

Revamping Gratitude

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Illustration by Laura Lavigne

Gratitude. Grateful. Thankful.

What immediately comes to mind when you hear these words? If you immediately think of Thanksgiving, you are among the majority. Most people associate being thankful with one of the main holidays celebrated during the year. Why do we do this? Our society has engrained such an emphasis on appreciation at these times. Sadly, the result is that gratitude is less thought of as a daily experience. My hope is to change this mindset from this once-a-year frame of mind to a day-to-day one.

I would like to think I have been on this long journey of understanding gratitude during my years. I like to relate my experiences to the song *Don't Stop Believin'*. Besides the fact that Journey is amazing, this song ties in perfectly with the theme of gratitude. It addresses concepts such as hope and love. Most importantly, it talks about moving on from your past, knowing that tomorrow will be a better day. In essence, it talks about being *optimistic*. This is HUGE with regards to gratitude. As you will see, this source of optimism has been the basis of my journey to becoming a more grateful individual.

But what *really* is gratitude? For a word whose etymology dates back to the 1560s Latin word "gratus", one would think we should have a really good grasp on its meaning. It has been engrained in our heads since a young age. Our parents spent a decent amount of time forcing us to say "please" and "thank you" while we were young because being

thankful was the polite thing to do. We complied and said those words so we could run along and play with our friends and toys. The meaning was oftentimes *forgotten*.

Not only has the meaning been lost, it has also been wrongly associated. For instance, have you ever heard someone say, “You should be grateful for what you have, things could be worse”? I can almost guarantee you have. Although it makes sense that yes, we should be appreciative of our lifestyle and health and relationships, why do we put such emphasis on gratitude in the face of misfortune? Now there’s some food for thought.

I should confess that when I think of gratitude, I immediately hone in on one event from my childhood. Also, this is probably a good time to mention that I discovered gratitude through this event as a result of misfortune. So, you can see that I am not exempt from these questions I am posing before you. In fact, it is because I have had these same misconceptions about gratitude that I have learned *why* it is important to push past them and become a grateful spirit on a daily basis.

Growing up, I was very stubborn. Most people would still consider me to be this way. I’m the type of person who gets a thought in her head and wants to stick with it until its fruition. But, I’m not always right. (Now don’t go telling people that - that’s our little secret). This was especially the case when I was in elementary school.

“Dad, but I don’t want to!” became my go-to phrase during fifth grade. It probably would have been a great catch phrase for a sitcom, starring myself. I can picture myself similar to Stephanie Tanner from *Full House*, a little girl who always has a sassy remark. The only difference would be the plot twist in my story.

As per usual, I said that phrase to my Dad early on a Saturday morning. It was a perfect April day. The sun was bright and my best friend, Meredith, was waiting for me in the driveway. It was the first nice day of spring and we were excited to test our electric scooters we had gotten for Christmas. Mind you, these were not just *any* electric scooters. These were the ones that have seats and go fairly fast. Very cool.

But the issue was safety. My Dad heard that someone had died recently on a similar type of scooter as a result of not wearing a helmet. I simply did not want to hear it since wearing a helmet was “not cool at all, Dad.” After much disagreement, I stomped off with my helmet in tow, strapped it on, and hit the open road with my friend.

Most of the beginning of the ride was spent complaining about my Dad. I mean how un-cool, right? But as the day progressed, the hard feelings were soon forgotten and the two of us were laughing and trying new things with our scooters. Now, I don’t know if you have ever had the experience of time moving in slow motion when something bad happens, but the next few seconds seemed like the longest seconds of my life.

Preoccupied with our giggling, we didn’t notice the patch of gravel in front of us until our tires swerved and our scooters collided. I flew and hit my head on the edge of the driveway; my friend fell backwards from her scooter. She was upset and went home

wailing while I was fretting about making sure she was okay. At the time, I was completely oblivious to the fact that my helmet had cracked and my body was bloody.

Viewing this event now, I would be crazy to say that I am not grateful for my Dad's advice. His genuine concern for my well being essentially saved my life that day. I am also extremely thankful for my friendship with Meredith. Most importantly, I am appreciative for my good health and for hers, also.

As I mentioned before, I *have* been guilty of not being a grateful spirit. The accident is a clear example of this. Experiences like this one, and others involving family and friends, have taught me the importance of being grateful. As humans, we need to be more reflective, more appreciative of what is going on around us. This positive thinking in our daily lives has many benefits, as discussed by Susan Jurgelski in the *Sunday News*. She said: "Researchers are finding that the benefits of positive thinking are far-reaching, not only enhancing mental and physical health and disease immunity, but also making it easier to weather life's storms and build relationships." In reading this, my first thought was "Well, how closely associated is positive thinking (optimism) with gratitude?"

Optimism is closely linked with being grateful since both of these help people keep things in perspective. For instance, you could be like "Freshman-year Amanda" (me): overwhelmed with the change from high school to Honors College classes, extremely homesick, and struggling to find fitting extracurricular activities. Or, you could be like "Junior-year Amanda" who has now taken a Health and Fitness class that focused greatly on being grateful, takes her challenging Ross classes step-by-step, is happy with her roommates, and is almost spreading herself too thin with extracurricular activities since there is so much she enjoys doing.

If you didn't get the general consensus, "Junior-year Amanda" is MUCH happier. What is the key to this increased happiness? I have learned to put things in **perspective** and be grateful for what I have going for me in the present. Not only is this optimistic tendency important to me, I have noticed that it has rubbed off on those close to me. They comment on how happy I am and I see them picking up little habits here and there. For instance, if I don't do as well on something as I would've liked, I use that as motivation to knock the next assignment out of the park.

So, as a result of being more positive, you not only benefit your health, but also those you care about. As mentioned in an article on *Psychology Today* by Sherrie Carter, "Simply put, when you hang out with happy people, you tend to feel happier, have more energy, and feel less stressed." Establishing optimistic tendencies doesn't need to happen overnight. This is all part of building healthy relationships. Which, if you're like me, is crucial during your college years.

Grateful thinking doesn't have to focus solely on the good in life, either. Sounds counterintuitive, right? Believe me, it isn't. It is important to also look at regrets. Overcoming these negative thoughts helps us view these situations in a better light. In a past Health and Fitness class I took, I wrote letters to people I may have hurt. This was

simply a way to get my words out; I did not send them. But, it was through this exercise that I was able to reflect on the good times and *move on*. These were not written with the intent of apologizing or saying what I did was wrong. It was purely a way of forgiving myself.

Quite surprisingly, forgiveness is a huge part of being a grateful spirit. One cannot hold a grudge and be appreciative. As much as we multitask in our daily lives, this is not one of the instances where we can take a shortcut and say, “Hey! I am still mad at you and will never get over it...but on the bright side I appreciate you.” Sorry to disappoint. In fact, as mentioned on page 339 in *Chapter 15: The Healing Power of Spirituality, Faith, and Religion*, “When we blame others for our misery, thus giving up responsibility, we give away our power and self-control. Forgiveness lets go of the damaging blame.”

Simply stated: forgiveness is *not* a way of excusing bad behavior; it is simply a way of *coming to terms with life*. Which is what gratitude is all about!

Gratitude is also a way of learning how to be selfless. This is reflected by the altruistic mentality that generally dominates those who are appreciative individuals. A perfect example of this is John D. Rockefeller. Besides having an incredible mustache, he is well known as being the world’s first billionaire. Pretty cool, right?

What many are unaware of, though, is that he suffered heavily from insomnia. Not only did he suffer from insomnia, he was also losing hair and had digestion issues. The source of his issues: being a *cynical man*. In his pursuit of riches, he had left many people in the dust; he was very egocentric. He received hate mail, and even had to hire bodyguards to protect him from his enemies. As a result, this emotional trauma ended up impacting his health. In fact, he suffered so heavily from these ailments that he was told at one point he would most likely only live a year more.

So, what did he do?

He changed his mindset and became more grateful. He thought of others by using his wealth for their benefit. The Rockefeller Foundation, the General Education Board, and the Rockefeller Institute of Medical Research are a few of the many philanthropic avenues he pursued. As a result of this philanthropy, he became healthier, mentally and physically. As stated on page 357 in *Chapter 16: The Healing Power of Altruism*, “He kept on giving and caring for others, in fact, until he died at the age of ninety eight.” For a man who was told he would die in a year, this is quite remarkable.

Now, I’m not saying that gratitude is your one-way ticket to eternal youth and longevity. But, the health benefits of it definitely help. Being grateful, optimistic, altruistic, and forgiving (all words I closely associate), help you to live a healthier and more fulfilling life. Establishing this type of life should start now. Beginning these grateful habits at a younger age is the best time to do so because they are just that: *habits*. As mentioned by James Clear in an article on the Huffington Post, “On average, it takes more than two months before a new behavior becomes automatic -- 66 days to be exact.” He goes on to

say that learning these habits is a *process*; this is why incorporating them as early as possible is key. College, in particular, is the perfect time for this. With more practice, these habits will become second nature as you age, helping you to have a better outlook on life.

So, what is my final advice? Grab some paper and a pencil and write down ten things you are grateful for today. I did this everyday last semester; it is surprising how difficult it was at first. I would sit there staring at the blank page thinking, “Oh, I really enjoyed my lunch today.” But, believe me, it gets easier over time. Your reasons for being grateful come more naturally as you get in the habit of thinking about them. Try doing a random act of kindness. Or simply push yourself outside of your comfort zone and tell someone why you appreciate his or her friendship.

But, most importantly, don’t think of gratitude as a “once a year thing.” Make it an important part of your life, and I assure you that you won’t be disappointed.

Annotated Bibliography

Carter, Sherrie Bourg. "Emotions Are Contagious-Choose Your Company Wisely." *Psychology Today: Health, Help, Happiness + Find a Therapist*.

This was a popular and professional source for my paper. I was interested in finding research that related to my topic from a psychologist, whom I feel is extremely qualified to talk about this topic. It talked about the "good, bad, and ugly" of referring to emotions as contagious. The author made these two comparisons by using research for both sides of the argument. The author's main aim in writing this was to have people be more aware of their emotions and be in tune with what impacts them. It appears to be written as more of an educational source for a wide audience, and it seems very reliable since the author is a qualified psychologist. I disagreed with some of the implications regarding the "bad", but this just helped me in supporting my argument in my paper better. The article was definitely useful in my piece since it directly supported the context of which I was writing in.

Clear, James. "How Long Does It Actually Take to Form a New Habit? (Backed by Science)." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 10 Apr. 2014.

This article is a very popular piece, as shown by the fact that it has 4.4k likes on Facebook. Its content proved very useful for the purpose of my paper. The source discussed how long it takes to form a new habit, and why it is important to stick through the process of acquiring one. The author also gave some advice for sticking with a new habit since they know it is easy to be led astray. In order to develop these arguments, James Clear references a study that was done on habits. This establishes the writer's credibility. His aim is to get people forming "good habits" and to stick through the process and not get discouraged. His audience appears to be a younger crowd; it was written in a way that would be shared via social media. The inclusion of research made it a reliable resource. I used the source directly in my paper to provide additional knowledge to the reader about developing habits.

Frandsen, Kathryn J., and Brent Q. Hafen. "The Healing Power of Altruism." *Mind/Body Health: The Effects of Attitudes, Emotions, and Relationships*. By Keith J. Karren. 3rd ed. San Francisco: Benjamin Cummings, 2005. N. pag. Print.

This was a primary source I used to talk about John D. Rockefeller. The whole chapter did not talk solely about Rockefeller, instead, he was used as an example in the chapter to back up an argument that the author was making about altruism. The author's main points were that altruism really does heal an individual physically and emotionally and that these two things are not separate. To develop this point, the author also used other examples of altruistic activities and referenced how these can impact the body. The author's aim is to educate college-age students about altruism in one's daily life. I consider this a very reliable source; it was from a chapter I read for my Health and Fitness class Winter term of 2014. When writing this paper, I used a lot of background information I learned from reading this chapter to influence my argument I was making.

Frandsen, Kathryn J., and Brent Q. Hafen. "The Healing Power of Spirituality, Faith, and Religion." *Mind/Body Health: The Effects of Attitudes, Emotions, and Relationships*. By Keith J. Karren. 3rd ed. San Francisco: Benjamin Cummings, 2005. N. pag. Print.

This was a primary source that I used to discuss the self-control that is lost when one is unable to forgive themselves. I directly quoted this chapter in my piece. The author's main argument was to argue how beneficial one's spirituality, faith, and religion is in their life. The author gave a lot of research data throughout the chapter to back these claims up. To develop this argument, the author takes the reader through blocked off sections addressing these three different parts of one's life in order to show how important it is to practice these things on a daily basis. This was also a chapter I read for my Health and Fitness class winter term of 2014 and its intended audience is college-age students. This source was very helpful because it truly defined forgiveness for me; there is so much more to forgiveness than what we have been taught growing up.

Heffernan, Virginia. "What If You Just Hate Making Dinner?" *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 11 Oct. 2014.

I used this as my source of reference for the style of my piece. This was a secondary source. It is a magazine article written for the New York Times. The author talked about stereotypes and how she really doesn't enjoy making food and would rather just spend time with her kids. Her reflection on cookbooks was really funny; I tried to use this humor throughout my paper. She uses plays on words in order to do this. I really enjoyed the combination of narrative and the personal voice that was used in order to share with people why she feels this way. I feel that it was intended for other moms since it seemed very relatable. It was reliable since she referenced a lot of other sources.

"John D. Rockefeller." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, n.d.

This article talks about the history of John D. Rockefeller. This was a secondary source for my paper. In this article, there is a clear outline of his life. The article progresses from his early childhood through his years of success and eventually until his death. The author supports this information by giving a lot of dates and examples from Rockefeller's life. The purpose for this piece is to educate readers, most likely other history buffs, about this individual. I referenced this information when writing about him so that I would have a better knowledge base. The general information was used just as background knowledge, but I felt that it was a quality source based on all of the historical dates that were referenced.

Jurgelski, S. (2010, Nov 21). Gratitude. *Sunday News* Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/docview/807649001?accountid=14667>

I directly used this source and quoted it to talk about positive thinking. This was a primary source for my paper. It was important in discussing the mental and physical health benefits of optimism. It went into great detail about these benefits,

and this helped me to back up my own opinion on the topic better. The author supported their facts by using facts from other research that has been done. The author's aim, in this case, was to emphasize these health benefits associated with gratitude. The audience is those reading the *Sunday News*. I feel that this was a valuable source since it directly complemented the argument I was trying to make in my paper. It proved very helpful.