

THANKS!

How the New Science of Gratitude
Can Make You Happier

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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

BOSTON • NEW YORK 2007

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1

THE NEW SCIENCE OF GRATITUDE

I cannot tell you anything that, in a few minutes, will tell you how to be rich. But I can tell you how to feel rich, which is far better, let me tell you firsthand, than being rich. Be grateful . . . It's the only totally reliable get-rich-quick scheme.

— BEN STEIN, actor, comedian, economist

 IN 1999, the renowned writer Stephen King was the victim of a serious automobile accident. While King was walking on a country road not far from his summer home in rural Maine, the driver of a van, distracted by his rottweiler, veered off the road and struck King, throwing him over the van's windshield and into a ditch. He just missed falling against a rocky ledge. King was hospitalized with multiple fractures to his right leg and hip, a collapsed lung, broken ribs, and a scalp laceration. When later asked what he was thinking when told he could have died, his one-word answer: "Gratitude." An avowedly nonreligious individual in his personal life, he nonetheless on this occasion perceived the goodness of divine influence in the outcome. In discussing the issue of culpability for the accident, King said, "It's God's grace that he [the driver of the van] isn't responsible for my death."

This brief glimpse into the private life of the most successful horror novelist of all time reveals that gratitude can occur in the most unlikely of circumstances. Specializing as he does in writing about

the darker, more fearful side of life, the “King” of terror is an unlikely poster person for gratitude. Normally we associate gratitude with the more elevated, exalted realms of life. For centuries, theologians, moral philosophers, and writers have identified gratitude as an indispensable manifestation of virtue and excellence of character. One contemporary philosopher recently remarked that “gratitude is the most pleasant of virtues and the most virtuous of pleasures.”

Despite such acclaim, gratitude has never, until recently, been examined or studied by scientific psychologists. It is possible that psychology has ignored gratitude because it appears, on the surface, to be a very obvious emotion, lacking in interesting complications: we receive a gift — from friends, from family, from God — and then we feel pleurably grateful. But while the emotion seemed simplistic even to me as I began my research, I soon discovered that gratitude is a deeper, more complex phenomenon that plays a critical role in human happiness. Gratitude is literally one of the few things that can measurably change peoples’ lives.

It is perhaps inevitable that work rectifying such a glaring scientific omission would, like so many other breakthroughs, begin serendipitously. As a professor at the University of California, Davis, in the 1980s, I had become interested in what is now known as positive psychology, the study of human emotions that are healthy and pleasurable aspects of life (as opposed to the field’s prior concentration on clinical and emotional problems). From the late 1980s to the late 1990s, the focus of my research was on happiness and goal strivings. Then, in 1998, I was invited to attend a small conference on what were deemed the “classical sources of human strength”: wisdom, hope, love, spirituality, gratitude, humility. Each scientist was given the charge of presenting the known body of knowledge on his or her topic and developing a research agenda for the future. My first choice, humility, was taken; instead, I was assigned gratitude. I canvassed the theological, philosophical, and social science literatures, culling insights from these disciplines in an attempt to understand the essence

of this universal strength. I soon came to believe that the capacity for gratitude is deeply woven into the fabric of the human species and possibly other species as well.

After the conference, I began a program of scientific research in collaboration with Michael McCullough, psychologist at the University of Miami, in which we made several important discoveries about gratitude. We discovered scientific proof that when people regularly engage in the systematic cultivation of gratitude, they experience a variety of measurable benefits: psychological, physical, and interpersonal. The evidence on gratitude contradicts the widely held view that all people have a “set-point” of happiness that cannot be reset by any known means: in some cases, people have reported that gratitude led to transformative life changes. And, even more important, the family, friends, partners, and others that surround them consistently report that people who practice gratitude seem measurably happier and are more pleasant to be around.

This book showcases the new science of gratitude. Woven into the narrative is a discussion of how the great religious leaders, philosophers, theologians, and writers have written about gratitude in different cultures and historical periods. To encourage the reader to begin the journey of gratitude practice, I include a discussion of practical techniques that will increase readers’ gratitude and happiness. I intend this book to provoke intellectual interest as well as self-examination; I hope to provide you with information that might inspire you to make life-altering decisions.

WHAT GRATITUDE IS

What exactly do we mean by *gratitude*? Most of us have an everyday sense of the concept. When I am grateful, I acknowledge that I have received a gift, I recognize the value of that gift, and I appreciate the intentions of the donor. The benefit, gift, or personal gain might be material or nonmaterial (emotional or spiritual).

From a scientific perspective, though, gratitude defies easy classification. Some years ago, the Web site for a popular radio talk show sold T-shirts emblazoned with the motto “Gratitude is an Attitude.” It certainly is an attitude, but it is much more. Gratitude has also been depicted as an emotion, a mood, a moral virtue, a habit, a motive, a personality trait, a coping response, and even a way of life. The Oxford English Dictionary defines gratitude as “the quality or condition of being thankful; the appreciation of an inclination to return kindness.” The word *gratitude* is derived from the Latin *gratia*, meaning “favor,” and *gratus*, meaning “pleasing.” All derivatives from this Latin root have to do with kindness, generousness, gifts, the beauty of giving and receiving, or getting something for nothing. Gratitude is pleasing. It feels good. Gratitude is also motivating. When we feel grateful, we are moved to share the goodness we have received with others.

Gratitude Is Recognizing and Acknowledging

In my own thinking about gratitude, I’ve found it very helpful to conceive of it in terms of two stages. First, gratitude is the *acknowledgment* of goodness in one’s life. In gratitude we say yes to life. We affirm that all things taken together, life is good and has elements that make it worth living. The acknowledgment that we have received something gratifies us, either by its presence or by the effort the giver went into choosing it. Second, gratitude is *recognizing* that the source(s) of this goodness lie at least partially outside the self. The object of gratitude is other-directed; one can be grateful to other people, to God, to animals, but never to oneself. This is one significant way in which gratitude differs from other emotional dispositions. A person can be angry at himself, pleased with herself, proud of himself, or feel guilty about doing wrong, but it would be bizarre to say that a person felt grateful to herself. Even if you bought yourself a lavish dinner, as I am inclined to do when I order room service, it would be peculiar if I were to give thanks to myself. Thanks are directed outward to the giver of gifts.

From this angle, gratitude is more than a feeling. It requires a willingness to recognize (a) that one has been the beneficiary of someone's kindness, (b) that the benefactor has intentionally provided a benefit, often incurring some personal cost, and (c) that the benefit has value in the eyes of the beneficiary. Gratitude implies humility — a recognition that we could not be who we are or where we are in life without the contributions of others. Gratitude also implies a recognition that it is possible for other forces to act toward us with beneficial, selfless motives. In a world that was nothing but injustice and cruelty, there would indeed be no possibility of gratitude. Being grateful is an acknowledgment that there are good and enjoyable things in the world.

These two terms, *recognition* and *acknowledgment*, need some unpacking. First, they suggest that gratitude (or thankfulness) is an effortful state to create and maintain. It is not for the intellectually lethargic. Thanking belongs to the realm of thinking: the two words stem from common etymological roots. Prominent existential philosopher Martin Heidegger was fond of saying “*Denken ist Danken*” (“thinking is thanking”). The French language is especially rich in expressions having to do with thanking. The term *reconnaissance* is from the French *reconnaissance*, meaning an inspection or exploration for the purpose of gathering information. It typically has a military connotation, but in the context of gratitude it refers to inspecting or exploring one's life for the purpose of seeing to whom thanks should be given. The French expression “*je suis reconnaissant*” is translated as a three-part construal: (1) “I recognize” (intellectually), (2) “I acknowledge” (willingly), and (3) “I appreciate” (emotionally). Only when all three come together is gratitude complete.

This brief etymological detour suggests already that gratitude is much more than mere politeness or a superficial feeling. Recognition is the quality that permits gratitude to be transformational. To recognize is to cognize, or think, differently about something from the way we have thought about it before. Think about an experience in your life when what was initially a curse wound up being a blessing in

disguise. Maybe you were terminated from a job, a marital relationship dissolved, or a serious illness befell you. Gradually, you emerged from the resulting darkness with a new perception. Adversity was transformed into opportunity. Sorrow was transformed into gratefulness. You *re-cognized* the event. The re-cognizing might also involve matters much more mundane than downsizing, divorce, or disability. Driving to work on an ordinary day, we may for the first time notice a sunrise, a meadow bursting with spring blooms, or a formation of geese overhead, and find ourselves suddenly overcome with grateful awe.

Gratefulness is a knowing awareness that we are the recipients of goodness. In gratitude we remember the contributions that others have made for the sake of our well-being. On the recipient side, we acknowledge having received a benefit, and we realize that the giver acted intentionally in order to benefit us. On the giver side, we acknowledge that the receiver was in need of or worthy of the benefit, and we recognize that we are able to provide this benefit. We cannot be grateful without being thoughtful. We cannot shift our mental gears into neutral and maintain a grateful lifestyle. This is why gratitude requires contemplation and reflection.

The Heart and the Head

Lest we overintellectualize gratitude (an occupational hazard for an academic like myself), we must keep in mind that the affective, or feeling, component can be profound. Gratitude engages the heart as well as the mind. *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics* says that “gratitude is the heart’s internal indicator when the tally of gifts outweighs exchanges.” Nearly 200 years ago, the Scottish philosopher Thomas Brown defined gratitude as “the delightful emotion of love to him who has conferred a kindness on us, the very feeling of which is itself no small part of the benefit conferred.”

I have come to believe that inside of us looms a powerful need to express gratitude for the goodness we have received. For some people,

on some occasions, the feeling wells up inside until it spills over. Perhaps this is why we find that often we cry tears of gratitude. Gratitude calls out for expression until it can no longer be contained.

Elizabeth Bartlett is a professor of political science at a Midwestern university. At the age of 42, chronic tachycardia (an irregular heartbeat) necessitated a heart transplant. Four years earlier she suffered a cardiac arrest, and medication failed to improve her condition. In her book chronicling her journey, she describes this sense of overflowing gratitude:

Yet I have found that it is not enough for me to be thankful. 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. To give from the fullness of my being. This comes not from a feeling of obligation, like a child's obligatory thank-you notes to grandmas and aunts and uncles after receiving presents. Rather, it is a spontaneous charitableness, 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.

Getting What We Don't Deserve

An additional, essential aspect of gratitude is the notion of *undeserved merit*. When I am grateful, I recognize that I have no claim on the gift or benefit I received; it was freely bestowed out of compassion, generosity, or love. One philosopher of ethics thus defines gratitude as "the willingness to recognize the unearned increments of value in one's experience." The theological term for this is *grace*. So we have another trio of terms that go together: *grace*, *gratis*, and *gratitude*. They flow into one another. Perceive grace and you will naturally feel grateful. Grace is unearned. It is a free gift. If you believe in grace, you believe that there is a pattern of beneficence in the world

that exists quite independently of your own striving and even your own existence. Gratitude thus depends upon receiving what we do not expect to receive or have not earned, or receiving more than we deserve or earned. Grace is why the discussion of gratitude is so at home in religious discourses and perhaps why it has proven so intractable in the social sciences. When Stephen King said that it was by God's grace that he was alive, his mental calculus told him that given what might have happened on the rural road that day, he did not get what he deserved.

The problem, though, is that for many of us, a grace-filled worldview is difficult to sustain. The human mind contains mental tools that appear to work against the tendency to perceive grace. We are forgetful. We take things for granted. We have high expectations. We assume that we are totally responsible for all the good that comes our way. After all, we have earned it. We deserve it. When asked to pray at the family dinner table, son Bart Simpson offered the following words: "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing." In one sense, of course, Bart is correct. 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 quite independently of his actions or even in spite of himself. We are the recipients of help from others, both past and present, and we need to be reminded of this. In his commencement address at Ithaca College, Ben Stein, whom I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, told graduating seniors, "We're all heirs and heiresses to a society of freedom and plenty that most of us did absolutely nothing to earn. It just fell into our laps." We can be proud of our accomplishments yet simultaneously realize they would have been impossible without help from others. This realization is the soil that permits gratitude to germinate.

Gratitude can also be a response to unmerited evilness. While we most often link gratitude in our minds with pleasant outcomes, gratitude is not an infrequent response even in the midst of horrendous trauma and tragedy. My work has led me to interview people who have suffered terrible illness and loss, including the events of

September 11, 2001, and the destructive hurricanes that hit the southeastern United States in 2005. Even in the face of such terrible adversity, it is possible to be grateful for a benefit one has received. And, more important, people who experience gratitude in such dire circumstances consistently report that they are happier than those who do not and are less susceptible to negative emotions and outcomes. It is this presence of thankfulness in trying times that enables us to conclude that gratitude is not simply a form of “positive thinking” or a technique of “happy-ology,” but rather a deep and abiding recognition and acknowledgment that goodness exists under even the worst that life offers. That aspect of gratitude is one of the most intriguing to me.

WHY DOES GRATITUDE MATTER?

“Be grateful to those who do well to you. Be thankful for your blessings” is something that we teach our children at the youngest of ages. It is more than empty platitudes. Gratitude is an important dimension to our life as we interact with one another in our everyday affairs. It is impossible to imagine a world where individuals don’t receive and give gratitude to one another on a regular basis. Binding people together in relationships of reciprocity, gratitude is one of the building blocks of a civil and humane society. Georg Simmel, a prominent early-twentieth-century Swiss sociologist, referred to gratitude as “the moral memory of mankind.” He wrote that “if every grateful action . . . were suddenly eliminated, society (at least as we know it) would break apart.” We need gratitude to function in relation to others.

To illustrate this connective component, Roger, a man I interviewed, was on the verge of losing his home due to escalating medical bills and an extended period of unemployment. He wrote in his gratitude journal:

I was scheduled back to work August 7, 2000, and my coworkers and friends threw a benefit for me at a rock-n-roll club called

“the Double Door.” Located in an “upcoming” neighborhood the place was known as an opening stage for the Rolling Stones tour. My building manager spearheaded the effort organizing a raffle of restaurants’ dinners, sports items, and free buffet and music. My wife, Sue, felt guilty about not having been part of the planning or promotion, we felt like this was asking too much of our friends and families but we weren’t in charge so we sat back and just appreciated the effort and hard work being done on our behalf. Was it gonna be a bust? Or success? We didn’t know but Sue, Brian, and the three boys were gonna show up to thank anyone who showed up. Well, the big day came after much anticipation. About two hundred people showed up, bought raffle tickets, drank, danced, partied, and ate till 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 house/car would have been on the market. Insurance picked up the majority of bills, but weekly tests and medication and follow-up ran into the thousands. We saw so many friends and coworkers it was truly a great night. The \$1000 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.

One needs simply to try to imagine human relationships existing without gratitude, as Simmel did in his thought experiment. By way of contrast, *ingratitude* leads inevitably to a confining, restricting, and “shrinking” sense of self. Emotions such as anger, resentment, envy, and bitterness tend to undermine happy social relations. But the virtue of gratitude is not only a firewall of protection against such corruption of relationships; it also contributes positively to friend-

ship and civility, because it is both benevolent (wishing the benefactor well) and just (giving the benefactor his due). In gratitude, we show our respect for others by recognizing their good intentions in helping us. A grateful outlook can even dominate the life of an entire culture, as can be seen in certain Eastern cultures where individuals view themselves as recipients of endless ancestrally bestowed blessings.

But we can do better than thought experiments. Devotional writers have long assumed that an effective strategy for repositioning one's spiritual and emotional life is to count one's blessings. At the same time, current psychological dogma states that one's capacity for joy is biologically set. Our experimental research has begun to put these conflicting assertions to rigorous test. Preliminary findings suggest that those who regularly practice grateful thinking do reap emotional, physical, and interpersonal benefits. Adults who keep gratitude journals on a regular basis exercise more regularly, report fewer illness symptoms, feel better about their lives as a whole, and are more optimistic about the future. These benefits were observed in experimental studies when comparisons were made with those who were asked to chronicle their daily hassles or to reflect on ways in which they were better off than others. In daily studies of emotional experience, when people report feeling grateful, thankful, and appreciative, they also feel more loving, forgiving, joyful, and enthusiastic. These deep affections appear to be formed through the discipline of gratitude.

There is the short-term feeling of gratitude, but also the long-term disposition of gratefulness. Our groundbreaking research has shown that grateful people experience higher levels of positive emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, love, happiness, and optimism, and that the practice of gratitude as a discipline protects a person from the destructive impulses of envy, resentment, greed, and bitterness. We have discovered that a person who experiences gratitude is able to cope more effectively with everyday stress, may show increased resil-

ience in the face of trauma-induced stress, and may recover more quickly from illness and benefit from greater physical health. Our research has led us to conclude that experiencing gratitude leads to increased feelings of connectedness, improved relationships, and even altruism. We have also found that when people experience gratitude, they feel more loving, more forgiving, and closer to God. Gratitude, we have found, maximizes the enjoyment of the good — our enjoyment of others, of God, of our lives. Happiness is facilitated when we enjoy what we have been given, when we “want what we have.”

The significance of gratitude lies in its ability, as Ben Stein cogently noted, to enrich human life. Gratitude elevates, it energizes, it inspires, it transforms. People are moved, opened, and humbled through experiences and expressions of gratitude. Gratitude provides life with meaning by encapsulating life itself as a gift. Without gratitude, life can be lonely, depressing, impoverished.

So gratitude is a key to happiness, as I will argue from a scientific angle. And happiness itself is a good thing. An implicit assumption that many of us hold is that happiness depends on *happenings* — by what happens in our lives. We believe that success in life — whether in the boardroom or the bedroom — makes people happier. Yet a recent review of the scientific literature on happiness revealed that happiness yields numerous rewards for the individual and *precedes* these outcomes. This means that happiness makes good things happen. It actually promotes positive outcomes. The benefits of happiness include higher income and superior work outcomes (for example, greater productivity, higher quality of work, greater occupational attainment), larger social rewards (such as more satisfying and longer marriages, more friends, stronger social support, and richer social interactions), more activity, energy, and flow, and better physical health (for example, a bolstered immune system, lowered stress levels, and less pain), and even longer life.

Consider what this means in concrete terms. Two highly sought outcomes are longevity and affluence. We want to live long and pros-

per. Heavy cigarette smoking can knock off about six years from a person's life. Conversely, happiness can add as much as *nine* years to one's life expectancy. What about net worth? A longitudinal study of college students found that happiness levels in college predicted income sixteen years later. The most cheerful students earned \$25,000 more per year than their more dour classmates.

But a long and comfortable life isn't everything, is it? The scientific literature suggests that happy individuals are also more creative, helpful, charitable, and self-confident, have better self-control, and show greater self-regulatory and coping abilities. Happy people, the facts clearly show, are flourishing and successful people. Therefore, interventions that increase people's enduring joy become even more desirable as happiness predicts changes in other positive outcomes, such as altruistic behavior, creativity, work performance, physical health, and social relationships.

Surely a deep and abiding gratefulness — the ability to relish the little pleasures that common occurrences afford — is a desirable human quality. Among the questions I will explore in this book are: How do we get there? How do we get from feeling gratitude to being grateful? Is gratitude one of those “unfair” gifts given to those who possess sunny dispositions, those who do not instinctively feel the anxiety, pain, and isolation of living in this world? Is this an emotion that comes from a chemical predisposition to optimism or are there choices we can make? Can we choose gratitude? I conclude that gratitude can indeed be cultivated in a positive way, and that it can become a critical component of human happiness. In the final chapter, I present a discussion of some of the exercises I recommend readers use to increase their gratitude and, consequently, to enrich their lives.

SOME RESERVATIONS ABOUT GRATITUDE

You may be already raising some objections about a grateful approach to life. I have heard the following protests lodged: Is not grati-

tude in today's day and age overly naive? Gratitude is fine for Hallmark sentimentality, but what of the harsh realities of life? Does it ignore tragedy and suffering? If I am grateful for my life, will my contentment lead me to avoid being an agent of change in the world? Are grateful people too satisfied with the status quo? Does gratitude undermine autonomy and self-initiated striving? Can I be justified in not feeling grateful even though others have been kind to me? What about people who have harmed me but also provided me with benefits? How do I handle this conflict?

For the inquisitive mind, these questions and others arise. One of my goals in this book is to provide some serious, thoughtful reflection on these objections, using science-based evidence where possible. Gratitude is a natural response to a particular situation when good things happen to an individual, but there may be times when it is an incorrect response. We may be so biased by good things that happen to us that we respond incorrectly to a particular situation. For example, we may feel gratitude toward an individual whose intentions do not deserve such a response. We may credit inanimate objects for saving our lives or bringing us luck to the point that we feel gratitude to the objects. We deceive ourselves into thinking that we should be grateful to things. We are grateful for our softball game not being rained out, for winning the lottery, or for finding a parking space in the mall lot at Christmas.

Part of the problem, I think, is that we lack a sophisticated discourse for gratitude because we are out of practice. The philosopher of emotion Robert Solomon has noted how relatively infrequently Americans talk about gratitude but how this emotion forms the foundation of interaction in many other cultures. Gratitude is a "hypocognized" emotion in America, meaning that collectively we typically don't give it much thought. On the other hand, anger, resentment, happiness, and romantic love tend to be overly scrutinized or "hypercognized." It has been argued that conventional males may be averse to experiences and expressions of gratefulness inasmuch as

they imply dependency and indebtedness. One fascinating study in the 1980s found that American men were less likely to evaluate 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 American males would feel queasy about even discussing it. We don't like being reminded that we needed help. We don't want to be beholden to our saviors. Gratitude would seem to pose a challenge for this reason alone.

Gratitude can be a bitter pill to swallow, humbling us and demanding as it does that we confront our own sense of self-sufficiency. So we may avoid it as we avoid going to the doctor for the annual prostate exam. But it is also good medicine, and its side effects are few. Across cultures and time spans, experiences and expressions of gratitude have been treated as both basic and desirable aspects of human personality and social life. Gratitude is a virtue as well as an emotion, the possession of which enables a person to live life well and therefore must receive a hearing in any comprehensive treatment of the virtues. The Roman philosopher Cicero held that "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others." Cicero's contemporary, Seneca, maintained, "He who receives a benefit with gratitude repays the first installment on his debt." "He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has," wrote Epictetus. The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich." Psychologists who have aligned themselves with positive psychology are quite interested in those psychological propensities that lead to a rich life, and my message is that gratitude is one of these essential propensities.

While gratitude is seemingly universally praised, ingratitude is universally condemned. Seneca called ingratitude an "abomination." The Enlightenment philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant,

at odds on most heady philosophical issues, found common ground on ingratitude. Hume remarked that “Of all the crimes that human creatures are capable of committing, the most horrid and unnatural is ingratitude,” while Kant contended that “ingratitude . . . is the essence of vileness.”

Despite these powerful assertions, opinion concerning gratitude’s status as a virtue is far from unanimous. In search for universal consensus, we should not overlook the ambivalence about the place of gratitude in the ancient world that is echoed by many of our contemporaries today. It was La Rochefoucauld who said, “Gratitude in the generality of men is only a strong and secret desire of receiving greater favours.” Aristotle thought gratitude was a weakness. He found gratitude incompatible with magnanimity and therefore did not include it in his list of virtues. Magnanimous people, according to Aristotle, insist on their self-sufficiency and therefore find it demeaning to be indebted to others. Nietzsche believed gratitude was often a disguise for covert interests and that having a person’s gratitude guaranteed that person’s loyalty. Making the previous quotes generous by comparison, Dorothy Parker opined that gratitude “is the meanest and most sniveling attribute in the world.”

Nowadays, it is not so much that we are strongly opposed to gratitude on philosophical and moral grounds, but rather that we simply don’t think about it very often. In fact, we can be downright amnesiac when it comes to gratitude. The Reverend Peter Gomes, distinguished professor in the Harvard University Divinity School, wrote, “When I saw the Christmas lights being strung up across the city streets and the Santa Clauses in the store windows at Sears, I knew that Thanksgiving could not be far away.” In Gomes’s view, we have forgotten Thanksgiving in contemporary life, and more fundamentally, we have forgotten the very reason for Thanksgiving: expressing gratitude. Contemporary social science research will remind us that if we overlook gratitude, it will be at our own emotional and psychological peril.

One of the risks in writing a book on gratitude is that it might

fall prey to the dual biases of sentimentality and sermonization. The sentimentalizing bias emphasizes the emotional aspect and personal benefits of gratitude: It feels good, so personal happiness becomes the ultimate motivation for gratitude. Gomes noted that “Once we have been liberated from the count-your-many-blessing-name-them-one-by-one routine, we will have made a significant step.” The sermonizing bias stresses, on the other hand, the moral imperative nature of gratitude: We ought to be grateful, and wouldn’t the world be a better place if everyone were more grateful? Although there is certainly a positive valence and moral imperative to gratitude, an exclusive focus on these two elements would fail to address the growing body of scientific scholarship on the topic. Besides, these assumptions are just flatly wrong. Far from being a warm, fuzzy sentiment, gratitude is morally and intellectually demanding. Similarly, feeling as if we *should* feel gratitude after being sermonized might produce resentment, not gratitude. This book, though, is based on scientific discoveries. However, although I strive for objectivity and accuracy in describing and explaining the benefits of grateful living, don’t mistake objectivity for neutrality. I am not neutral about gratitude. I believe it to be the best approach to life.

GRATITUDE AS A CHOSEN ATTITUDE

From reading accounts of gratitude from people around the world and throughout history, I became convinced that gratitude is an approach to life that can be freely chosen for oneself. It does not depend upon objective life circumstances such as health, wealth, or beauty. Saying that gratitude is a choice means that we can select it from an array of responses to what life offers. The late Catholic priest, psychologist, and devotional writer Henri Nouwen knew this:

Gratitude as a discipline involves a conscious choice. I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are steep and hurt and resentful. It is amazing how many occasions present

themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of a complaint. I can choose to be grateful when I am criticized, even when my heart responds in bitterness . . . I can choose to listen to the voices that forgive and to look at the faces that smile, even while I still hear words of revenge and see grimaces of hatred.

What does it mean to say that gratitude is a choice? It means that we sharpen our ability to recognize and acknowledge the giftedness of life. It means that we make a conscious decision to see blessings instead of curses. It means that our internal reactions are not determined by external forces.

That gratitude is a conscious decision does not imply that it is an easy decision. The ability to choose gratitude may not come easily, naturally, or effortlessly. While gratitude is pleasant, it is not easy. We have to work at it. It must be consciously cultivated. Albert Einstein admitted that he needed to remind himself a hundred times a day that his inner and outer life depend on the labors of other men, living and dead, and that "I must exert myself in order to give in the measure as I have received and I am still receiving." A number of personal burdens and external obstacles block grateful thoughts. A number of attitudes are incompatible with a grateful outlook on life, including perceptions of victimhood, an inability to admit one's shortcomings, a sense of entitlement, and an inability to admit that one is not self-sufficient. In a culture that celebrates self-aggrandizement and perceptions of deservingness, gratitude can be crowded out. It is also easy to see how gratitude can have a difficult time surviving in a culture that celebrates consumption. But in gratitude we recognize that we are not ultimately producers and consumers but, above all, the recipients of gifts.