

# Pay It Forward

Gratitude may seem like a simple emotion, but **Robert Emmons** argues that it inspires kindness, connection, and transformative life changes. And he's done the research to prove it.

ELIZABETH BARTLETT IS A PROFESSOR of political science at a Midwestern university. At the age of 42, her irregular heartbeat had become life-threatening. A heart transplant was her last hope, and she was fortunate to receive one. In a book chronicling her journey, she writes that she felt thankful for her new lease on life—but simply feeling thankful wasn't enough.

I have a desire to do something in return. To do thanks. To give thanks. Give things. Give thoughts. Give love. So gratitude becomes the gift, creating a cycle of giving and receiving, the endless waterfall. Filling up and spilling over... perhaps not even to the giver but to someone else, to whoever crosses one's path. It is the simple passing on of the gift.

What Bartlett describes is true gratitude. As this brief passage illustrates, gratitude is more than a pleasant feeling; it is also motivating. Gratitude serves as a key link between receiving and giving: It moves recipients to share and increase the very good they have received. Because so much of human life is about giving, receiving, and repaying, gratitude is a pivotal concept for our social interactions. The famed sociologist Georg Simmel declared that gratitude is "the moral memory of mankind." If every grateful action, he went on to say, were suddenly eliminated, society would crumble.

Yet gratitude's benefits are rarely discussed these days; indeed, in contemporary American society, we've come to overlook, dismiss, or even disparage the significance of gratitude.

Part of the problem, I think, is that we lack a sophisticated discourse for gratitude because we are out of practice. The late philosopher Robert Solomon noted how

relatively infrequently Americans talk about gratitude. Despite the fact that it forms the foundation of social life in many other cultures, in America, we usually don't give it much thought—with a notable exception of one day, Thanksgiving. On the other hand, we tend to scrutinize anger, resentment, happiness, and romantic love.

It has been argued that males in particular may resist experiencing and expressing gratefulness inasmuch as it implies dependency and indebtedness. One

## TOO YOUNG FOR GRATITUDE?

Researchers at Boston University found that only 21 percent of kids younger than six said "thank you" to adults who gave them candy. By contrast, more than 80 percent of kids older than 10 expressed gratitude in the same situation.

fascinating study in the 1980s found that American men were less likely to regard gratitude positively than were German men, and to view it as less constructive and useful than their German counterparts. Gratitude presupposes so many judgments about debt and dependency that it is easy to see why supposedly self-reliant Americans would feel queasy about even discussing it.

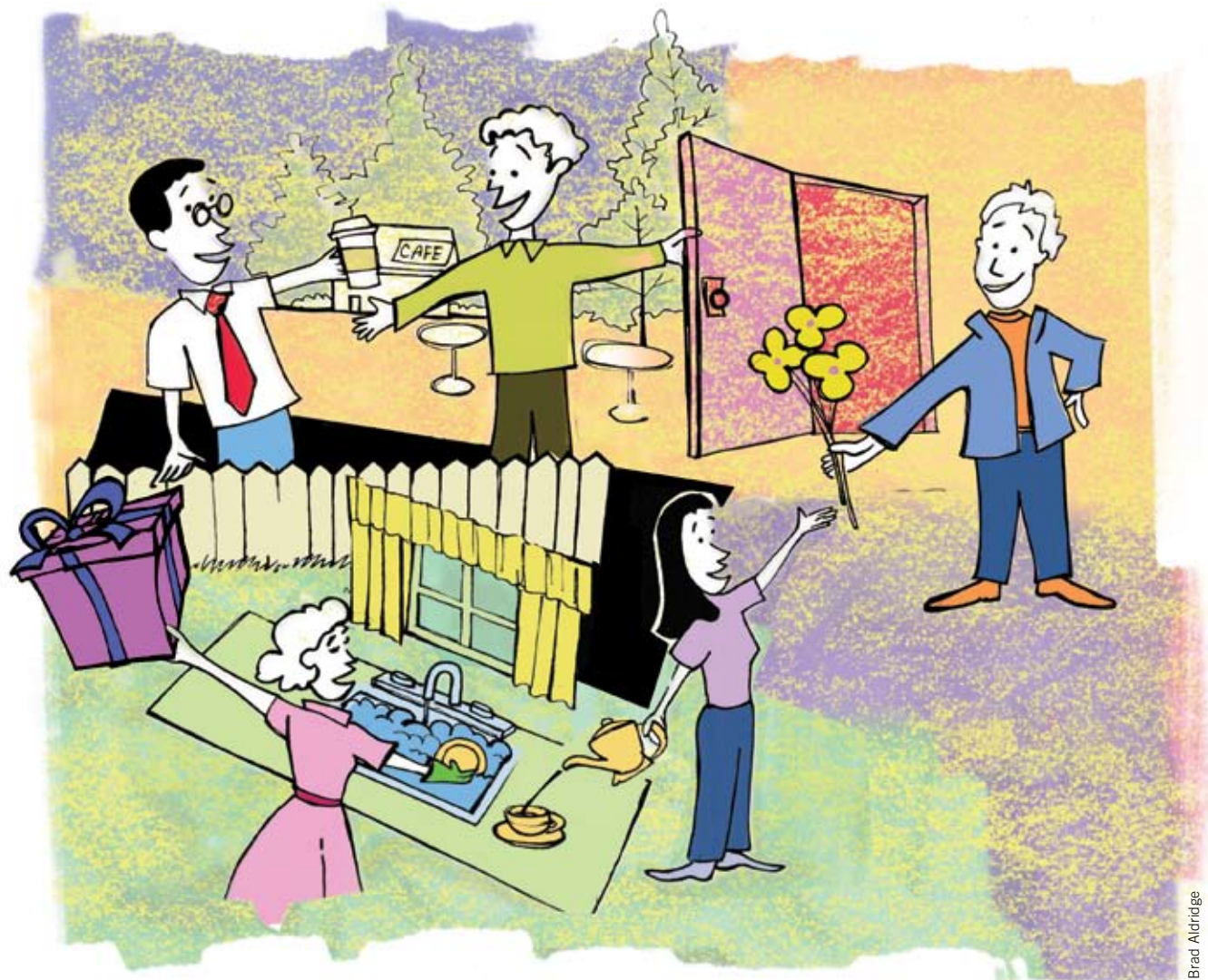
We like to think that we are our own creators and that our lives are ours to do with as we please. We take things for granted. We assume that we are totally responsible for all the good that comes our way. After all, we have earned it. We

deserve it. A scene from *The Simpsons* captures this mentality: When asked to say grace at the family dinner table, Bart Simpson offers the following words: "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing."

In one sense, of course, Bart is right. The Simpson family did earn their own money. But on another level, he is missing the bigger picture. The grateful person senses that much goodness happens independently of his actions or even in spite of himself. Gratitude implies humility—a recognition that we could not be who we are or where we are in life without the contributions of others. How many family members, friends, strangers, and all those who have come before us have made our daily lives easier and our existence freer, more comfortable, and even possible? It is mind boggling to consider.

Indeed, contemporary social science research reminds us that if we overlook gratitude, it will be at our own emotional and psychological peril. After years of ignoring gratitude—perhaps because it appears, on the surface, to be a very obvious emotion, lacking in interesting complications—researchers have found that gratitude contributes powerfully to human health, happiness, and social connection.

I first started studying gratitude 10 years ago. While the emotion initially seemed simplistic to me, I soon discovered that gratitude is a deep, complex phenomenon that plays a critical role in human happiness. My research partnership with Michael McCullough at the University of Miami has led to several important findings about gratitude. We've discovered scientific proof that when people regularly work on cultivating gratitude, they experience a variety of measurable benefits: psychologi-



Brad Aldridge

cal, physical, and social. In some cases, people have reported that gratitude led to transformative life changes. And even more importantly, the family, friends, partners, and others who surround them consistently report that people who practice gratitude seem measurably happier and are more pleasant to be around. I've concluded that gratitude is one of the few attitudes that can measurably change peoples' lives.

## The science of gratitude

At the outset of our research, Mike McCullough and I assumed that regularly practicing gratitude should enhance people's psychological and social functioning; we then based a series of experiments on that assumption.

In our first study, Mike and I randomly assigned participants one of three tasks. We decided to encourage some participants to feel gratitude and others to be negative and irritable. We also created a third, neutral group by which to measure the others.

Once a week for 10 weeks, the study's participants kept a short journal listing five things that had occurred over the past week. They either briefly described, in a single sentence, five things for which they were grateful ("the gratitude condition"), or they did the opposite, describing five hassles that displeased them ("the hassles condition"). The neutral control group was simply asked to list five events or circumstances that had affected them each week, and they were not told to accentuate the positive or negative aspects of those circumstances.

To give a flavor for what participants wrote about, examples of gratitude-inducing experiences included "waking up this morning," "the generosity of friends," "God for giving me determination," and "the Rolling Stones." Examples of hassles were: "hard to find parking," "messy kitchen no one will clean," "finances depleting quickly," and "doing a favor for friend who didn't appreciate it."

Although I believed we'd see the benefits of gratitude, I wasn't sure this result would be inevitable or unequivocal. To be grateful means to allow oneself to be placed in the position of a recipient—to feel indebted, aware of one's dependence on others, and obligated to reciprocate. An exercise like ours might remind people that they need to repay the kindness of others, and they may resent these obligations and even report strong negative feelings toward their benefactors.

So I was surprised at how dramatically positive our results were. At the end of the 10 weeks, participants who'd kept a gratitude journal felt better about their lives as a whole and were more optimistic about the future than participants in either of the other two conditions. To put it into numbers, according to the scale we used to calculate well-being, they were a full 25 percent happier than the other participants. Those in the gratitude condition reported fewer health complaints and even

spent more time exercising than control participants did, and *significantly* more time exercising than those in the hassles condition (nearly 1.5 hours more per week). This is a massive difference. The gratitude group participants also experienced fewer symptoms of physical illness than those in either of the other two groups.

In a second study, we asked participants to keep journals every day for two weeks. People assigned to express gratitude again showed an impressive array of benefits: On surveys we gave all study participants, people who kept a gratitude journal reported feeling more joyful, enthusiastic, interested, attentive, energetic, excited, determined, and strong than those in the hassles condition. They also reported offering others more emotional support or help with a personal problem—supporting the notion that gratitude motivates people to do good. And this was not limited to what they said about themselves. We sent surveys to people who knew them well, and these significant others rated participants in the gratitude group as more helpful than those in the other groups (these friends were not aware of which experimental condition the participants were in).

We got similar results in a study of adults with neuromuscular disorders, many of whom suffered from fatigue, slowly progressive muscle weakness, muscle and joint pain, and muscular atrophy. Little is known about factors affecting the quality of life among people with neuromuscular disorders. This study gave us a unique opportunity to determine if the gratitude intervention could help improve the well-being of these people coping with a chronic physical disease.

Participants in the gratitude condition showed significantly more positive emotions and satisfaction with life than a control group, while also showing fewer negative emotions. They also felt more optimism about the upcoming week and felt closer and more connected to others, even though many lived alone and did not increase their actual contact time with others. Remarkably, these positive emotional and psychological changes weren't only apparent to the participants themselves: Based on reports we received from the spouses of study participants, people in the gratitude condition seemed outwardly happier than people in the control group.

Participants in the gratitude condition also reported getting more hours of sleep each night, spending less time awake before falling asleep, and feeling more refreshed

upon awakening. This finding is enormous, in that sleep disturbance and poor sleep quality have been identified as central indicators of poor overall well-being, as well as increased risk for physical disease and premature death. It may sound simplistic, but the evidence cannot be ignored: If you want to sleep more soundly, count blessings, not sheep.

One of the important features of all of these studies is that we randomly assigned participants to conditions. Many people who tend toward pessimism may have been placed in the gratitude group, just as optimists may have been in the other conditions. Plus, few studies have been

## THANK YOU REVENUE

- When a server writes “thank you” on a restaurant bill, his or her tip goes up by as much as 11 percent.
- Including thank you notes in mail surveys typically increases response rates.
- According to a study in the mid-1970s, jewelry store customers who received a phone call to thank them for their business spent more in the store over the next month than customers who hadn't received the thank you call. In fact, customers who got a thank you call spent more than customers who were thanked *and* told that the store would be having a 20-percent-off sale.

able to successfully create interventions to increase happiness or well-being; we were able to do so with an exercise that required minimal effort.

Other studies have corroborated our findings and further testified to gratitude's benefits, especially for social connections. For example, additional research Mike and I conducted has shown that individuals who report habitually experiencing gratitude engage more frequently in kind or helpful behaviors than do people who experience gratitude less often.

We've also identified people with strong dispositions toward gratitude and asked their friends to tell us about them. We

then compared their friends' responses to feedback we received from the friends of less grateful people. According to their friends, grateful people engaged in more supportive, kind, and helpful behaviors (e.g., loaning money, providing compassion, sympathy, and emotional support) than did less grateful people.

Some particularly informative research has been conducted by David DeSteno and Monica Bartlett at Northeastern University. In their creative studies, participants worked on a computer-generated task; when they were about to receive their score, the screen suddenly went blank. Another person in the room—a “confederate,” someone secretly working with the researchers—“discovered” that the monitor's plug had been pulled partially out of the power strip and then helped display the participant's scores. Upon leaving the laboratory, the participant was asked if they would volunteer to assist in another, ostensibly unrelated experiment, which involved completing a tedious and taxing survey.

Compared to people who didn't receive the favor, including some who were put in a good mood by watching a funny video clip, the people who received the favor and felt grateful toward the confederate were more likely to go through the trouble of filling out the survey. This suggests the unique effects of gratitude in motivating helping behavior, more so than the general effects of simply being in a positive mood.

## Why is gratitude good?

So why is gratitude good? For two main reasons, I think. First, *gratitude strengthens social ties*. It cultivates an individual's sense of interconnectedness. This was beautifully illustrated in a story by Roger, a man we interviewed in our research on patients with chronic neuromuscular disease.

Faced with escalating medical bills and an extended period of unemployment, Roger was on the verge of losing his home—until friends organized a benefit party to raise money for him. He wrote in his gratitude journal:

Well the big day came after much anticipation. About two hundred people showed up, bought raffle tickets, drank, danced, partied and ate til 1 a.m. closing! We went up on stage to thank everyone amid joy, tears, and hugs. My manager cut me a check for over \$35,000 the next week! Without that check my

## The Art of the Thank You

BY SAGE COHEN

I hated writing thank you notes as a child, but I had no choice: My mother was adamant about honoring other people's kindness and generosity. She was like a master composer, insisting that her protégé practice thank-you-note scales. But now, after a childhood spent crafting those notes, the music of gratitude flows naturally from me.

For example, I hired Brant to build an arbor around my front door. I drew it exactly as I wanted, and he realized my vision perfectly. Marveling at how the arbor's beauty uplifted me every time I crossed my threshold, I called Brant a few weeks after the arbor went up. He answered the phone defensively.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, his voice a cold brillo of distance.

"You can say, 'You're welcome,'" I responded.

"I don't understand," Brant shot back.

"I am calling to say 'Thank you.'" I

Silence.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I love my arbor, and I wanted you to know how much I appreciate your work."

More silence.

"I've been doing this work for 20 years, and no one has ever called to thank me for it," said Brant. "People only call me when they have problems." He was incredulous.

I had a similar experience with L.J., who sold me my car at the Honda dealership. He answered my questions, didn't push, and gave me space to think and decide. I wrote to let him know that he completely exceeded my expectations of what a beat-'em-down car sales experience would be like, and that I was happy with my car choice.

L.J. called me a few days later. He said that his was the first thank you note in the history of the dealership. The managers open the mail and then pass on all acceptable communications to the sales team. Evidently, my note was circulated through the ranks, and as a result, L.J. was mercilessly teased. But I'll bet that every one of his peers looked at him differently after that.

Encounters like these give me pause. Are we really living in an age when feedback loops only close with complaints? It seems to me that when we focus on problems, we only foster dissatisfaction and resentment. But when we focus on celebrating goodness, we are likely to tune into what is good.

house/car would have been on the market.... We saw so many friends and co-workers it was truly a great night. The \$1,000 first prize was donated back to us by the winner (a stranger!). My doctor and nurse also attended and our priest stopped by for a few beers—I keep thinking of more highlights as I write. I truly felt like George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life!* I feel myself almost tearing up as I write. My heart warms as I see the people that attended. I also feel a need to help or reach out to others whenever I can help by speaking or just listening.

### TAKEN FOR GRANTED

In a study by researchers at Tel Aviv University in Israel and the University of Pittsburgh, people were asked to imagine getting a ride to the airport—either from a parent, sibling, friend, acquaintance, or a stranger. They said they'd feel the *least* amount of gratitude toward parents or siblings, and the most toward a friend, acquaintance, or stranger.

In Roger's response to that evening, and his desire to help others as a result, we can see how gratitude truly serves as "the moral memory of mankind."

A second reason supporting the power of gratitude is that gratitude increases one's sense of personal worth. When we experience gratitude, we understand that another person wishes us well, and in turn, we feel loved and cared for. If someone has incurred a personal cost by helping me out, then how can I not conclude that I have value in that person's eye?

It might be this link that explains why gratitude can be a powerful antidote to a depressed view of life. One of the reasons gratitude makes us happier is that it forces us to abandon a belief that may accompany severe depression—that the world is devoid of goodness, love, and kindness, and is nothing but randomness and cruelty. By recognizing patterns of benevolence, the depressed person may change his or her self-perception ("I guess I'm not such a loser after all"). By feeling

grateful, we are acknowledging that someone, somewhere, is being kind to us. And therefore, we can see not just that we are worthy of kindness, but that kindness indeed exists in the world and, therefore, that life may be worth living.

We are receptive beings, dependent on the help of others, on their gifts and their kindness. As such, we are called to gratitude. Life becomes complete when we are able to give to others what we ourselves received in the past. In one of our studies, a 33-year-old woman with spinal muscular atrophy captured this dynamic:

All of my life, people have been involved to assist me in getting dressed, showered, to work/school, etc. It was my hope that one day, I would be able to do something really significant for someone else, like others have always done for me. I met a man who was married and very unhappy. He and his wife had a little boy born to them and then die at seven months of age. For 10 years they remained married, trying to have another baby. They were never able to have a child again. They divorced and he became my friend and lover. He told me of his life's dream of having another child. I got pregnant from him and had a miscarriage. I got pregnant again and had an ectopic pregnancy. (No loss of my tube, thank God!) A shot took care of the problem. I got pregnant a third time; our beautiful son was born on 12/20/98. I have never felt as grateful for anything in my life. I was actually able to give something back to someone. Me, who was supposed to die before I was two years old.

It is gratitude that enables us to receive and it is gratitude that motivates us to return the goodness that we have been given. In short, it is gratitude that enables us to be fully human.

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