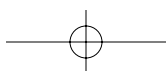
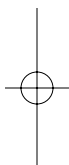
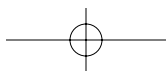
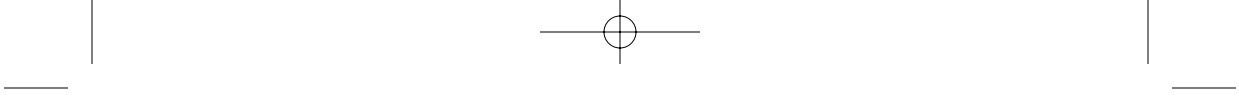




SPIRITUAL PRACTICES *for the* BRAIN





SPIRITUAL PRACTICES *for the* BRAIN



CARING FOR MIND, BODY, AND SOUL

ANNE KERTZ KERNION

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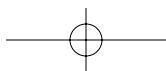
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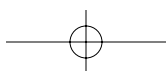
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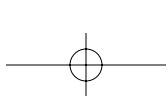
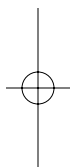
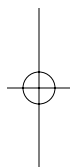
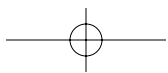
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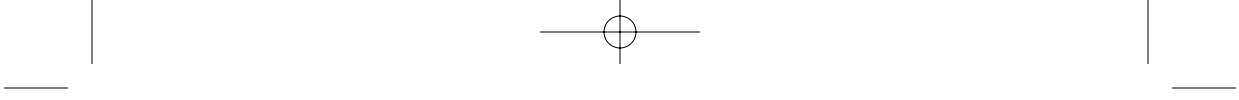






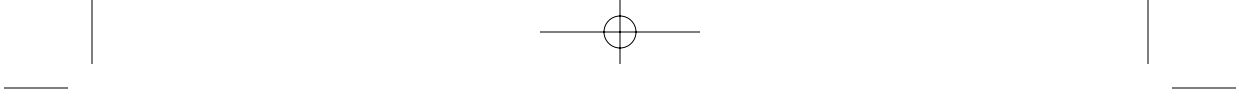
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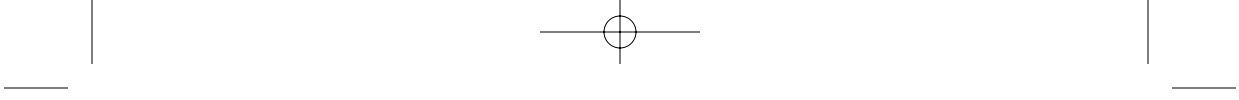


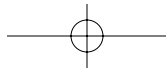
*It isn't more light we need, it's putting into practice
what light we already have. When we do that,
wonderful things will happen within our lives and
within our world.*

—Peace Pilgrim



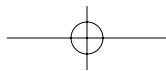
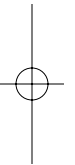
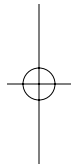
*Spirituality is the story of our passionate affair with
what is deepest inside us and with the candle that's
always flickering inside us and sometimes almost
seems to go out and sometimes blazes. And religion is
the community, the framework, the tradition, all the
other people into which we bring what we find in
solitude.*

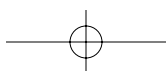
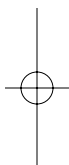
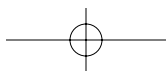


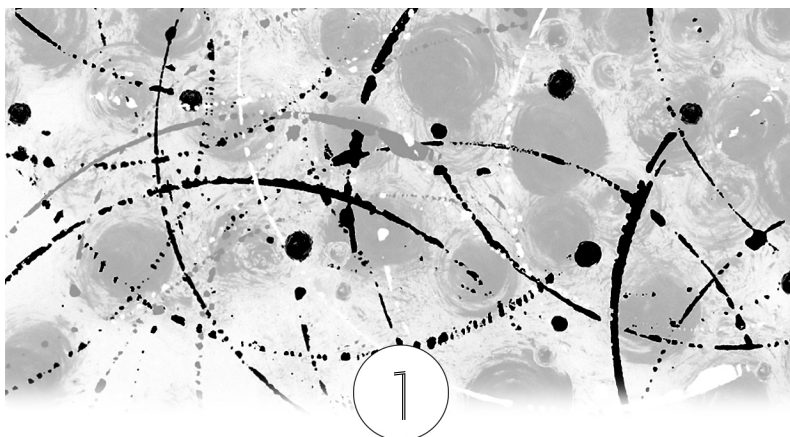


Introduction

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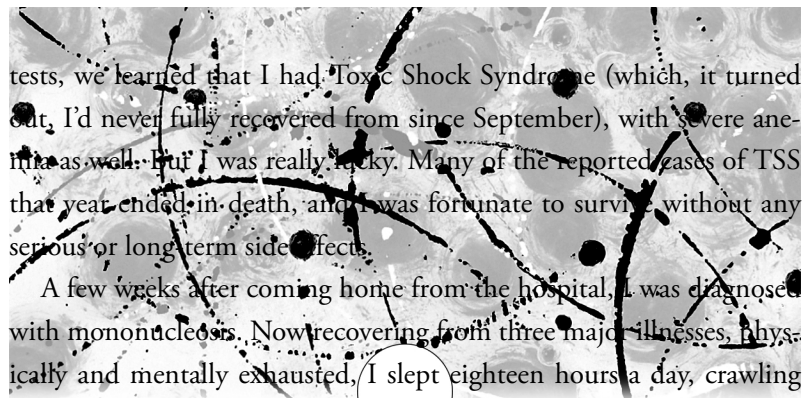
Living with Gratitude

*It is not joy that makes us grateful. It is gratitude that
makes us joyful.*

—Brother David Steindl-Rast

I graduated from Penn State in March of 1981 without any idea how sick I was. My daily runs had been labored since September, after I fainted on the ramp going into the opening day football game. The next day, my fever was so high that my alarmed roommate, Teri, insisted I go to the student infirmary. A week of observation and tests turned up nothing unusual, so they sent me home. I still remember that painfully slow walk back to my apartment, so weak that each step took every ounce of concentration. After finally reaching my apartment, I climbed back into bed and rested for several more days. I regained enough energy to begin attending my final engineering classes, where senior-level coursework would pile up quickly. I eventually got back into a groove of sorts, but never shook the exhaustion. I just chalked it up to lingering effects of whatever mysterious illness I had contracted.

Soon after returning to St. Louis after graduation, I fainted in my parents' kitchen while fetching a glass of water at midnight. After being rushed to a nearby hospital, and having several rounds of blood



tests, we learned that I had Toxic Shock Syndrome (which, it turned out, I'd never fully recovered from since September), with severe anemia as well. But I was really lucky. Many of the reported cases of TSS that year ended in death, and I was fortunate to survive without any serious or long-term side effects.

A few weeks after coming home from the hospital, I was diagnosed with mononucleosis. Now recovering from three major illnesses, physically and mentally exhausted, I slept eighteen hours a day, crawling out of bed every afternoon to eat a small meal and visit with family and friends. The healing process took months, and I vowed that if I ever made a full recovery, I would take good care of my body and never, ever take my health for granted.

Before this episode, I'd never thought about being grateful for disease-free days. But for a long time after recovery, I counted my blessings every single day. Although I'd had the typical childhood diseases and sports injuries, I'd sprung back quickly, never convalescing for more than a week or two. The tenuous nature of life was front and center, particularly after reading about other young women who hadn't survived Toxic Shock. These illnesses made me so much more aware of life's gifts. Internalizing how close I'd come to dying brought everything into focus.

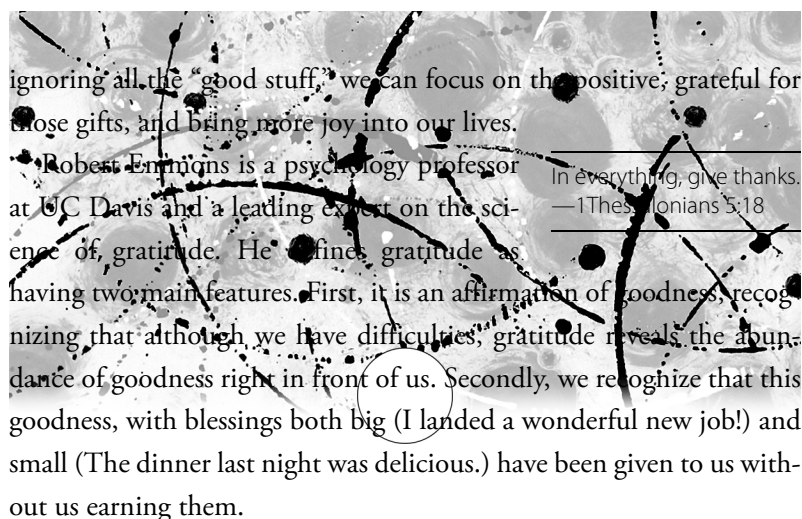
Although I hadn't read those words yet, he encapsulates what I began to understand so deeply all those years ago: we are miraculously here, a part of something, and life is a privilege.

Gratitude is the understanding that many millions of things come together and live together and mesh together and breathe together in order for us to take even one more breath of air, that the underlying gift of life and incarnation as a living, participating human being is a privilege; that we are miraculously part of something rather than nothing. Even if that something is temporarily pain or despair, we inhabit a living world, with real faces, real voices, laughter, the color blue, the green of the fields, the freshness of a cold wind, or the tawny hue of a winter landscape.

—David Whyte

Practice: Ponder a few of the ordinary gifts you take for granted: your family, health, or friends, house, job, food, etc. Maybe write one or more on a piece of paper or post-it note. Imagine what life would be like without just one of them. Take a moment to acknowledge your thankfulness. Breathe in gratitude.

Why isn't gratitude second nature to all of us? One reason, as noted earlier, is that our ancestors' brains developed to survive. Their brains were, and now ours are, exceedingly good at finding and holding on to any information that could spell trouble. The practice of gratefulness can help thwart this tendency. Instead of focusing on problems and



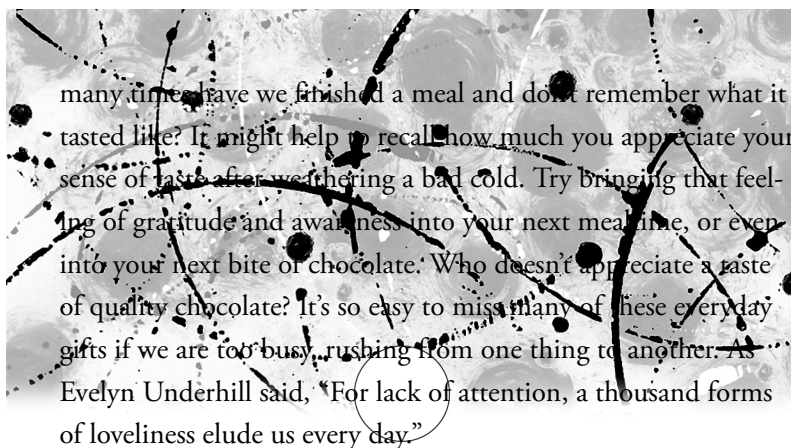
ignoring all the “good stuff,” we can focus on the positive, grateful for those gifts, and bring more joy into our lives.

• **Robert Emmons** is a psychology professor at UC Davis and a leading expert on the science of gratitude. He defines gratitude as having two main features. First, it is an affirmation of goodness, recognizing that although we have difficulties, gratitude reveals the abundance of goodness right in front of us. Secondly, we recognize that this goodness, with blessings both big (I landed a wonderful new job!) and small (The dinner last night was delicious.) have been given to us without us earning them.

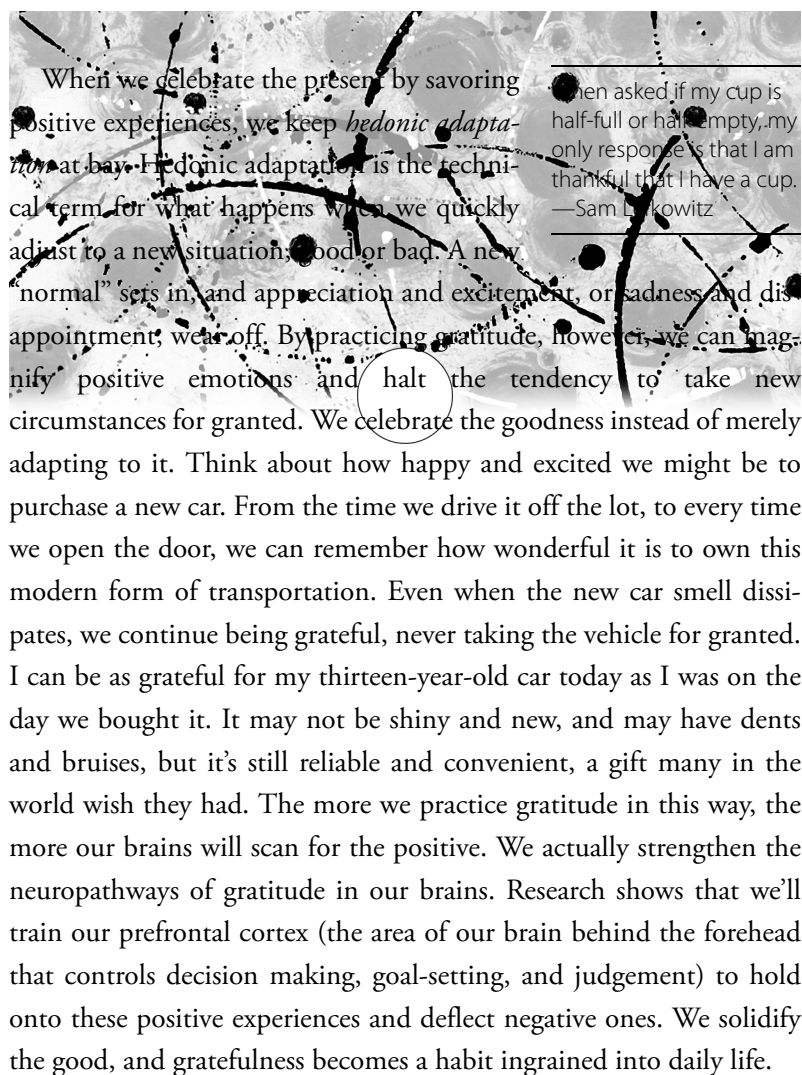
In everything, give thanks.
—1 Thessalonians 5:18

The key to fostering an attitude of gratitude is to practice it regularly. I’ll share some research-based suggestions to help you get started.

1. **Keep a gratitude journal.** Recall all the gifts that have come your way. It’s fun to read it later and savor those moments once again. Don’t feel that you need to write every day. Instead, try jotting down three things you’re grateful for every Sunday. That way, you’ll be on the lookout for gifts throughout the week but won’t feel the burden of recording them daily.
2. **Seek out prayers of gratitude.** They are powerful sources of inspiration.
3. **Use your senses—taste, sight, touch, smell, and sound—to appreciate the miracle of being alive.** You might want to choose one sense each day, or one each week, and focus on the gifts you experience through that particular lens. To nurture my sense of smell, I add a few drops of essential oil to a cotton ball and place it in my workspace or my hotel room. I take a few deep breaths once in awhile to enjoy the natural scents. We also have daily opportunities to bring our attention to taste. How



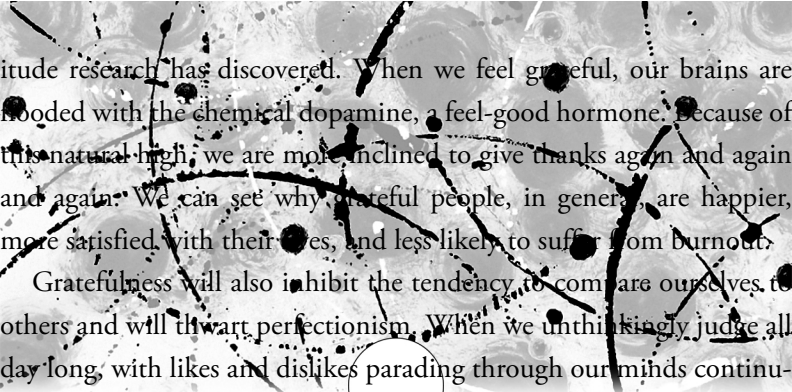
4. **Set up visual reminders.** I place rocks and stones from our travels in every room to remind myself to be grateful, not only for the vacation spots, but also for the variety and beauty of rock formations on earth. Posting gratitude quotes on your computer or bathroom mirror is another option, or display pictures of places and people who are especially dear to you. A simple plaque in my office, a gift from my coworkers, says, "Begin each day with a grateful heart." It's a great reminder at the beginning of each workday.
5. **Smile, look people in the eye, and say thank you.** Write thank-you notes and letters. Seize every opportunity to express your gratitude to others. This practice will bring joy to you, appreciation to others, and the effects can ripple out to many more.
6. **Create a gratitude jar.** Take a few moments every day, or just a few times each week, to write down the blessings that have come your way. They can be big or small. If you have a family, bring everyone into the act. Children who cannot write yet can draw a picture of something they are thankful for. Read the notes at a family dinner to spread an "attitude of gratitude" to all those around the table.



When we celebrate the present by savoring positive experiences, we keep *hedonic adaptation* at bay. Hedonic adaptation is the technical term for what happens when we quickly adjust to a new situation, good or bad. A new “normal” sets in, and appreciation and excitement, or sadness and disappointment, wear off. By practicing gratitude, however, we can magnify positive emotions and halt the tendency to take new circumstances for granted. We celebrate the goodness instead of merely adapting to it. Think about how happy and excited we might be to purchase a new car. From the time we drive it off the lot, to every time we open the door, we can remember how wonderful it is to own this modern form of transportation. Even when the new car smell dissipates, we continue being grateful, never taking the vehicle for granted. I can be as grateful for my thirteen-year-old car today as I was on the day we bought it. It may not be shiny and new, and may have dents and bruises, but it’s still reliable and convenient, a gift many in the world wish they had. The more we practice gratitude in this way, the more our brains will scan for the positive. We actually strengthen the neuropathways of gratitude in our brains. Research shows that we’ll train our prefrontal cortex (the area of our brain behind the forehead that controls decision making, goal-setting, and judgement) to hold onto these positive experiences and deflect negative ones. We solidify the good, and gratefulness becomes a habit ingrained into daily life.

By focusing on the positive in this way, we keep negative emotions like envy, resentment, and regret at bay—emotions that can destroy our happiness. Several recent studies show that gratitude can be effective even in treating depression. A 2009 National Institutes of Health (NIH) study showed that the hypothalamus is activated when we feel gratitude. It is also addictive—another one of the benefits that grat-

When asked if my cup is half-full or half-empty, my only response is that I am thankful that I have a cup.
—Sam LeKowitz

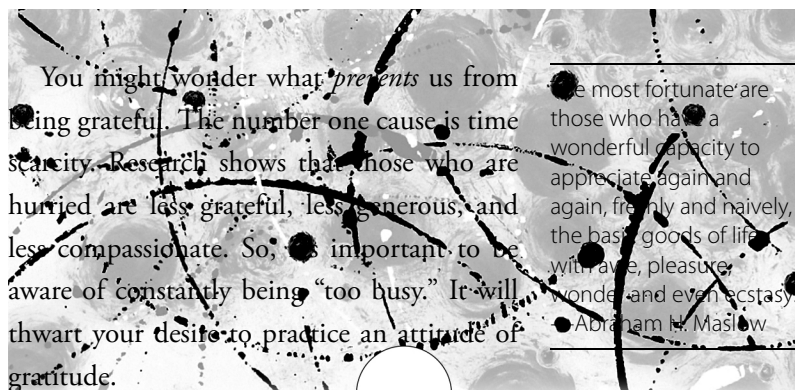


itude research has discovered. When we feel grateful, our brains are flooded with the chemical dopamine, a feel-good hormone. Because of this natural high, we are more inclined to give thanks again and again and again. We can see why grateful people, in general, are happier, more satisfied with their lives, and less likely to suffer from burnout.

Gratefulness will also inhibit the tendency to compare ourselves to others and will thwart perfectionism. When we unthinkingly judge all day long, with likes and dislikes parading through our minds continuously, our relationships suffer. A judgmental attitude helped our ancestors navigate the wild, as they evaluated what would help them stay alive and what might kill them. But constantly judging and critiquing is not beneficial to our well-being in the modern world. On the contrary, it ramps up our stress levels and creates separation from others.

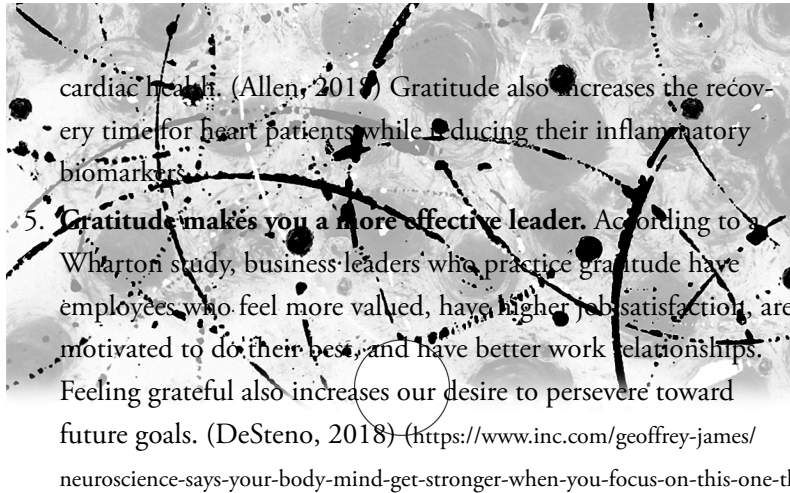
Gratitude helps us become more resistant to stressors. Research concludes that if we have a grateful outlook, then we'll recover more quickly from difficult life events and we'll lessen our anxiety. "Cultivating appreciation and other positive emotions showed lower levels of stress hormones, [specifically] a 23 percent reduction in cortisol and 100 percent increase in DHEA/DHEAS levels." (Study published by National Center for Biotechnology Information.) (Dehydroepiandrosterone, or DHEA, helps produce other hormones.) Interestingly, another study found that subjects' heart rates and amygdala activity decreased after gratitude interventions, (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28698643>) meaning that emotional regulation improved.

Grateful people also have a higher sense of self-worth. We can notice and thank all the people who are looking out for us, who have helped us get to where we are today. And that makes us feel loved and good about ourselves.



Let's look at some other mental and physical effects of gratitude.

1. **Gratitude makes you more likely to exercise.** According to the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, people who keep gratitude journals "reported fewer health complaints, spent more time exercising, and had fewer symptoms of physical illness."
2. **Gratitude improves the quality of your sleep.** According to a study conducted at the University of Manchester and published in the Journal of Psychosomatic Research, regularly focusing on gratitude and thankfulness "improved quality of sleep and [resulted in] longer sleep hours."
3. **Gratitude increases your emotional well-being.** According to studies published in the Journal of Research in Personality, gratitude leads to lower depression and higher levels of social support while making you less likely to consider suicide.
4. **Gratitude makes your heart stronger and healthier.** Research conducted at Massachusetts General Hospital found that the presence of gratitude in a patient "may independently predict superior cardiovascular health." Other researchers find that a regular gratitude practice helps lower inflammation and blood pressure, producing calm by activating the parasympathetic system, increasing resilience to disease and trauma, and helping maintain



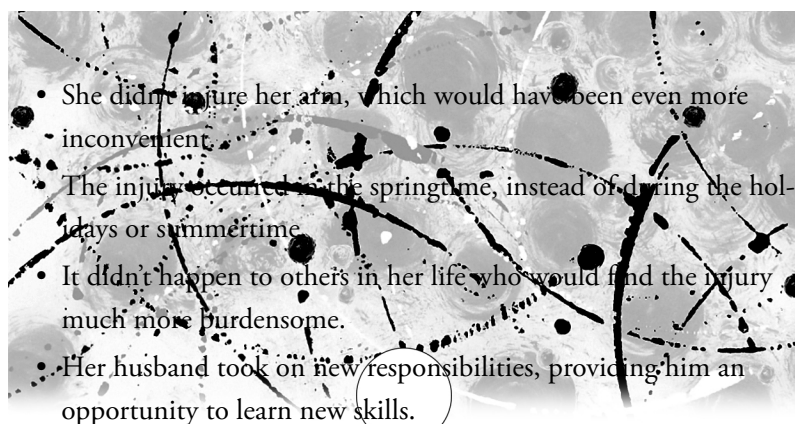
cardiac health. (Allen, 2019) Gratitude also increases the recovery time for heart patients while reducing their inflammatory biomarkers.

5. **Gratitude makes you a more effective leader.** According to a Wharton study, business leaders who practice gratitude have employees who feel more valued, have higher job satisfaction, are motivated to do their best, and have better work relationships. Feeling grateful also increases our desire to persevere toward future goals. (DeSteno, 2018) (<https://www.inc.com/geoffrey-james/neuroscience-says-your-body-mind-get-stronger-when-you-focus-on-this-one-thingdraft-1562273865.html>)

Tap into gratitude all day simply by asking yourself, "What can I feel grateful for right now, right here?" Brother David Steindl-Rast, the renowned teacher of Gratefulness, recommends using the alphabet to help you count your blessings: Start with the letter "A", and try to name as many things you're grateful for that begin with that letter. Work your way through the alphabet. It may take you twenty-six days, but your gratitude well will be full!

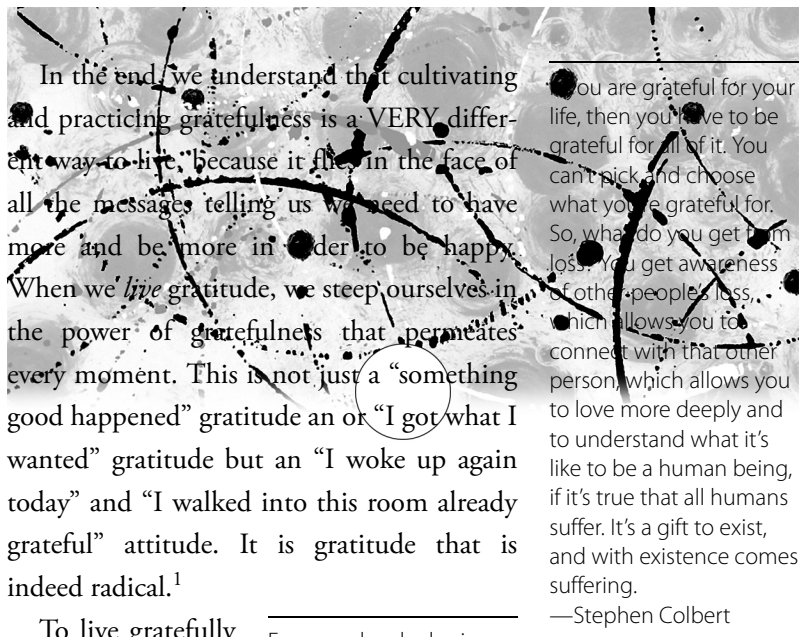
It is especially helpful to practice gratitude when difficulties arise. My co-worker and friend Marianne broke her foot last year. It was one of those "don't ask me how it happened" sort of accidents, ie, hanging curtains in her dining room. Instead of moping around, bemoaning the loss of six weeks of driving, walking, and exercise, she began counting all the ways she was grateful:

- She was able to continue performing her work duties.
- Her neighbors and friends were happy to drive her to appointments and errands, and she was glad to spend some extra time with them.



Marianne is a textbook case in how to stave off the blues when things don't go as planned. She is finding things to be grateful *for in* her situation, although she's not grateful *for* her situation. Her "attitude of gratitude" illustrates how this spiritual practice buffered against the stress and negativity her situation might have caused. She was able to count her blessings instead of tallying what went wrong.

Each of us gets knocked around by life now and again, so it's helpful to remember that practicing gratitude can help us cope, while also supporting our physical, mental, and spiritual health. Steeped in the power of gratitude, we can be thankful that we simply woke up this morning. This kind of gratitude transforms us, and we then live from a deep well of thanksgiving that will never run dry.



In the end, we understand that cultivating and practicing gratefulness is a VERY different way to live, because it flies in the face of all the messages telling us we need to have more and be more in order to be happy. When we *live* gratitude, we steep ourselves in the power of gratefulness that permeates every moment. This is not just a “something good happened” gratitude or “I got what I wanted” gratitude but an “I woke up again today” and “I walked into this room already grateful” attitude. It is gratitude that is indeed radical.¹

To live gratefully is to live as if nothing is promised us.

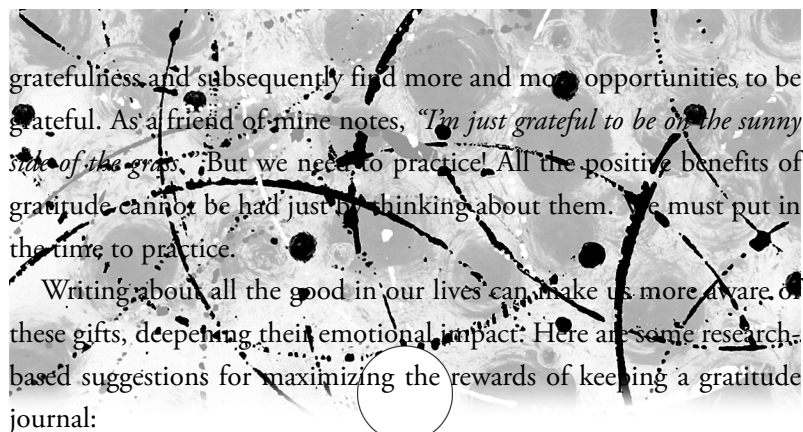
For me, a lovely day is any day I wake up.
—Bernie Siegel

We cultivate an

appreciation of the ordinary, marveling at this amazing world of ours, and we experience it as truly extraordinary. We can open our eyes to the wonders around us and notice beauty at every turn: the veins in a leaf, the twinkle in the eyes of a child, clear blue skies, the stars at night, a budding tree in the springtime. We draw hot water out of a faucet, have a roof and four walls and machines that automatically wash and dry our clothes. I often think of the refugees in the world who carry water over long distances, cook over an open fire, scrub clothes in a river, and then drape them over rocks, walls, and tree branches to dry. What they would give to have ordinary household amenities like ours! When we begin noticing these everyday gifts, perhaps even writing them down in a gratitude journal, we begin seeing more of them. We’re expanding those neural pathways associated with

You are grateful for your life, then you have to be grateful for all of it. You can’t pick and choose what you’re grateful for. So, what do you get from loss? You get awareness of other people’s loss, which allows you to connect with that other person, which allows you to love more deeply and to understand what it’s like to be a human being, if it’s true that all humans suffer. It’s a gift to exist, and with existence comes suffering.

—Stephen Colbert



gratefulness and subsequently find more and more opportunities to be grateful. As a friend of mine notes, *"I'm just grateful to be on the sunny side of the grass."* But we need to practice! All the positive benefits of gratitude cannot be had just by thinking about them. We must put in the time to practice.

Writing about all the good in our lives can make us more aware of these gifts, deepening their emotional impact. Here are some research-based suggestions for maximizing the rewards of keeping a gratitude journal:

Don't just go through the motions. Research suggests that journaling is more effective if you first make the conscious decision to become happier and more grateful. (Lyubomirsky, 2008)

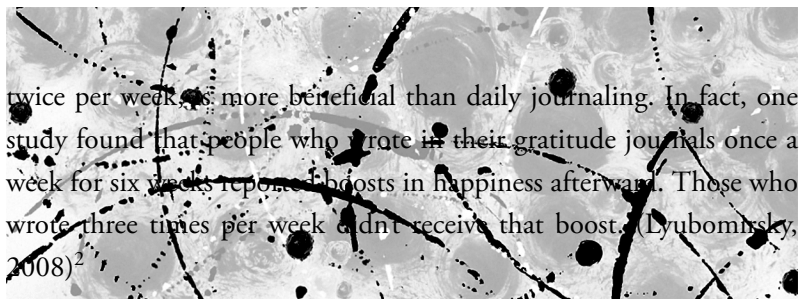
Perhaps ponder each day as though it is the first day of your life, or the very last day of your life. If you do this, Brother David says, you will have spent the day very well.

Go for depth over breadth. Elaborating in detail carries more benefits than a superficial list of many things.

Get personal. Focus on people to whom you are grateful instead of on things. Try subtraction, not just addition. One effective way of stimulating gratitude is to reflect on what your life would be like *without* certain blessings, rather than just tallying up all those good things. While cleaning out the garage recently, I found a box filled with letters my husband and I wrote while we lived apart. What would my life be without Jack over the past thirty-eight years? That question alone brought a wave of gratitude.

Savor surprises. Record unexpected or surprising events, as these tend to elicit stronger levels of gratitude.

Don't overdo it. We can become numb to the novelty and benefits if we write more frequently. Jotting grateful notes occasionally, once or



twice per week is more beneficial than daily journaling. In fact, one study found that people who wrote in their gratitude journals once a week for six weeks reported boosts in happiness afterward. Those who wrote three times per week didn't receive that boost. (Lyubomirsky, 2008)²

Last spring, my newly painted office was crying out for some semblance of order. A few decades' worth of books sat in piles on the floor, a visual reminder of the many eras in my life. I certainly didn't need every volume in front of me. I took the opportunity to thoughtfully reshelve only what was essential. ("Essential" being used very loosely here.) I pondered each book's future usefulness, retrieving any bookmarks and old letters tucked inside. When I came across a card or

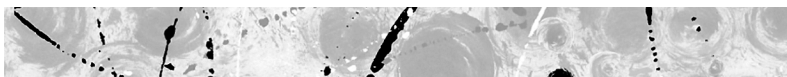
letter, I took a few moments to read it and recall the author's gift to my life. These little gems, tucked away long ago, transformed a painful project into a delightful chore. This undertaking became a meditation on the many good souls who have graced my journey, generating within me a sense of deep gratitude.

The power of a handwritten note is immeasurable. I treasure these cards, written in a variety of longhand styles, holding thoughtful sentiments from family, friends, coworkers, mentors, and customers. The books may go, but the letters will stay, reminders of the love that has carried me through the years.

Can you see the holiness in those things you take for granted – a paved road or a washing machine? If you concentrate on finding what is good in every situation, you will discover that your life will suddenly be filled with gratitude, a feeling that nurtures the soul.

—Rabbi Harold Kushner

Ponder all the people who have contributed to who and where you are today. Bring to mind relatives and ancestors who made sacrifices and



endured hardships, who perhaps moved to a foreign land. Their courage, strength, and spirit provide you, today, with opportunities you would not have had otherwise. Although we will never meet them in person, we can feel connected to them, experiencing deep appreciation for their lives and vision.

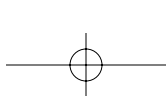
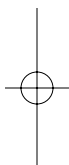
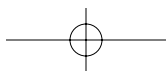
Next, bring into focus all the teachers, mentors, and friends who have impacted your life and taught you how to live and love. Their time, example, and simple presence have influenced us in countless ways. Hold them in your heart, and if some are still with us, consider writing a note of gratitude to them. Be specific and add as much detail as possible, thanking the person for all they have given you. This exercise helps us become more deeply aware of how interconnected we are to one another.

My predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved. I have been given much and I have given something in return. Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.
—Oliver Sacks, *Gratitude*



Acknowledgments

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Placeholder.



Endnotes

1. Allen, Summer, *The Science of Gratitude White Paper*, Greater Good Science Center, May, 2018, ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-JTF_White_Paper-Gratitude-FINAL.pdf.
2. (Lyubomirsky, S. (2008). *The how of happiness: A scientific approach to getting the life you want*. New York, NY, US: Penguin Press.)



About the Author

Author blurb here.

