

The Power of Gratitude

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“Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.” – Melody Beattie

As we approach the holiday season, which in the US starts with Thanksgiving, I like to revisit my understanding of gratitude and consider how to re-attune myself to this practice. And I invite you to do the same together with me.

Gratitude can be understood as being in awe with the miracle of life, as cultivating a consistent connection with the life force within and all around us. Tapping into this energy, we touch the flow of life and are moved to nourish one another’s hearts by sharing our appreciation.

Practicing gratitude develops a reverence for human relationships and our relationship with all of life. As we practice, we become more and more aware of these relationships and how much they mean to us.

I am eternally grateful for a loving relationship with my parents, who were committed to protect me and support my growth, wellbeing, and happiness. That is a blessing I wish every human being could receive. And I am painfully aware this is not always the case.

My mind then goes back to many people who have enriched my life. For example, my French high school teacher, Paola, who checked in with me at the end of class, as I had been peculiarly silent that day (a rare occurrence for me!). Forty years later, I still treasure how she contributed to my sense of mattering.

My mind touches the memory of my Italian supervisor, Maria, who took me under her wings in a way that taught me the experience of “power with” even though she had never heard of NVC.

I think of Inbal Kashtan, who first taught me NVC after I attended a weekend with Marshall B. Rosenberg. And Sylvia Haskvitz who invited me to consider becoming a CNVC assessor and mentored me for years.

As I bring these friends to mind, I feel bubbly inside. I notice my shoulders open while my breath deepens. I am sitting taller.

I pause and invite you now to take a few minutes and bring to mind moments of connection that nourished your heart and conveyed to you a sense of mattering, belonging and cherishing.

Cultivating gratitude is also one of the most effective antidotes for stress. Scientific studies have repeatedly shown that focusing on gratitude and goodness of any given situation lowers stress hormones (such as cortisol and norepinephrine). In other words, choosing where to place our attention shifts our thinking, changes the chemical reactions in our body, and affects our emotional experience.

Living grounded in a consciousness of gratitude, our neurophysiology naturally relaxes and conveys celebration of and connection to life. For example, a smile brightens our face, and our tone of voice sounds warm and cheerful.

“What is there to appreciate in this situation right now?” This can be a powerful question to bring us back to gratitude whenever we might be resisting what is present and going into fear, scarcity, and separation from life.

Nature can also be a powerful channel to reconnect with ourselves and savor the qualities of life. I love the sound of the ocean’s waves rushing on the beach, allowing me to pause, relax, and open to what is precious to me.

What are some of your natural sanctuaries that support you in reconnecting with a sense of gratitude?

Yet, life also brings challenges. As Albert Schweitzer wrote, “At times, our

own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.”

Mataji, my Indian Yoga Master, did this for me -- offering her light and presence when I cried in grief for my father years after his death. (A belief that I needed to remain strong for my mother had blocked those tears from rolling freely when he died.)

I think of my husband Giuseppe who sat in the dark with me, night after night, as I was facing an acute depression after yet another move and the loss of all our reliable connections and familiar world.

I see myself breathing more deeply and sense my body relax and my chest expand. I feel relief; a sense of spaciousness arises in me.

Who and what has rekindled the flame within you when it had dimmed?

Neuroscience has shown that we cannot selectively numb emotions: the brain is unable to access emotions we consider pleasant if we resist the emotions that we consider unpleasant. Gratitude and grief are more intertwined than we would like them to be. In the words of Thomas Lynch, "We get no choice. If we love, we grieve."

Whenever we sense ourselves tense, irritated, or worse, despondent and disillusioned, we might be going through a bout of unrecognized grief. If we cradle it and stay with it for some time, it will reveal to us the losses we have incurred. Those losses speak to us of people and times, objects and places we have valued and cherished; losses we hadn't paid much attention to in the past and that require us now to slow down and be considered with care. Giving those losses space to speak to us will allow us to touch their tenderness and smell their fragrance. At that point, we have come to the place of grace, the opportunity to let them go. The sweet gift of tears we will experience will fill our hearts with gratitude.

As we approach the holidays, we will be confronted with empty seats at the table, now more than ever due to the pandemic , or some unresolved pain with a family member or close friend.

So one request we may dare ask of ourselves may be: *“What have I not given my heart space to grieve, yet?”*

As we reorient ourselves towards gratitude, NVC offers a clear map on where to anchor our attention: what exactly happened (observation) , how we feel about it, and what particular needs we are connected to. We can choose to put words to this experience and amplify our celebration of all that preserves, enriches, and enhances life in the present moment.

Fostering an awareness of interdependent relationships while valuing mutuality in the here and now involves three concrete steps: connecting with ourselves and the person who is contributing to making our life more wonderful, sharing our experience with them, and celebrating the power of giving and receiving. By naming a clear observation of what contributed to our needs and sparked gratitude and joy in us, we make ourselves be known and share our undefended heart.

And in receiving our experience, the person who did that action may touch some clarity and understanding and may join in the celebration of life. Our words may support the other person in knowing that they made a contribution -- thus meeting a need alive in them. This is where the dichotomy between “giver” and “receiver” may dissolve, and there is only GIFT.

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