

The benefits of gratitude

01:00 AM EST on Saturday, November 24, 2007, *The Providence Journal*

By Richard C. Dujardin

Journal Religion Writer

It is often the most overlooked part of the Thanksgiving weekend. Amid the parades, football games, church services and family gatherings, we often assume that taking the time to reflect and express our thanks for the blessings of the last year will be the easy part.

Yet, for many people, the idea that we could be called upon to express thanks can be an occasion of guilt or dread. What if we don't feel particularly thankful for anything? What if we secretly feel that all the good things that have happened in our lives are due to no one but ourselves?

If that's the case, we may want to pause to consider the conclusions of researchers who have found clear connections between developing a spirit of gratitude and our overall happiness.

Jeffrey Froh, an assistant professor in the graduate program in school-community psychology at Hofstra University in New York, divided 200 sixth- and seventh-graders in one Long Island public school into three groups and each day for two weeks teachers had one of the groups jot down five things for which they were most grateful.

WHEN THE EXERCISE ended, Froh and his fellow researchers discovered that the students in the "count your blessings" group were considerable more optimistic and satisfied with their lives both at school and at home, than either of the other groups.

But even more impressive, in Froh's view, was that when he went back to measure the students three weeks after the experiment ended, those in the gratitude group were still scoring significantly higher in optimism and satisfaction. "What's nice about it is that exercise required only a couple of minutes a day, yet the effects maintained themselves," Froh commented in an interview this week. The psychologist was so impressed with the finding that they suggested that teachers begin having all of the students keep "gratitude journals."

Robert A. Emmons of the University of California, a professor who many consider to be a leading authority on the "science" of gratitude, has summarized what he considers the most significant findings of a project that he and Michael McCullough of the University of Miami conducted with a grant from the John Templeton Foundation":

- In one experiment, adults who kept "gratitude journals" on a weekly basis exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives and were more optimistic about the upcoming week compared to adults in two other groups.
- 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, while self-guided exercises in gratitude with young adults resulted in higher levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness and energy.
- Grateful individuals place less importance on material goods, are less likely to judge their own and others success in terms of possessions accumulated, and are more likely to share their possessions with others.
- Those who regularly attend religious services and engage in prayer or spiritual reading are more likely to be grateful. Those with a strong disposition toward gratitude have capacity to be more empathetic and to be generous and helpful to people in their social networks.

Such findings come as no surprise to clergy and others who say they have seen first hand how gratitude influences people's day-to-day living.

"There are a lot of things that happen when we thank God," says Rabbi Amy Levin of Temple Torat Yisrael of Cranston. "It's an acknowledgement that the blessings in our lives are not from ourselves. It puts things in perspective and shows us our place in the created world. The flip side is when we look at the blessings in our lives; it behooves us to realize that not everyone shares the same blessings, and that we have an obligation to reach out to those others who haven't had those blessings."

Sister Theresa Robertson, the mother superior for the Little Sisters of Poor's Jeanne Jugan Residence in Pawtucket, says she has seen families become reconciled when individuals express gratitude.

There are always going to be people who, when illness or tragedy befall them, will ask, "why me?" she says. But there are others whose sense of gratitude cannot be disturbed.

"GRATITUDE IS A GIFT and a virtue," she advises. "We can be grateful for the things that we wouldn't immediately see as gifts, even the obstacles and challenges and sometimes the suffering that may occur, because they help us grow as persons. We hear people say, 'the cancer changed my life. It opened me to the love of other people and to ' hope I didn't expect. I've had suffering but I've also had blessings.'

Linda Douty, a spiritual director and retreat leader in Memphis, Tenn., and author of book, *How Can I See the Light When It's So Dark? A Journey to a Thankful Heart*, says in an interview this week that she believes everyone is naturally

inclined to be grateful, but there are certain ways of thinking that can impede “gratitude muscle.”

One such way of thinking, she says, is to “discount” any good thing that has happened because we don’t believe it will last. “We’re always waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Another obstacle, she says, involves the sort of thinking that continually compares our own situation to a presumably better-off neighbor, or when we allow our expectations to be shaped by movies, TV and the celebrity culture. Then, too, she says, there are the feelings of survivor’s guilt sometimes experienced by people who survived a tragedy where everyone else died. To be sure, she says, there is a danger in embracing the opposite notion that “I was the one survivor because I was favored.”

“I have a real problem with that,” she says. “It suggests that the others died because they weren’t favored. I think we just have to say, ‘thank you, Lord,’ and let go of the reason why. We need to leave the rest to mystery.”

Douty observes that most parents try to teach their children to say “thank you,” but suggests that they should also try to encourage their grateful heart by regularly asking them “what was the best thing that happened to you today?” and “who would you say you were thankful to today?”

The Rev. Edward V. Vacek, a Jesuit priest and professor of moral theology at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass., says that one of the “nice” things about Thanksgiving is that it is one holiday that has not been contaminated by commercialism.

“It’s still about family, friends and good food, and not about presents,” says the priest, who traveled to Omaha for Thanksgiving to be with his extended family.

THE CHIEF OBSTACLE to gratitude, in the priest's judgment, is the sense of entitlement by those who believe that whatever good they have experienced derives from their own hard work and no one else, so they don't think there's anyone to thank.

"We know people who think that way, and most of us realize they are missing a great part of life," he says.

"Even the successful company president must know that he would not be where he is without all underlings who were out there doing the sales. Even the medical professional must recognize he is drawing from 2,000 years of medicine" says the priest.

Yes, says Father Vacek, Thanksgiving is a reminder to us all that life is not all about ourselves. It's a time when most Americans recognize that they are dependent on God and others and are happy to be so.

"One of the lines in the Bible says give thanks to God for everything. We can even look on suffering as a place to give thanks, or the ability to carry on in the midst of suffering and find meaning. We are deeply enriched by being grateful people."