in other words, to identify people who are by nature grateful souls.

Both state and dispositional gratitude have been shown to enhance overall psychological, social, and physical well-being. For example, gratitude involves and encourages more positive social interactions, in turn making people better adjusted and accepted by people around them, and finally leading to well-being.<sup>6</sup> Since the emergence of gratitude research in the past few years, the two main measures that have been widely administered to measure dispositional gratitude are the six-item Gratitude Questionnaire<sup>11</sup> and the 44-item Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT).<sup>12</sup> Dispositional gratitude is a generalized tendency to first recognize and then emotionally respond with thankfulness, after attributing benefits received through benevolence to an external moral agent.<sup>13</sup> The 44-item GRAT includes the three dimensions of trait gratitude: resentment, simple appreciation, and social appreciation.<sup>12</sup> Other measures to assess gratitude in recent years have mainly included personal interviews,<sup>14</sup> rating scales,<sup>15</sup> and other self-reporting measures such as free response<sup>16</sup> and personal narratives.<sup>17</sup>

#### RESEARCH ON GRATITUDE AS DISPOSITION

Dispositional gratitude has been shown to uniquely and incrementally contribute to subjective well-being,<sup>18-19, 10</sup> and contribute to benefits above and beyond general positive affect.<sup>20</sup> Dispositional gratitude has also been found to be positively associated with prosocial traits such as empathy, forgiveness, and willingness to help others.<sup>11</sup> For example, people who rated themselves as having a grateful disposition perceived themselves as having more prosocial characteristics, expressed by their empathetic behavior and emotional support for friends within the last month. Similar associations have been found between stated gratitude and well-being.

People with stronger dispositions toward gratitude tend to be more spiritually and religiously minded. Not only do they score higher on measures of traditional religiousness, but they also scored higher on non-sectarian measures of spirituality that assess spiritual experiences (e.g., sense of contact with a divine power) and sentiments (e.g., beliefs that all living things are interconnected) independent of specific theological orientation. All mea-

asures of public and private religiousness in the Emmons and Kneezel study were significantly associated with both dispositional gratitude and grateful feelings assessed on a daily basis.<sup>21</sup> Although these correlations were not large (ranged from  $r=.28$  to  $r=.52$ ), they suggest that spiritually or religiously inclined people have a stronger disposition to experience gratitude than do their less spiritual/religious counterparts. Watkins and colleagues found that trait gratitude correlated positively with intrinsic religiousness and negatively with extrinsic religiousness. The authors suggest that the presence of gratitude may be a *positive* affective hallmark of religiously and spiritually engaged people, just as an absence of depressive symptoms is a *negative* affective hallmark of spiritually and religiously engaged people. They likely see benefits as gifts from God—"as the first cause of all benefits."<sup>18</sup>

Additional research has examined trait gratitude in religious contexts or gratitude felt toward God. A nationwide survey found that people who have no religious preference or who have not attended church services recently are twice as likely to skip traditional Thanksgiving holiday observances, compared to people who are active religiously.<sup>22</sup> Krause found that gratitude felt toward God reduced the effect of stress on health in late-life adults.<sup>23</sup> Using data from a longitudinal nationwide survey, Krause and colleagues further uncovered a linkage between "congregational cohesiveness" and gratitude toward God.<sup>24</sup> Gratitude toward God was measured by modifying the Gratitude Questionnaire<sup>11</sup> to make reference to God (e.g., "I have so much in life to be thankful to God for;" "I am grateful to God for all he has done for me."). Perceptions of cohesiveness (a belief that personal values are shared by church members) predicted an increase in feelings of gratitude toward God over time, leading the researchers to conclude that church attendance influences gratitude indirectly through congregation-based emotional support. Using the same data set, Krause found that gratitude toward God mediated the effect of financial strain on depression in late-life adults.<sup>25</sup> Financial stress had a greater impact on depression for older adults with fewer feelings of gratitude, whereas the negative effects of financial strain on depressive symptoms were eradicated for older adults who were more grateful. Gratitude directed toward God adds unique variance in predicting happiness and life satisfaction above and beyond general trait gratitude.<sup>26</sup> Lastly, dispositional gratitude was found to contribute to greater stress resiliency in a small sample of Presbyterian clergy.<sup>27</sup>

Another empirical approach to religious gratitude is to examine themes of thankfulness and gratitude in personal prayer content. In a study of

prayer in the lives of college students, prayers of thanksgiving were the second most common type of prayer, following petitionary appeals.<sup>28</sup> Another study looking at prayer found that prayers of thanksgiving were negatively related to depression and anxiety and positively related to greater hope in patients with rheumatoid arthritis.<sup>29</sup> In a study examining the link between prayer and coping, prayers of praise and thankfulness were rated as the second most effective form of prayer in coping with personal difficulties.

#### EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES OF GRATITUDE

In one of the first studies examining the benefits of experimentally-induced grateful thoughts on psychological well-being in daily life, the experimenters focused on gratitude in relation to three conditions: gratitude provoking experiences, hassles, and neutral life events.<sup>7</sup> As expected, the gratitude condition led to overall well-being, as revealed by fewer health complaints and a more positive outlook toward life. Participants in the "gratitude" condition also reported fewer physical health problems, and also rated their life to be better compared to participants in the "hassles" and "neutral" conditions. Furthermore, in a study examining the contribution of gratitude in daily mood over 21 days, gratitude was strongly associated with spiritual transcendence and other positive affective traits (e.g., extraversion).<sup>10</sup> In the past few years, a number of laboratory and research based intervention studies have also been examining the positive impact of gratitude induced activities (e.g., the gratitude visit, gratitude letter) on psychological well-being.<sup>10, 29-30, 31, 32</sup>

In these studies, participants in the gratitude condition are given the following instructions: "We want to focus for a moment on benefits or gifts that you have received in your life. These gifts could be simple everyday pleasures, people in your life, personal strengths or talents, moments of natural beauty, or gestures of kindness from others. We might not normally think about these things as gifts, but that is how we want you to think about them. Take a moment to really savor or relish these gifts, think about their value, and then write them down every night before going to sleep." A wide range of experiences sparked gratitude: cherished interactions, awareness of physical health, overcoming obstacles, and simply being alive, to name a few. This instructional set was in contrast with comparison conditions asking those in other randomly assigned groups to chronicle their daily travails or hassles or to reflect on ways in which they were better off than others.

In daily studies of emotional experience, when people report feeling grateful, thankful, and appreciative, they also feel more loving, forgiving, joyful, and enthusiastic. These deep affections appear to be formed through the discipline of gratitude. In this regard, it is interesting that the Greek root of the word enthusiasm, *entheos*, means “inspired by or possessed by a god.” Importantly, these data showing that gratitude is correlated with beneficial outcomes are not limited to self-report. Notably, the family, friends, partners, and others that surround them consistently report that people who practice gratitude seem measurably happier and are more pleasant to be around. Grateful people are rated by others as more helpful, more outgoing, more optimistic, and more trustworthy.<sup>11</sup>

The benefits of gratitude were further confirmed in another study that compared the efficacy of five different interventions that were hypothesized to increase personal happiness and decrease personal depression.<sup>31</sup> In a random assignment, placebo-controlled Internet study, a gratitude intervention (writing and delivering a letter of thankfulness to someone who had been especially helpful but had never been properly thanked) was found to significantly increase happiness and decrease depression for up to one month following the visit. Results indicated that “participants in the gratitude visit condition showed the largest positive changes in the whole study.” Thus, the benefits of gratitude do not appear to be limited to the self-guided journal-keeping methodology utilized by Emmons and McCullough.<sup>7</sup>

#### WHY IS GRATITUDE GOOD? EXPLORING MECHANISMS

How does one account for the psychological, emotional, physical, as well as spiritual, benefits of gratitude? Gratitude implies a recognition that it is possible for other forces to act towards us with beneficial, selfless motives. A number of possible explanations have been suggested, however, not all of them have been fully investigated. In the next section, we examine five explanations for the relation between gratitude and well-being:

*Gratitude increases spiritual awareness.* Many world religions commend gratitude as a desirable human trait,<sup>33-34</sup> which may cause spiritual or religious people to adopt a grateful outlook. Upon recognition of God’s provision of benefits, humans respond with grateful affect and gratitude is one of the most common religious feelings that believers in virtually all spiritual traditions are encouraged to develop. When contemplating a positive circumstance that cannot be attributed to intentional human effort, such as a miraculous healing

or the gift of life, spiritually inclined people may still be able to attribute these positive outcomes to a human or non-human agent (viz., God or a higher power) and thus, experience more gratitude. Third, spiritually-inclined people also tend to attribute positive outcomes to God's intervention, but not negative ones.<sup>35-36</sup> As a result, many positive life events that are not due to the actions of another person (e.g., pleasant weather, avoiding an automobile accident) may be perceived as occasions for gratitude to God, although negative events (e.g., a long winter, an automobile accident) would likely *not* be attributed to God. This attributional style then is likely to magnify the positive emotional effects of pleasant life events. Being grateful to a Supreme Being and to other people is an acknowledgment that there are good and enjoyable things in the world to be enjoyed in accordance with the giver's intent. Good things happen by design. If a person believes in the spiritual concept of grace, they believe that there is a pattern of beneficence in the world that exists quite independently of their own striving and even their own existence. Gratitude thus depends upon receiving what we do not expect to receive or have not earned or receiving more than we believe we deserve. This awareness is simultaneously humbling and elevating to those with a spiritual worldview.

*Gratitude promotes physical health.* Some of the benefits of gratitude for mental health may result from gratitude's ability to enhance physical health functioning. A small number of studies have reported physical health benefits of gratitude and these relations have been largely independent of trait negative affect.<sup>37</sup> Gratitude interventions have been shown to reduce bodily complaints, increase sleep duration and efficiency, and promote exercise.<sup>7,19</sup> Experimental research suggests that discrete experiences of gratitude and appreciation may cause increases in parasympathetic myocardial control,<sup>38</sup> lower systolic blood pressure,<sup>39</sup> as well as improvements in more molar aspects of physical health, such as everyday symptoms and physician visits.<sup>7</sup> McCraty and colleagues found that this appreciation increased parasympathetic activity, a change thought to be beneficial in controlling stress and hypertension, as well as "coherence" or entrainment across various autonomic response channels.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, there might be some direct physiological benefits to frequently experiencing grateful emotions. These findings provide a link between positive emotions and increased physiological efficiency, which may partly explain the growing number of correlations documented between positive emotions, improved health, and increased longevity.

*Gratitude maximizes pleasure.* Gratitude maximizes enjoyment of the pleasurable in our lives. A well-established law in the psychology of emo-

tion is the principle of adaptation. People adapt to circumstances, both pleasant and unpleasant. Our emotional systems like newness. Unfortunately for personal happiness, adaptation to pleasant circumstances occurs more rapidly than adaptation to unpleasant life changes. This is why even a major windfall, such as a huge pay raise, tends to impact happiness for only a mere few months. Once the glow fades, we return to the same happiness level we had before. Psychologists call this phenomenon hedonic adaptation. The only thing that can change it and prolong the increase in happiness is gratitude. Gratitude promotes the savoring of positive life experiences and situations, so that the maximum satisfaction and enjoyment is derived from one's circumstances. In helping people not take things for granted, gratitude may recalibrate people's "set points" for happiness—our baseline levels of happiness that appear to be primarily innate, driven by one's genes.

*Gratitude protects against the negative.* Gratitude also mitigates toxic emotions and states. Nothing can destroy happiness more quickly than envy, greed, and resentment. The German moral philosopher, Balduin Schwarz identified the problem when he said "the ungrateful, envious, complaining man...cripples himself. He is focused on what he has not, particularly on that which somebody else has or seems to have, and by that he tends to poison his world."<sup>40</sup> Grateful people tend to be satisfied with what they have, and so, are less susceptible to such emotions as disappointment, regret, and frustration. Moreover, in the context of material prosperity, by maintaining a grateful focus a person may avoid disillusionment and emptiness. The sense of security that characterizes grateful people makes them less susceptible to needing to rely on material accomplishments for a stable sense of self.

*Gratitude strengthens relationships.* Perhaps most important of all is that gratitude strengthens and expands social relationships. It cultivates a person's sense of interconnectedness. An unexpected benefit from gratitude journaling, one that I did not predict in advance, was that people who kept gratitude journals reported feeling closer and more connected to others, were more likely to help others, and were actually seen as more helpful by significant others in their social networks. Gratitude is the "moral memory of mankind" wrote noted sociologist Georg Simmel. One just needs to try to imagine human relationships existing without gratitude. By way of contrast, ingratitude leads inevitably to a confining, restricting, and "shrinking" sense of self. Emotions like anger, resentment, envy, and bitterness tend to undermine happy social relations. But the virtue of gratitude is not only a firewall of protection against such corruption of relationships, it contributes positively to friendship and

civility, because it is both benevolent (wishing the benefactor well) and just (giving the benefactor his due, in a certain special way). We also have evidence that people who are high on dispositional gratitude, the chronic tendency to be aware of blessings in life, have better relationships, are more likely to protect and preserve these relationships, are more securely attached, and are less lonely and isolated. People who have an easier time conjuring up reasons to be grateful are less likely to say that they lack companionship or that no one really knows them well. Our innate longing for belonging is strengthened when we experience and express heartfelt gratitude. Gratitude takes us outside ourselves where we see ourselves as part of a larger, intricate network of sustaining relationships—relationships that are mutually reciprocal.

#### CULTIVATING GRATITUDE

Despite all of the benefits that living a grateful life can bring, gratitude can be hard and painful work. It does not come easily or naturally to many. Grateful states, along with their numerous benefits, remain, for the most part, theoretical concepts, which are transient and unpredictable experiences in the majority of people's lives. The feeling is too often dependent on the ordering of external events, rather than being a basic orientation toward life. People may find it relatively easy to feel happily grateful when life proceeds according to plan—however, people rarely sustain such energizing feelings as a norm in the midst of their ordinary daily lives. It is too easy to shunt aside, overlook, or take for granted the basic gifts of life.

At the other end of the spectrum, a tragedy or crisis can often elicit feelings of grateful relief that the situation did not turn out worse than it might have, or incite feelings of gratitude for escaping a potentially life-threatening event. Research has shown that people often and easily fall prey to old patterns of self-centered, unappreciative thought and action soon after the event has passed. Mitchell<sup>41</sup> identified four contemporary forces contributing to the erosion of gratitude in modern culture: a) increasing secularism and loss of an absolute moral order; b) loss of contact with the natural world; c) loss of a sense of rootedness in a place; and d) a loss of sense of the past. Each of these losses contributes to an overall inability to feel grateful for life's blessings.

Because of numerous obstacles, gratitude, at least initially, requires discipline. So this is the paradox of gratitude: while the evidence is clear that cultivating gratitude, in our life and in our attitude to life, makes us happier and healthier people more attuned to the flow of blessings in our lives, it is

still difficult. Practicing gratitude is easier said than done. A number of evidence-based strategies, including journaling and letter writing, have proven effective in creating sustainable gratefulness. At this point, we can step back to see what general features these strategies share. In many respects, gratitude can be thought of as a mindfulness practice that leads to a greater experience of being connected to life and awareness of all of the benefits available.

One of the first steps is attention. Attention is noticing and becoming aware of blessings that we normally take for granted. It is tuning into the many reasons for gratitude that already exist in our lives. Simultaneously, directing our attention this way in a focused manner blocks thoughts and perceptions that are inimical to gratitude, such as feelings of exaggerated deservingness or perceptions of victimhood. Focusing techniques that enhance attentiveness (such as mindfulness meditation) will be effective in increasing one's appreciation for the simple blessings of life and in banishing incompatible thoughts from consciousness.

Finally, there is remembering. Grateful people draw upon positive memories in which they were the recipients of benevolence. This is why religious traditions are able so effectively to cultivate gratitude—litanies of remembrance encourage gratitude, and religions do litanies very well. The scriptures, sayings, and sacraments of faith traditions inculcate gratefulness by drawing believers into a remembered relationship with a Supreme Being and with the members of their community. There is a French proverb that states that gratitude is the "memory of the heart"—it is the way that the heart remembers. The memory of the heart includes the memory of those we are dependent on, just as the forgetfulness of dependence is an unwillingness or inability to remember the benefits provided by others.

## CONCLUSION

Gratitude is held in high esteem by virtually everyone, at all times, in all places. From ancient religious scriptures through modern social science research, gratitude is upheld as a desirable human characteristic with a capacity for making life better for oneself and for others. Aside from a few harsh words from a small handful of cynics, nearly every thinker has viewed gratitude as a sentiment with virtually no downside. As Comte-Sponville pointed out, gratitude is "the most pleasant of the virtues, and the most virtuous of the pleasures."<sup>42</sup> It is virtuously pleasant because experiencing it not only uplifts the person who experiences it, but it edifies the person to whom it is

directed as well. But the fact that people typically consider gratitude a virtue and not simply a pleasure also points to the fact that it does not always come naturally or easily. Gratitude must, and can, be cultivated—and by cultivating the virtue, it appears that people may get the pleasure of gratitude, and all of its other concomitant benefits, thrown in for free.

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