

“Thanks Giving, Thanks Receiving”

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“Thank you.”

It’s something we say a lot...perhaps even more than we realize.

It’s estimated that people in North America say “thank you” about 2,000 times a year...which is more than five times every day!¹

The practice of gratitude, of saying “thank you,” can be very helpful to us—especially at times when some things aren’t going very well.

People of every age say thank you, and children are particularly good at it.

In the well-known story “Winnie the Pooh,” “Piglet noticed that even though he had a Very Small Heart, it could hold a rather large amount of Gratitude.”

In a moment, we’ll sing a song that some of you may know, if you’re young, or if you have people in your life who are.

Even though we start out our lives

¹ <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/americans-phrase-lost-meaning-article-1.2791950>

being good at gratitude,
it turns out we get even better at it as we get older!

Research has shown that
our ability to be grateful actually improves with age.

One possible reason for this is that as the years go by,
we gain enough life experience to recognize the
blessings that do come our way.²

This may be especially true during times of challenge—
such as the current pandemic and time of lockdown.

When we're aware of suffering and hardship,
in our own lives and the lives of others,
we may notice the things we're thankful for
“one quiet thing at a time.”

When we sincerely express that gratitude,
to others, to ourselves or even Life Itself...
we create a circle of giving and receiving
that can nourish us each and every day.

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The Canadian songwriter Raffi has a wonderful song that
allows us to say “Thanks a Lot” to everything around us.

Maybe some of you know it!

² Wendy Leung, “*The Science of Gratitude: As we age, our brains get better at feeling thankful,*” *The Globe and Mail*, October 15, 2011.

Thanks to Angela Klassen and a video³ she shared this week, I've just learned how to sign "thanks a lot," so I'll do that at the same time I'm singing and you can join me.

If you know the signs for all the words, please, go ahead and sign them as well.

"Thanks a lot,
Thanks for Sun in the sky.

Thanks a lot,
Thanks for clouds so high.

Thanks a lot,
Thanks for whispering wind.

Thanks a lot,
Thanks for the birds in the spring.

Thanks a lot,
Thanks for the moonlit night.

Thanks a lot,
Thanks for the stars so bright.

Thanks a lot,
Thanks for the wondering me.

³ How to Sign "Thanks a Lot" by Raffi.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaGQQpn0YZQ&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1homPYAUFQ4txcW6plPfxlxbUin8RUWHmAYXz1_fLM7F4n1LGX5qtAfZo

Thanks a lot,
Thanks for the way I feel.

Thanks for the animals,
Thanks for the land,
Thanks for the people everywhere.

Thanks a lot,
Thanks for all I've got.
Thanks for all I've got.”⁴

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I don't know about you, but I feel a lot better after singing that song.

And that's no surprise. Scientists have found that when you feel gratitude, and express it, it can make you feel better.

In one experiment, a group of students who were feeling sad were invited to write letters to people, to thank them for something they had done.

Even when the letters were not sent, it was found that the process of writing the letter lifted the spirits of the person who wrote it.⁵

⁴ Words and music, Raffi Cavoukian @Kohaw Music, Homeland Publishing.
⁵ Joshua Brown, Joel Wong, Greater Good Magazine, “How Gratitude Changes You and Your Brain”
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_gratitude_changes_you_and_your_brain

When the letters **were** shared, they helped build and sustain relationships.

When it comes to mental health in the pandemic, maintaining and nurturing our connection with others is one of the most important things we can do.

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I thought it was very interesting that writing the letters made a huge difference even when they weren't sent.

It turns out that any feeling or expression of gratitude can help us, even if we don't say it out loud or to anyone but ourselves.⁶

Here's an interesting experiment we can all try right now.

You can do it at home whether you're a child or an older person.

Here are your instructions.

When I say "start," look around the room wherever you are, and let yourself notice one thing at a time.

When your attention lands on something, say "thank you" to it, either out loud or silently.

Then move on to the next thing you notice,

⁶ Michael D.C. Fishman: "The Silver Linings Journal: Gratitude During a Pandemic," US National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health.

whatever it is, and say “thank you” to it, as well.

Depending on where you are, you may also notice people or animals nearby.

You can say “thank you” to them, or even to the people you see on the screen.

I’m going to stop speaking now for about thirty seconds, so we can all do this.

Start!

(DO THE PRACTICE FOR 30 SECONDS)

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Like any spiritual practice, this one is personal, and your experience may be different than mine...but here’s what happened the first time I did this.

I noticed that each time my attention rested on a new object, whether it was my telephone, my computer, the books on the shelf, the hardwood floor, the microphone in front of me...

Saying “thank you” to it opened my heart to everything it offered in my life.

For example, saying “thank you” to the microphone awakened in me an awareness of how it connects me to other people, including you.

Saying “thank you” to the cartoon taped to my computer reminded me of the laughter it brought me.

Most of all, the act of saying “thank you” brought a softening to me, a tenderness and openness that hadn’t been there before...and a sense of deeper connection with everything around me.

As I say “thank you” to each thing in turn,
my heart opens a little more,
and I feel more connected to the Wholeness of life.

When I do this, I don’t even have to explain or describe the connection that I feel with the object.

Instead, in the instant of saying “thank you,”
either silently or aloud,
all of the reasons for gratitude
are encompassed in the moment.

The Buddhist teacher Tara Brach writes:

“Gratitude is like breathing in – letting ourselves be touched by the goodness in others and in our world.

Generosity is like breathing out – sensing our mutual belonging and offering our care.

When we are awake and whole,
breathing in and out happens naturally.”

That is to say, when we are awake to our interconnection with all things, the rhythm of giving and receiving happens naturally.

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As we might expect on this Thanksgiving weekend, there's a lot being written about gratitude, and perhaps especially now as we cope with the difficult circumstances of the world.

Dr. Robert Emmons is the founding editor of the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, and he's quoted in yesterday's *Globe and Mail*.

He writes that, "Gratitude is the realization that we have everything we need in the moment."

Gratitude is "untethered from circumstance" and can be cultivated during difficult times.

He suggests that this involves "seeing more good than bad, even when life is more bad than good."

He goes on to say that "this is not for the intellectually lethargic."

It requires intention and is the work of a lifetime.⁷

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⁷ Erin Anderssen, "This Thanksgiving, gratitude is precious—but warm feelings are only the first step to living well," *The Globe and Mail*, Oct. 11, 2020, A12-13.

In Raffi's song, the line "thanks for all I've got" refers to many pleasant things, including the birds in the trees and the whispering wind.

But what about the other things?
The things we don't want to experience?

Although it may be hard to understand, some people have said that it's possible to say "thank you" even for things we didn't want.

A few years ago, a man named Stephen Colbert had a conversation with a TV host named Anderson Cooper.

Stephen Colbert is a comedian, so his job is to make people smile and laugh.

But the two of them were having a serious talk...because both of them had gone through very sad experiences.

Anderson's mother had recently died, and when Stephen was just ten years old, he lost his father and two of his brothers in a terrible accident.

Anderson had heard Stephen say something he didn't understand, and he wanted him to explain it.

He said, “[Stephen], you have learned to, in your words, 'love the thing that [you] most wish had not happened.' [...] Do you really believe that?”

And Stephen replied, “Yes. It's a gift to exist, and with existence comes suffering. There's no escaping that.”

He went on, as he thought about how sad it was to lose his father and brothers.

“I don't want it to have happened,” he said.
“I want it to *not* have happened.”

But if 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.”

And he continued, “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.”⁸

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⁸ Bill Murphy, Jr., “*Stephen Colbert and Gratitude*,” on Understandably, <https://www.understandably.com/p/stephen-colbert-on-gratitude> (with CNN interview, August 16, 2019).

This Thanksgiving, we have the opportunity to say “thank you”—even when life may be bringing us challenges we did not want.

We have the opportunity to taste life, in all its fullness, and see how it nourishes us—so we might become more loving and generous people.

In Christian churches, the ritual of communion was an invitation to take in life, in this thankful way.

It was also called “the Eucharist,” from the Greek *eukharistos*, meaning ‘grateful’.

As we join together for our Harvest Communion ritual, practiced in a new way this year...

I’d like to say “thank you” for listening and for being here.

Thanks, a lot.

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