

# Cultivating Gratitude

Robert Emmons, professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, is one of the foremost authorities on the topic of gratitude in North America. He is the author of more than sixty research articles and two books, **Words of Gratitude: For Mind, Body & Soul** (Templeton Foundation Press 2001 — co-authored with Joanna Hill) and, **The Psychology of Gratitude** (Oxford University Press, 2004). He has been studying what makes people happy for nearly twenty years and in this interview, conducted by *Thirty Thousand Days* Ass't Editor Trudy Boyle, Emmons reveals some of his conclusions about the practice and importance of cultivating gratitude.

**TB: Professor Emmons, how did you actually get interested in the subject of gratitude?**

RE: Well, actually it came about as somewhat of a fortuitous accident. I was invited to this conference in 1998, and the conference was on virtues — those



traits of character that philosophies and religions have considered important for centuries, but psychologists really hadn't studied very much. Some examples are wisdom, hope, love, forgiveness, humility, and gratitude. So each of the people attending this conference were assigned a particular virtue to become the expert on, and to review all the literature and present a one hour talk on what's known about it and how psychology might advance knowledge of that particular virtue.

I was asked to study gratitude. I had studied happiness in graduate school and gratitude has often been seen as one route to happiness — by becoming more grateful and counting your blessings and so forth. I said "sure I'll do it," and it is probably one of the most interesting things I've ever studied.

**TB: In your research do you find that some people are, by nature, grateful? And, if so, have you discovered anything that you think makes that difference?**

RE: There's a whole cluster of related characteristics that seem to go together — things like optimism, hope, gratitude, and happiness. Some of this, I would guess, is genetically determined. Some of it is

going to be based upon early life experiences and positive relationships with other people. *Very little of it, interestingly, seems to depend upon circumstances or life examples.* So there are just these ways of framing life experiences that transcend good or bad things that are happening to a person. There's a cluster of positive characteristics and then there's another set of characteristics which block those positive characteristics. A sense of entitlement, or deservingness, is something that's going to block this recognition that other people are partly responsible for the good things that happen to us. When I take all the credit for the good things that happen to me it's going to be hard to feel a sense of indebtedness or sense of gratefulness in life.

**TB: What would you consider to be a common, but incorrect assumption about your work?**

RE: Sometimes there's an assumption that if one is grateful then almost by definition one is less autonomous or less self motivated. That gratitude leads to complacency, you know, accepting one's situation no matter what it is (unhealthy, abusive, etc) and not doing anything about it. I've never seen a case where that's happened. We don't find evidence of that passivity in the research.

**TB: I'm interested in practices that will help instill a sense of gratitude in people. Have you found any practices that will help shift a person's perspective to be more appreciative?**

RE: What we do in our research is have people keep gratitude journals on a regular, daily basis. This process of writing, just putting it on paper, helps people focus, and people report that it helps them to think about things a little differently than they had before. People start to think about things in their lives as benefits or as gifts that are given to them, and not necessarily things they have earned or deserved.

**TB: One thing I do when I introduce Naikan to people, is to make a distinction between a gratitude journal and noticing the ways that we're supported whether we're grateful or not.**

RE: That's right. We have tried to get people thinking along the lines of *specific* others, and *specific* events. In other words the source, and what that person, or it could be God for instance, has provided to you. Otherwise the gratitude journal could just be a happiness journal – stuff people feel good about, not necessarily specific things they've been given by other people.

**TB: You included Naikan in your book as a practice to cultivate gratitude. How did you discover Naikan?**

RE: Well I was interested in trying to understand why the practice of gratitude was not represented in any sort of formal psychotherapy. And so I just started doing some searches and came across Naikan as a therapy developed in Japan that had gratitude as well as guilt at its core.

**TB: Would you say that the kind of guilt that Naikan may stimulate is a healthy guilt?**

RE: Absolutely – a beneficial guilt. Psychologists tend to have a negative spin on guilt, you know. You shouldn't have guilt, it's debilitating and so forth. But it can be very restorative as well.

**TB: What has changed in the last 50 years as we've become a more secular and richer society?**

RE: I think of gratefulness as really anchored in spirituality. And so a secular perspective is going to tend to erode that sense of gratefulness. Also, with increasing expectations and material comfort one tends to be less reflective. It goes with the territory, and it makes it difficult to spend the time to acknowledge where things come from and the people to whom one is indebted.

**TB: Do you have any recommendations that you give to parents or teachers who want to help instill a sense of gratitude in children?**

RE: I think practices that people have known about for a long time are the ones that are going to work. Like being a role model, expressing gratefulness oneself as a parent, writing thank you letters to relatives and teachers and who have provided benefits. Very concrete things, like gratitude prayers within one's tradition at mealtime and bedtime – very concrete.

**TB: Are you continuing on with your research on gratitude?**

RE: We are. We are trying to look at some of the consequences of gratefulness. Most of the work I've done I've looked at the personal benefits in terms of happiness, and health benefits. We're going to start a study where we look at married couples and see if gratefulness or keeping a gratitude journal impacts on the marital relationship — marital quality.

**TB: What do you consider to be the merit of selflessness? When you think about people like Schweitzer, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, or others who really gave themselves away. They really led a selfless life, for the benefit of other people.**

RE: In the cases of Mother Teresa and others that are talked about in the literature, one of the qualities that tend to motivate them is gratitude. They don't seem to fit the usual conception of gratitude where you see a benefit and then you're grateful. *They felt grateful for the opportunity to help, as opposed to receiving help.* They knew there was some benefit for them in developing compassion or whatever it was, and so they didn't need to receive gratefulness from the people they helped. I think what enabled them to persist under stressful circumstances is just the ability to be helpful, which created in them a sense of gratitude, a sense of purpose, that they wouldn't otherwise have had.

**TB: Is there anything else that you would like to add?**

RE: I think it's important to stress that gratitude is really a choice. It doesn't depend upon circumstances or genetic wiring or something that we don't have control over. It really becomes an attitude that we can choose that makes life better for ourselves and for other people. I think about it as the best approach to life and I gave a talk this past summer where the title was, "Gratitude Is the Best Approach To Life." At the time that it seemed a little presumptuous, but the more I think about it, I really think the title is true. When things go well gratitude enables us to savor things going well. When things go poorly gratitude enables us to get over those situations and to realize they are temporary.

**TB : I think that's a great title for your next book.**

RE: I'll use it.