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Delivered June 14, 2015

Gratitude

A Tool for Making Ourselves Whole

In his gospel, the apostle Luke tells us a story that can be disturbingly familiar. Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem. On the edge of a village in Galilee, he sees ten lepers standing a distance away. They call out: “Jesus, have pity on us!”

Jesus tells them to go see the local priests, and as the lepers begin walking into the village, they are miraculously healed.

One of the lepers, seeing that the terrible disease has suddenly left his flesh, turns and runs back. As Luke tells us: “One of them, realizing he had been healed, returned – glorifying God in a loud voice – and fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him.”

This man happened to be a Samaritan, a people the Jews scorned and shunned.

Jesus then voices the question that’s on all of our minds when he says: “Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this stranger returned to give thanks to God?”

The episode ends with Jesus telling the Samaritan: “Stand up and go. Your faith has made you whole.”

Very likely, we know where the other nine went. They saw they’d been healed and were overjoyed. So they immediately resumed life as usual.

More than anything else, Luke's account prompts us to look into our own hearts and ask: Who are we? Are we the one leper who gave thanks for this miracle? Or are we like the other nine, so excited about being healed that we can't wait to rush back into the world?

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The word gratitude comes from the Latin word *gratia*. It means grace, graciousness, or gratefulness.

Gratitude is appreciation for what you receive, whether it's tangible or intangible. With gratitude, you acknowledge goodness in your life. Usually, this goodness comes from somewhere outside of ourselves. Gratitude helps us connect with something larger than ourselves – whether it's other people, something in nature, or a higher power.

When we have gratitude, we appreciate what we have instead of seeking something new in hopes that it will make us still happier. Gratitude helps us focus on what we already have instead of what we lack.

We know from how gratitude makes us feel and from studies done on other people that gratitude is associated with greater happiness. It helps us feel more positive. It enables us to cope with adversity. It helps us maintain strong relationships.

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Looking at gratitude from a Spiritualist perspective, we see expressing thanks as one of the most powerful acts we can perform. We know that existence – both on the earth plane and in spirit – is a matter of vibrations. Modern physics tells us the same thing.

As Spiritualists, we are blessed with receiving information from unseen spirit entities, including some highly advanced spirit teachers. Gratitude is discussed in a great many of these spirit communications and can be summarized this way:

- We know gratitude has very high vibrations, which helps us in two important ways. One is that it helps us commune with the higher spirit realms, to be closer to the beautiful spirit beings that love, teach, and protect us.

- The second way is that gratitude – as with the emotion of love itself, as with forgiveness – raises our personal vibrations for greater health and happiness. We know, for example, that self-pity is the emotion of lowest vibration. Feeling sorry for ourselves creates a dense barrier between us and the love and joy of the higher vibrations.

Think about it: How can you experience self-pity when you're expressing gratitude for the blessings you're receiving?

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We learn a great deal from Spiritualist teachings, and it's always exciting when we see our beliefs confirmed through scientific research.

I spoke recently on this platform about some of the breakthrough studies at leading universities and research centers into the existence of Spirit and Spirit's roles in our everyday lives.

Similarly, gratitude is a topic where leading scientists and researchers are proving what the world's religions and Spirit have taught us for thousands of years.

I read an interesting article in a recent issue of the Harvard Mental Health Letter. The heading was "In Praise of Gratitude." Being a scholarly journal, it made a point of discussing recent scientific research into gratitude's effects on us. It focused on work at both the University of California and the University of Miami.

In these studies, participants wrote a few sentences each week on particular topics.

- One group wrote about things for which they were grateful.
- A second group wrote about their daily irritations.
- A third wrote about events in their lives, either positive or negative.

After ten weeks, researchers found that the people who wrote about gratitude were more optimistic and felt better about their lives than did the people in either of the other groups. They also had fewer visits to physicians than those who focused on their aggravations.

Meanwhile, at the University of Pennsylvania, another study has tested about 500 people to determine the impact of various actions on their personal happiness. As part of the study, each person was to write and personally deliver a letter of gratitude to someone who had never been properly thanked for his or her kindness.

The results showed that when people expressed gratitude in this manner, their personal happiness scores soared. The impact of expressing even long-overdue gratitude was greater than from any other act included in the study, with this increased happiness lasting for a month or more.

Other studies have proven how gratitude can improve relationships. For example, a study of couples found that individuals who took the time to express gratitude for their partner felt more positive toward that partner, plus they felt more comfortable expressing concerns about their relationship.

In the work world, research has shown that managers who make the effort to say “thank you” to people who work for them generally find that those employees are motivated to work harder.

For example, researchers at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania randomly divided university fund-raisers into two groups.

- One group made phone calls to solicit alumni donations in the same way they always had.

- The second group — assigned to work on a different day — received a pep talk from the program’s director, who told them she was grateful for their efforts.

During the following week, the university employees who heard her message of gratitude made 50 percent more fund-raising calls than those who had not been thanked.

The point here is not that thanking people is a tool for getting them to work harder. But that we are much more willing to expend effort when we know it's appreciated.

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Delving deeper into the scientific data, the benefits of practicing gratitude become ever more extraordinary.

A couple of years ago, ABC News was doing one of its annual Thanksgiving news stories and the reporter asked the head of biologic psychology at Duke University Medical Center – a man named Dr. Murali Doraiswamy – what his research into gratitude had revealed. Here's what he said:

"If thankfulness were a drug, it would be the world's best-selling product, with a positive health maintenance indication for every major organ system."

He called gratitude an effective strategy for enhancing wellness throughout our system, with measurable effects on both our bodies and brains.

Research shows that gratitude improves levels of mood neurotransmitters such as serotonin, reproductive hormones such as testosterone, cognitive and pleasure-related neurotransmitters such as dopamine, and stress hormones such as cortisol. Plus, it has positive effects on our inflammatory and immune systems, cardiac and EEG rhythms, blood pressure, and blood sugar.

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As scientists continue to learn more about how our brains work, the more the teachings of many of the world's religions are shown to be incredibly wise.

One new finding is that the human brain has what scientists call a "negativity bias." This means the so-called "bad stuff" in our lives emotionally outweighs the good by about three-to-one. In other words, many more neural and emotional systems are triggered by negative circumstances when compared with what happens when we experience something positive.

Renee Jain, a specialist in positive psychology, explains it this way: "This bias developed over millions of years to help us survive threats in our environment. Fortunately, we no longer have to worry about a saber-toothed tiger attacking us on the way to work. Unfortunately, we still have this bias, which makes us emphasize the negative events, emotions, and interactions in our lives."

She goes on: "Gratitude helps us counteract the negativity bias by focusing our attention on the 'good stuff.' A little of this focus can go a long way to improving one's psychological, social, and physical health."

One of the most powerful practices uncovered in Jain's research is known as the Three Blessings exercise.

Each night before going to bed, you write down three good things that happened to you during the day. The research reveals that those who continue this exercise for one week can increase their happiness – and decrease depressive symptoms – for up to six months.

That's not a lot of effort for some pretty powerful rewards: Just writing down three good things that happened to you that day – things you can be thankful for – and doing it every night for one week, and the benefits can continue for half of a year.

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There's one more aspect of this new research I want to tell you about. A fellow named Mitch Wasden is CEO at Ochsner Medical Center in Baton Rouge. He explains how our brains are organized to avoid threats and to maximize rewards.

"But the interesting thing is that we can't feel the threats or the rewards unless we focus attention on them," he says. "Many good and bad things happen in our lives every day, but until they come to our own attention, we don't get the neurotransmitter release that allows us to feel good or bad."

In other words, we need to notice – to become aware of – these positive or negative things before our brains release the right chemicals for an appropriate

reaction. And the brain doesn't care if it's reacting to reality or fiction, or to something that happened today or two years ago.

This, once again, is the beauty of gratitude. Wasden says: "Feeling thankful for things that have happened acts as a mental movie. With gratitude, the brain releases dopamine, which, in turn, has a positive effect on mood and emotional well-being."

And as I noted a few minutes ago, the positive effects of this surge of happiness can last for weeks on end.

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There's one more scientist I'd like to mention, only this one is Swedish and lived in the 1700s. Emanuel Swedenborg was a well-known inventor and scientist. Then, in his middle age, he had a spiritual awakening and became a leading theologian of his day. His Biblical writings, accounts of astral journeys into the spirit realm, and his reports of his talks with angels and other spirit entities are a treasure trove of Spiritualist beliefs.

Here's something Swedenborg wrote in his *Arcana Coelestia* (#5957) about gratitude:

"The Lord does, indeed, require humility, worship, thanksgiving, and many other things from us. This might seem like repayment, so that the Lord's gifts do not seem to be free. But the Lord does not require these things for His own sake. Rather, they are required for our sake.

"If we are humble, we can accept goodness from the Lord, since we have been separated from selfishness and the evil things that go with it, which stand in the way of our accepting the Lord's goodness.

"This is why the Lord desires a state of humility in us for our own sake: because when we are in this state, the Lord can flow into us with heavenly goodness. The same is true of worship and thanksgiving."

We hear the same urging to be humble and grateful throughout the Old and New Testaments, as well as in certain spirit-channeled teachings.

The noted Trappist monk and author Thomas Merton, in his book *No Man is an Island*, said that people who are ungrateful admit that they do not know God. He says if we are not aware of our gratitude, we don't really know who we ourselves are – that we're not in touch with our life and what it means to be alive and to truly be.

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So now we've heard about the many benefits of gratitude, from secular scientific studies to the teachings of Spirit. But how do we practice gratitude? Is there a preferred method of giving thanks?

The Benedictine monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast, suggests three steps that can help us feel and express gratitude. These steps rely upon our intellect, our will, and our emotions. When good things happen to us, these steps occur spontaneously. Other times, gratitude may require some conscious effort.

- The first step uses our intellect. To feel grateful, we need to recognize the gift. Sometimes this is easy, and sometimes it's a challenge. In order to recognize the gift, we need to pay attention. We need to notice. We need to see that we receive blessings at every moment, and we just need to recognize them as gifts.

- The second step toward gratitude is that we need to acknowledge the gift. We need to see it as something outside of ourselves. This step is very powerful because when we acknowledge our blessings, we are letting something spiritual come into our consciousness. We are allowing ourselves to be touched, to be moved.

- The third step requires our emotions. We need to accept the gift with our whole heart. We need to say "yes!" We need to let gratitude flow into us and fill us with love, with joy. And then – as Swedenborg said – we can enter the realm of worship and thanksgiving.

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Remember, the Law of Attraction teaches us that our future depends largely on the thoughts we think today. So each moment of every day is an opportunity to turn our thinking around, to express our gratitude, and then we can feel more positively – be happier – in the very next moment.

We've heard from scientists the value of reciting and keeping lists of things for which we're grateful, whether those things are big or small. We can keep journals of the things we're thankful for, and we can write letters of gratitude.

But there are two other ways we know to be valuable. One is prayer. The other is meditation. Even a quick act such as blessing someone or something implies thankfulness.

We all know that giving thanks takes no time. It can happen in a flash in our minds. Or in a few moments when we pray or quietly speak our thanks. Or a few minutes if we write a letter or a journal-entry giving thanks for something.

We only need to keep ourselves open to these blessings that surround us throughout each and every day. We need to turn our attention to the good things and away from the problems, the stresses, and the aggravations.

And then we need to remember to express our gratitude.

In closing, I'd like to return to the story of Jesus and the lepers. We're not meant to know the fate of the nine who were healed but never returned to thank Jesus. We only know how Jesus told the one who'd returned to give thanks, "Your faith has made you whole."

This is the beautiful power of recognizing and expressing gratitude.

It makes us whole.