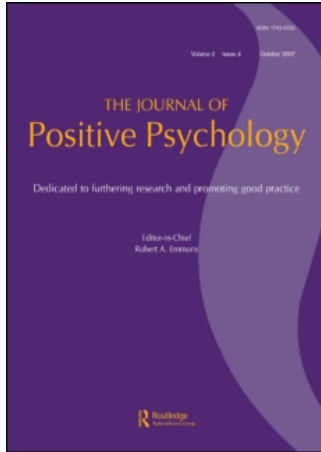


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Book reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Thanks! How the new science of gratitude can make you happier, by Robert A. Emmons, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 2007, 244 pp, US \$16.50, hardback (ISBN 0618620197).

In December 2005, I did what many academics do in the winter: write submissions for the American Psychological Association conference. I hoped to create a competitive panel for a symposium entitled, *Gratitude and mindfulness: Interventions for personal and interpersonal well-being*. Gratitude being central to the symposium, I thought Robert Emmons, the world's leading expert on gratitude, would be the perfect Discussant. "But why would he agree", I thought. "I'm sure he's swamped, and I'm a fledgling researcher". I took a risk. I sent the E-mail. Within several hours, he responded, "Sure, this sounds like a great panel. Thanks for asking". Although our symposium was rejected, I was (and continue to be) grateful to Emmons for agreeing to collaborate with a stranger, but why? In his latest book, *Thanks! How the new science of gratitude can make you happier*, Emmons answers this question, and many more, about the experience and expression of gratitude.

Thanks! is the first book I know of about the science of gratitude that is geared for public consumption. The other book, *The psychology of gratitude* (2004), is an authoritative text edited by Emmons and Michael McCullough. Unlike *Thanks!*, however, the target audience is largely academics and other scientists. *Thanks!* made the science of gratitude public. That's good. Psychologists should, in my view, give the science away. Emmons unequivocally achieved, and surpassed, this goal. On this criterion alone, I applaud him.

Thanks! is divided into seven chapters. Distilling the data on gratitude and making it digestible is daunting. Emmons made it seem easy. Aside from Chapter 1, all chapters are about equal length. Each chapter, in my view, could stand alone, similar to a handbook chapter. Like a handbook, each chapter is loaded with the theory guiding and empirical data supporting gratitude. The chapters flow in a logical sequence, yet one could review a single chapter, learn a lot, and feel like a complete story's been told. For instance, I've read Chapters 4 (Thanks be to God: Gratitude and the human spirit) and 7 (Practicing

gratitude) more times than I can remember. They're my favorites. And each time I've read one of them, I feel like I've participated in an organized and coherent lecture. *Thanks!* is a welcomed addition to books dedicated to teaching us how to live the good life.

While gratitude has a long history among philosophers and theologians, it wasn't until the turn of the twenty-first century that psychology finally began to give gratitude its deserved empirical homage. A PsycINFO search for gratitude between the years 1887 and 1998 (when positive psychology was popularized by Martin Seligman) yielded 218 citations. The same search between the years 1999 and 2007 yielded 369 citations. This suggests that psychology has a vested interest in furthering the science of gratitude. The individual largely responsible for the scientific advancement of gratitude, and for packaging it in a book for laypeople, is Emmons.

Why does gratitude matter? Emmons convincingly argues that, "... if we overlook gratitude, it will be at our own emotional and psychological peril" (p. 16). The empirical data presented in *Thanks!* lead me to draw a firm conclusion: the benefits of gratitude extend well beyond those associated with being polite. Grateful people experience higher levels of positive emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, love, happiness, and optimism; furthermore, actively cultivating gratitude in one's life buffers people from the deleterious consequences of envy, resentment, greed, bitterness, and materialism. Grateful people are also better at coping with stress, both everyday stress and trauma-induced stress, and may recover more quickly from illness and enjoy greater physical health. Concerning the latter, people instructed to count blessings slept more, exercised more, and reported more energy. Gratitude is psychologically and physically beneficial.

Gratitude is an interpersonal emotion and is linked with stronger social relationships and communal ties. Emmons reported that an unexpected finding in his groundbreaking research on gratitude was that those who kept gratitude journals reported feeling closer to others, were more likely to be prosocial, and were viewed as altruistic by intimate others. Furthermore, people high on dispositional gratitude have better relationships, put more energy into preserving these relationships, and are more securely attached and less lonely.

Using marriage as an example, Emmons discussed the work of Hochschild (1989) and her notion of an “economy of gratitude”. Troubled marriages tend to be low in gratitude. People are quick to acknowledge the garbage is overflowing, the floors need vacuuming, and date nights are nonexistent, but seldom express gratitude for picking up the kids from soccer, unloading the dishwasher, and calling to say “I love you”. We tend to count complaints instead of counting blessings. Using the research by John Gottman and Barbara Fredrickson as a springboard, Emmons suggests that couples should count at least five blessings for every one complaint (and, according to Emmons, some suggest counting as many as 8–20 blessings per every one complaint). This is one of the many tidbits of advice you’ll find interwoven throughout *Thanks!* Using his knowledge about gratitude as a bedrock, Emmons uses data and theory from various fields (sociology, biology, theology, and philosophy) to provide innumerable strategies for personal and interpersonal growth.

Gratitude and religion go hand-in-hand. “Where one finds religion, one finds gratitude” (p. 93). If you’re aiming to create an awkward moment at the next party you attend, I suggest raising one of three topics: religion, politics, or who’s got the biggest . . . grant. I was therefore most curious to read how Emmons presented the material in Chapter 4, “Thanks be to God: Gratitude and the human spirit”. Would he lose the readers, since throwing religion into the mix sometimes turns people off? Or would he captivate us even more than he already has, by telling us that being religious or spiritual isn’t a prerequisite for developing gratitude? I think it’s the latter. “Although gratitude is most at home in monotheistic traditions, there is not a religion on earth that believes that thanksgiving is unimportant” (p. 195). While much time is spent discussing gratitude in the three major world religions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), Emmons spends, in my view, an adequate amount of time on gratitude in “non-God” religions (i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shintoism). Although these latter religions don’t assume a Supreme Other to give thanks to, they do stress the importance of leading a moral life, one aspect of which is cultivating gratitude. While religious attendance is down, spirituality has risen (Myers, 2000). Therefore, I think including information on these “spiritual” traditions helped keep readers who may have wandered.

The bottom line, however, is this: gratitude is a sacred emotion (Emmons, 2005). Thankfully, this doesn’t preclude atheists or agnostics the blessing to experience it. Emmons unequivocally argues that we can all benefit from the experience and expression of gratitude, religion and spirituality notwithstanding. Being religious, however, increases one’s odds for deriving benefit from gratitude. Religious

people report more gratitude largely because they see everything (their senses, health, relationships, life, and even the ability to feel grateful) as gifts from God. They live in a pervasive state of thankfulness. Being religious or spiritual seems to enhance the frequency and intensity to which one experiences gratitude. While not fixed parts of the gratitude equation, the data seem clear: being religious helps one develop the worldview that gifts abound.

Thanks! ends by providing 10 practical strategies for becoming more grateful. Some strategies include keeping a gratitude journal, learning prayers of gratitude, increasing our mindfulness and using sensory-perceptual sharpening (called “come to your senses”), consciously using grateful language more often (e.g., gift, givers, blessings, blessed, fortune, fortunate, abundance), and using visual reminders. Illustrating the latter, I followed his advice and my screensaver now reads: “Life is a Gift—Thanks!” Overall, I was pleased with these interventions. As a gratitude researcher, the question I’m asked most often is, “How can I become more grateful?” It seems that everyone knows about counting blessings via a gratitude journal. One journalist recently asking for practical advice about enhancing gratitude said, “I need something that parents don’t know already, you know, like keeping a diary of blessings”. The gratitude visit, an intervention that debuted in the psychological literature in 2005 (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), now seems to have also went mainstream. Students have shared with me their experience with conducting a gratitude visit, even before discussing it in class. Therefore, I appreciated the new interventions. I think this will be the most popular chapter among the public and a favorite among positive psychologists.

Having evidence-based strategies to enhance gratitude is an important and much needed step in becoming more grateful. It helps people move from the contemplation to the action stage of change. With these resources, people can learn the skills associated with grateful living. But it’s equally important to appreciate the obstacles that can potentially thwart cultivating gratitude. A theme in *Thanks!* is that developing gratitude is difficult. It doesn’t happen with a tap of a wand or a sprinkle of pixie dust. It’s a chosen attitude. Some obstacles to achieving gratitude include ingratitude, the negativity bias, inappropriate gift giving, and upward social comparison. Another is “the busyness of life”. I think most people would agree that contemporary society is moving at an unnaturally fast pace (Whybrow, 2005). But fast and grateful are incompatible responses, similar to anxiety and relaxation. While talking on the phone, reading E-mail, eating lunch, and watering a plant, how can we possibly be grateful for our friend whom we’re talking to, the editor whose E-mail indicates that our manuscript was accepted for publication, our spouse for

remembering we like tuna with a little mayo, and the plant for beautifying our office? I don't think we can, and neither does Emmons. He reminds us that to cultivate gratitude, we need to recognize and be aware of all that we have to be grateful for. We then need to make the time to remember our blessings. But if we first don't recognize them, how can we remember them? The solution: slow down. While our world may be fast-paced, gratitude only grows with patience, persistence, and prioritizing. If we roll up our sleeves and commit ourselves to becoming grateful, we'll see that with gratitude comes abundance.

I give *Thanks!* two enthusiastic thumbs up. I devoured the book the first time I read it (I've already read it twice). It's a page-turner. But that aside, I have two minor criticisms: the title and the evidence provided for the "evidence-based practices". According to Emmons, one reason that writing a book on gratitude is risky is because of the sentimentality bias: emphasizing the emotional aspect and personal benefits of gratitude. While Emmons maintains that gratitude is "far from being a warm, fuzzy sentiment", (p. 17) and that it's, "morally and intellectually demanding", (p. 17) the title's emphasis on gratitude creating happiness suggests otherwise. Happiness is a hot topic these past several years (peruse the self-help section at your local bookstore and you'll notice books on happiness abound). While *Thanks!* made the science of gratitude accessible to the public, it may have come at a cost. Will the public now view gratitude as a, "I want to feel good so let me count my blessings" emotion, Emmons' fear (and mine), and not the, "I'm the beneficiary of an unearned gift, and I want to pay it forward" emotion that it is? Reading beyond the title and going the short distance to the jacket cover, I think we're safe: *Thanks!* emphasizes the latter. Gratitude is a positive emotion, and more.

Although Emmons states that the interventions provided are evidenced-based, I wish more of this "evidence" was provided. He may not have done this, however, for two reasons: the audience and the genuine lack of gratitude research. Assuming this is the case, then this isn't a criticism, per se. Rather it's a call for more research to be conducted on gratitude and included in another book intended for the public, perhaps in the sequel to *Thanks!*

Thanks! is a highly readable, colorful, and downright fun book. Emmons quotes many intellects such as Brother David Steindl-Rast and Seneca, and some not-so intellects such as Donald Trump and Bart Simpson (though I'm sure some will argue Bart's genius). His personal stories will have you laughing and feeling like you know him personally. Two classic witty one-liners are, "if you want to sleep more soundly, count blessings, not sheep," and "it is simply unnatural to have sharp implements inserted into the groin." When discussing the Biblical Book

of Job, I busted out laughing when Emmons stated (in reference to Job) that, "He's living the good life, fifth-century BC style" (p. 156). He also tells the story of his wife's grandmother giving him a plaid polyester cardigan one Christmas that he couldn't, "visualize wearing . . . in public" (p. 61). He also confesses that he and his wife, "... attempt to keep their children in line through the annual exploitation of Santa Claus's power to give and withhold" (p. 125). Interwoven throughout the book are also gratitude essays written by his research participants. These bring to life his research program demonstrating the strong and enduring benefits of gratitude. Creatively quoting others and using personal anecdotes, coupled with good-humor and poignant gratitude essays, make *Thanks!* a book you'll read over and over.

I usually use paperclips as bookmarks. They tend to stay put, unlike the traditional paper ones. These typically fall out of the book and get lost. After reading the first half of *Thanks!* I didn't have a paperclip nearby, so I grabbed the nearest thing that served the same purpose. I was unaware of what it was at that time, but found out after I finished the last half of the book. It was a "thank you" card from a student. "Ironic", I thought, "that I used a 'thank you' card as a bookmark for a book on gratitude". But the front of the card makes this even more ironic, some might say creepy. It says: "Gratitude is the memory of the heart". Meaning, gratitude may be a mechanism that makes us remember gifts bestowed by benefactors, especially when we highly value these gifts and they tug at our heartstrings. Maybe that's why I've remained grateful to Emmons for saying, "yes" to a stranger. It comes down to one simple, yet highly complex word—thanks.

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