

No Complaints! The Power of Gratitude

Recently, at a friend's funeral service, the minister summed up his life, character and values by sharing that, "He was always grateful for the gift of life as given by god – no complaints"! This statement got my attention as my friend had had his share of pain and suffering, including being shot and injured twice during wartime and suffering debilitating pain, ultimately becoming wheelchair bound in his latter years. It surprised me, as his family attested, that he never uttered a negative or angry word against his attackers or even otherwise during his life as a father, husband & provider.

As I listened, I felt a deep sense of respect and awe for how this man had lived his life by practicing the virtues of acceptance and surrender, key aspects of gratitude, and wondered why so many of us aren't more actively thankful, appreciative or gracious about all that life gifts us with? Why do we consistently find ourselves indulging in 'stinkin' thinkin' by focusing on that which is missing rather than that which isn't? Why does the grass always seem greener to us on the other side? Perhaps it is a question of 'attitude' – mine that is.

An Attitude of Gratitude

This trite phrase speaks to the simple truth that gratitude is an attitude about which we have a choice. Change your attitude and you have the power to change your life! We can either be grateful, or not – it is as simple, and as challenging as that. An ego identified individual always chooses gratitude as their companion as it serves their 'why me', 'poor me', and 'not happy until' victim archetype. But when one chooses gratitude as the default mode, life blooms, yielding a rich harvest, especially for the one choosing it.

According to studies done by researcher Robert A. Emmons from the U of C, Davis, experiments done with Gratitude in 2002-2003 show that:

1. Those who kept gratitude journals on a weekly basis exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms and felt better about their lives as a whole;
2. A daily gratitude intervention (self-guided exercises) with young adults resulted in higher reported levels of the positive states of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness and energy;
3. Participants who kept gratitude lists were more likely to have made progress toward important personal goals (academic, interpersonal and health-based) over a two-month period compared to subjects in the other experimental conditions.

Overall, where Gratefulness and Well-being are concerned, Emmons found that, "Grateful people report higher levels of positive emotions, life satisfaction, vitality, optimism and lower levels of depression and stress. The disposition toward gratitude appears to enhance pleasant feeling states more than it diminishes unpleasant emotions...



(and that)... Grateful people do not deny or ignore the negative aspects of life." Perhaps Albert Einstein understood this when he stated that, "A hundred times a day I remind myself that my inner and outer life depends on the labors of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the full measure I have received and am still receiving."

Personally, choosing gratitude connects me to my heart, helping me feel centered, calm, peaceful and happy; the paradox being that these feelings are not necessarily a pre-requisite to gratitude, but an inevitable result of it. Essentially, we don't always have to be happy to be grateful! Rather, and perhaps especially, when life challenges us the most is when we can choose to be and stay in gratitude, practicing both acceptance and surrender, for it is through 'loving what is', that we ultimately find liberation from pain and suffering.

Recently, a client shared how he often felt indignant and hurt when he gave and did not receive any form of thanks or acknowledgment. I pointed out to him how hypocritical this was in light of his own admission that he doesn't devote even one minute in a day to giving thanks and appreciation for the most valuable, priceless and enduring gift he has been given – the gift of LIFE! It is ironic how conditional we can be with our giving while often failing to acknowledge all that is so 'unconditionally' being given to us by all of creation. So what is the solution?

Choosing Gratitude

To experience life as a positive, happy and fulfilling journey, resolve to choose gratitude over negativity, lack, selfishness, envy, greed, jealousy and complaining! Granted that life isn't always ideal yet, do not abandon your ideals, values and your ability to determine how to relate to life challenges. And keep it simple. Even if you are not one to makes lists or keep daily or weekly journals, you can still choose, upon waking and when going to sleep, a simple prayer of gratitude. Personally, I do this daily by saying, "Thank-you God for the gift of another day!" In the morning, doing this affirms for me that life is a gift, waiting to be opened and shared wholeheartedly with all others; and at night, despite how my day has gone, it allows me to choose gratitude over negativity and affirm, as did my friend, that life is a gift as given by God – no complaints! ■

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