

## THE GRATITUDE CURE: TURNING FROM ANXIETY, FEAR or ENTRENCHED VICTIMHOOD TO JOY, CREATIVITY & GRACE

Gratitude, particularly expressing it, is associated with happiness in a number of studies. Expressing gratitude increases: the quality of a person's health, happiness scores, positive emotions, optimism, the savoring of satisfying experiences, resilience and strength in the face of adversity, and a sense that goodness arises, at least in part, from sources outside ourselves (e.g. Nature, other people, Higher Power). Gratitude reduces pain and suffering. When superiors thank their subordinates, they are motivated to work harder. In one study, students who were thanked for their efforts in a phone message made 50% more fund-raising calls, than those who did not receive the same message.

I knew none of this research when a friend, diagnosed with 4<sup>th</sup> stage pancreatic cancer, began an online group for posting a "Gratitude List." I didn't know her when she began it. I learned about it in the midst of my divorce. Like most people, I was overwhelmed by the multiple losses, and endless financial and legal demands. While I knew about mediation and collaborative divorce, my co-parent chose to litigate. I felt at times like I would implode from the sheer number of unknowns about my own and my children's futures, the need to act and make decisions anyway, and the impossibility, under such pressure, of learning quickly enough what I needed to know to feel I could move forward powerfully, now. Two other friends were "on the gratitude list" and encouraged my participation, given their own positive results. My friend has passed long since, and it was Robin Carlson, in her efforts to muster courage and strength, that left the Gratitude List Legacy to a group of us, that have since shared it with countless others.

During the divorce there were times as I wrote my Gratitude List when I was simultaneously weeping. During these times, I felt as if I were prying my clutching fingers from a safety bar, when I was actually clutching my anger, grief, hurt, blame and self-pity. I remember once, as I was writing "**Today I love and am grateful for . . . my co-parent's generosity,**" I felt furious and crying because given the adversarial nature of litigated divorce, my co-parent left me with no spousal and child support for four months, until it was court-ordered. The last thing I wanted was to be grateful to him. Slowly, my disciplined gratitude moved my inner life into alignment with my values in the midst of a maelstrom of real challenges. Such efforts literally re-route your neurology and the related neurotransmitters that impact brain chemistry. The choice was simple: Choose living on the cross of victimhood, or choose creating a life worthy of my life.

One of the guidelines we'd created for the list was "no qualifiers." So I found the one small speck (as I saw it then) of generosity in my co-parent, and declared gratitude for it, *without qualification*. This actually forced me to give up, at least *in that moment*, feeling "justified" and "right" about my anger and resentment. "No qualifiers" helped me choose life over a self-imposed "crucifixion." (It has since helped with physical pain/distress as well.) It helped to force me to find at least one element that was true about a perspective that directly countered my righteous attitude and my feeling victimized. Over the months and now years, this one practice has been transformative.

From personal experience I can say that, over time, a Gratitude Practice, *especially when shared with others*, not only grounded and lifted me out of my divorce-related overwhelm, anxiety and depression, but it also allowed me to:

- Take more of a bird's-eye view when a crisis creates a biology-driven narrow focus

- Find beauty in the mundane, almost automatically
- Be gracious, kind and even wise when the impulse had been to punch him
- Be generally kinder and more loving
- Be more self-acknowledging
- Share myself more freely and generously with the people I love and trust
- Be more focused on my ways of being, and less focused on “stuff” and “doing”
- Connect with people I love and respect over decades
- Acknowledge the goodness in myself and those I love, regardless of how I might be feeling in a given moment

I had no idea, when I began this practice, that research would affirm that the process of expressing gratitude actually changes your neurology, and rewires your brain biochemically in a saner, more positive direction, regardless of your circumstances.

So, here is how the Gratitude Practice Cure works:

**1. The Gratitude List must be shared.**

It is not sufficient to simply write it down in a diary, for example. While this is helpful, it’s far more effective to “share it.” We are “herd” animals. Our sense of who we are largely arises out of how others see and experience us, and how they communicate that back to us. And we *train ourselves as well as others to see and experience us in the ways they do, largely via our language* -- in the ways we speak about ourselves – our strengths and vulnerabilities. I knew clearly that I was sharing with a group of people who were committed to their own growth, who understood the detrimental effects to self/others of being judgmental, and who were capable of honoring their commitments – not just to themselves, but also to each other.

**2. You start the Gratitude List with “Today, I Love and am Grateful for . . . “**

Then you list 10 items after that. I number them so I don’t have to go back and count, but you can use bullets, dashes or whatever you want. Somehow, adding the word “Love” to what you’re grateful for augments the positive effect of creating the list. Can’t explain why, exactly, but it works.

**3. No more or less than 10 items** on the list. And you can use one or two words for an item, and no more than 1 sentence per item. Ideally it’s no more than a phrase rather than a full sentence. Coming up with 10 things is a *daily* commitment. Because it’s a commitment, you don’t “bail” by doing less, or you’ll lose faith in yourself as someone who doesn’t keep your commitments (as so often occurs with diets). Nor do you indulge in doing “more.” You’re sharing the list and people don’t want to commit to reading your daily epistles, if they’re long and wordy. Similarly, if you weenie out on doing at least 10, whether they follow suit or not, your “listeners” will feel the pull to do less when they “don’t feel like doing” what they’ve committed to sharing as well – in other words, if you let go of your commitments, you lower the standards of the group. 10. Doing more or less also erodes the powerful effect, given that our effectiveness and trustworthiness (with ourselves as well as others) is directly linked to **doing what we said we’d do, by when we said we’d do it**. Most report experiencing more positive results when they do this in the early morning as it sets the tone for the day. You can usually do it in less than 5 minutes, once you get the hang of it.

**4. You commit to doing your list on specific days, whether you feel like it or not.** If you have a smart phone, there is virtually no “excuse” to not do your list. If you’re in a remote part of the

globe with no internet, you simply make sure your “Gratitude Group” knows ahead of time, and your lists are still created in “drafts.” Some groups do it 5 days a week. Ours did it 7 days a week (we’ve been doing this practice for over 20 years now). When I first started out, it took me about 10-15 minutes. Now it takes me 1-3 minutes. Longer, if I have the time to bask in it. Ideally, you do this in the morning, as it sets the tone for the day. Some in our group (night owls) only commit to getting it in before midnight.

**5. No promotion of your latest projects or solicitation of a professional nature.** This is to protect you and your friends from turning the list into a marketing strategy that alters the “spirit” and focus of the exchange. For example, we all systematically removed our business “signatures” from our email group shares, or send a small, separate group email to each other if we’re wanting to promote something we’re doing or solicit volunteers/donations for a pet project, or wanting others to participate in a professional activity of some kind.

**6. One person is “the keeper” of the list.** It can rotate, but how it rotates is established and agreed to in very clear terms so everyone knows what to expect and **someone is always “holding the space” for the gratitude of the list participants.** The Keeper contacts people, in an email separate from the list, and simply notes very neutrally, for example, if they slipped into a negative judgment (e.g. “I noticed that you slipped a negative judgment in there.”). The Keeper would then *invite the person to redo it* without the judgment, in a private email exchange with the “Keeper” (e.g. Wanna try the same item without the judgment?). **The idea is that we all want to be or learn to be as mindful as possible of the ways we think/relate that “take us down,” and to commit to re-routing our neurology,** along with our intentions and efforts in a more effective and satisfying direction.

**7. Decide how many people’s posts you and your group are willing to commit to reading, and limit your group to that number.** I have to admit that I’m good with a maximum of about 4 or 5. I was in a group of 10 once and it was definitely too much to take on reading daily. It can be tricky to tell some people they can’t be part of your group, unless you explain how it works. I’ve handled this by committing myself to sharing the practice and empowering the new person to engage other close friends in the practice. **I also commit to supporting the new “Keeper” for a while.**

**8. No responses are required to others’ posts. This practice is *for you* – for *your* benefit.** The whole process can get bogged down if participants start feeling obligated to affirm each other, or miffed when they’re not affirmed or mentioned. **Blind copy** recipients – avoid burdening others with responses to your post. Often, participants may affirm each other via a separate, private email for something said on the list. Or sometimes they respond to another’s posts by being grateful for that particular friend’s item, in their next posting. For example, if *you* said I Love and Am Grateful for . . . “ and an item was “getting a new job I love,” in *my* next gratitude posting on the following day I might say that “Today, I Love and Am Grateful for . . . Maria’s getting a job she loves.” **We don’t get into cross-talking around each other’s postings, as this distracts and directs our attention towards engaging others, instead of simply *listening deeply to ourselves and sharing that.***

On a similar note – I have a group of people that I share my list with, but who don’t share this practice with me. They are people I love and value, and who often live far away in several other countries. It’s a way of staying in touch, that’s way more satisfying than getting stuck reading a

lengthy Holiday-type newsletter about the comings and goings of my life. I don't do this more than about once every two weeks.

The Gratitude List is brief and from the heart, and I give *everyone* I send it to genuine permission to let me know if it *ever* becomes burdensome to receive, and to delete or not read it, or simply to ask me to take them off the email list. People are busy. I do *not* share it with people who become upset, hurt, etc. when they don't show up on my list for some reason (yes – had that happen with 2 people who felt I “should” have mentioned them), or who judge me and our relationship if I didn't mention some way that person was kind to me.

I don't want to train myself to focus on others' ego needs, when I'm focused on reaching into myself, and creating Love and Gratitude. Consequently, I find a way to just stop sending them the list. Not surprisingly, there is something diagnostically predictable about people who think this practice is or “should be” about them. The only other somewhat adverse response I've had was someone who felt I was “rubbing it in her face” that my life was so much “better” than hers. The irony was that that person's life was actually more effective on all fronts at the time, but envy was a struggle for her. She actually asked me to take her off the list, because it was too upsetting. I obliged politely.

At the same time, I've been pleasantly surprised a number of times. People who never respond – I'm talking *years* of no response, will tell me when I see them 8 years later how much and how often they were inspired by the list when they were going through a particularly rough patch. It helped them see a light at the end of their own tunnel somehow. I've had this happen on numerous occasions where I frankly assumed the person was just deleting my email. I didn't “worry” about it at all, yet I never anticipated that *someone else* might actually be enlivened or encouraged by it.

**9. No explaining or catching each other up, and no “stories.”** In an example above I mentioned Maria. If 3 people in my group don't know who she is, I don't explain it. If they don't know my sister, I might say “my sister” rather than mentioning her by name if I mention her in my gratitude list. ***This practice is not about sharing stories, either positive or negative.*** Besides, our “stories” are largely distractions from the point of the exercise. The point is to redirect our focus and efforts in the direction of our Love and Gratitude, and towards what we want to create for ourselves with our lives. I read a quote recently: ***“What you perceive is who you are.”*** No kidding!

One way to avoid “stories” is to ask yourself: Is this bunch of detail a lot of “story” that's actually a distraction from *my experience* of love and gratitude?? Am I focusing on others' “knowing” or my own experience? People don't really want to hear all the details (especially daily!) and sharing them doesn't particularly benefit *you*. *What/Whom do you Love? What are you Grateful for? That's it.*

Stealing others' gratitude items is totally acceptable! Steal, borrow, rephrase or not – as long as it comes from your heart when you write it, it's FINE. You may/may not acknowledge the person when you steal (e.g. Leigh's: Money in the bank, and more on the way”). Doesn't matter. ***No ego.***

**10. No negative judgments.**

One of the purposes of the Gratitude List is to turn the mind away from that which discourages, condemns, alienates, etc. and towards that which encourages, creates, uplifts, inspires and

connects. Judgments are really “stories,” our interpretations of the facts. *Judgments alienate us from ourselves and from others.* They block movement in any direction. There’s nowhere to go in the face of judgment. When you judge, you slam the door on the other, and you also slam the door *on your self-reflection.* You stop self-reflecting. If I have the thought that you’re “an idiot” – I dispense with you and slam the door on you. And, at the same time I dispense with my having to self-reflect about my *own contributions* to the state of our relationship.

(I’m not using the word “judgment” here to mean discernment . . . we all HAVE to make certain judgment calls, to discern, for example, what is healthy, versus unhealthy. That’s discernment – I’m using negative “judgment” here to mean primarily blame, criticism or any kind of condemnation.)

If someone says “You are X,” where X is negative, you can’t really argue with that because it’s a perspective, an opinion, *not a fact.* And it’s usually an opinion to which the person who is judging is *emotionally attached,* at least at some level. You can get defensive and try to explain yourself, or try to persuade and debate, but then you’ve taken a one-down position in the face of someone’s opinion. Furthermore, all the research says *that the more you oppose someone, whether directly or indirectly, the more they reflexively resist you, and the more trust is eroded.*

What works is to “lean in” with empathic understanding, without necessarily having to agree or endorse a person’s “position.” Once you convey a willingness to understand, you may be able to ask something like: “Are you interested in the possibility of a different idea about that?” If the person says “yes,” then you’re at least eliciting (rather than trying to force) an opening to alternative information. If the person says “no,” at least you know it’s pointless to continue. A person who is judging has taken “a subjective position” that’s unchallenged in that person’s mind, and they relate to that judgment as if it were a fact, when it’s not. Once a person judges, and is attached to that judgment, there is nothing you can do about it *unless the person is willing.*

Negative judgments about you or anyone or anything else halt growth and forward movement. In the U.S, the impact of negative judgments is keenly observed in the way Congressional Republicans and Democrats have taken to grinding national progress to a halt. Both sides judge, debate, counterattack and get entrenched in rigid positions that allow for *no forward movement.* Moral outrage *literally* is a marketing strategy that sells news, social media hits, etc. *We literally get biologically reinforced* by the experience of it – whether or not a real threat exists. When we get busy “being right” -- moral outrage and negative judgments give us a biological “hit” – like a drug – we feel justified, we get to be “right” and make others “wrong,” we get to “dominate” and avoid domination (e.g. note the endless banter on Facebook, and the impulse to join in). But as many have noted, having “I was right” on your tombstone makes for a life shallowly lived. We indulge moral outrage and negative judgments in all areas of our lives, and it takes deliberate effort to move our minds and our focus in a different direction. The Gratitude List is an opportunity to move away from the alienation that negative judgments create in our thoughts and ways of being.

The antidote to judgment is to observe and describe the way a video camera would, e.g. “I notice that you . . .” Rather than saying, “Sam is a mean person,” you might observe and describe: “Sam was red in the face, slammed his fist on the table and made deprecating comments about Jane in front of her subordinates.” What’s the difference? “He is mean” is locked in cement – it’s a global condemnation. The objective description, on the other hand, while still “negative,” leaves us *free to wonder* about it. Turns out Jane sold company secrets to their competitor!

In general, positive “judgments” are disempowering as well, especially when they’re generic and global. “Good job!” gives the receiver NO information about what was effective *for him/her*. It’s *just* your positive judgment. At worst it can make children/peers dependent on your evaluations, rather than assessing the effectiveness of their behavior for themselves. On the other hand: “Despite all the setbacks and challenges, you really stuck with resolving the issue and it paid off. You’re beaming! You gotta be super proud of yourself” – That’s a *description of what worked for the person* that doesn’t put *you* at the center of it. You’re not saying “*I’m* so proud of you” which makes the statement *about you*, not the person who did something worthy of their *own self-pride*. For positive descriptions, you **reflect what worked/was effective for the person/those around the person, using a positive facial expression and voice tone** when you deliver the information. This is the most powerful and encouraging kind of interpersonal reinforcement. You put the locus of control/power/responsibility squarely in the other person – not centered in yourself. (Children really benefit from this approach!)

#### 11. No qualifiers.

No “but’s,” “if only’s,” “although’s,” “even though’s,” “nevertheless’s,” “however’s,” etc.

**Unqualified gratitude, love, cherishing and creative engagement** – that’s what most of the world’s religious people want *from God*! This is an opportunity to generate that experience for yourself, and to grant it to others. In my example above, I had to step out of my “small” angry, blamey self, and know myself as bigger than I was to really grant my co-parent the “unqualified” attribute of “generosity.” This acknowledgement also coaxed me out of my black-and-white thinking – something everyone who is divorcing needs when they know they will have to co-parent with a former spouse for the rest of their children’s lives. Seeing your co-parent as mean, selfish, treacherous, etc. and repeating that to yourself just sets you and your kids up for years of tension and distress.

#### 12. Reality as a “Creation.”

The “thing” or “way of being” you’re declaring you’re grateful for, doesn’t even have to be “factually true” – it can be what you are *aiming* to create for yourself. The act of declaring it **as if it were true**, helps you try on the possibility of it’s *being* true, and sends your mind and your efforts in the direction of creating that – the opposite of the direction our minds go when we’re scared, in pain, angry or depressed.

On the list, we don’t get nuts and say things like: “Today, I love and am grateful for . . . Being a multimillionaire,” imagining that somehow by saying this we will magically make it so. We don’t put chocolate frosting on cow patties. We all have a pile of “reasons” and “stories” and unacknowledged factors that have us *not* be multimillionaires – those stories are a part of our inner work, still to be done.

If being a multimillionaire is what floats your boat, then getting clearer about all the unacknowledged factors that have you *not* be a multimillionaire will help you break down the steps to creating a plan for moving in that direction. You’d map out the steps to getting where you want to go, identify the internal obstacles to getting there, and take on each of these obstacles in your gratitude list. For example: Today I love and am grateful for . . . 1) Doing what I said I’d do by when I said I’d do it . . . 2) Money in the bank and more on the way . . . 3) Taking 30 minutes to write down what I’m passionate about and pondering ways to monetize that . . . etc.

**13. “Being” items on your Gratitude List are more potent than “doing” or “having” items.**

The Rocky Horror Picture Show declares in a song: “Don’t dream it, **be it.**”

Today I Love and am Grateful for BEING . . . courageous, straight in my communication, patient etc. is more potent than describing the details of what you did that you “judge” as brave, direct or attuned to another’s rhythms. You’re **affirming who you are**, rather than what you *do*. You can always affirm what you do. Just know that when the list item is stated as a “being” statement it’s typically *much* more potent and effective.

**14. Convert Complaints, Criticisms and Judgments.** If you find yourself stuck in anger or judgment, convert it. A client recently found herself irritated with gossip in a particular friend group. She converted it to (Today I love and am grateful for . . . ) “knowing and appreciating the difference between sharing and gossip,” for one item, and then in another item wrote, “*Knowing how to ask respectfully for the specific, effective behavior I want, rather than criticizing or complaining.*”

**15. “Creating your day” in 1 or 2 sentences at the end of the gratitude list.** As a group we developed the practice of setting an intention for **who we’d be for that day** – not a list of the “to-do’s” to be mastered. So we might say at the end of the list of 10 items:

- (e.g. If you’re going to court) Today, I’m alive to what’s possible and stand for our divorce being resolved such that the wellbeing of all family members is honored, valued and secured.
- (e.g. You know you have to fire a valued employee that isn’t cutting it, and you’re worried about it) Today I am wise, loving and empowering as I deliver hard news.
- (e.g. You want to do something you’re really scared to do) Today I’m courageous – afraid to do what there is to do and do it anyway with grace and ease . . .
- (e.g. You know you’re compelled to do work when you get home on a Friday night, but you want to clear some down time) Today, I come home and savor the stillness of being work-free, loving my partner, etc. . . .
- (e.g. You don’t want to do something you’ve been avoiding and needs to get done) Today I commit to freeing myself from procrastination by 3pm . . .

**16. Affirmation.** Our group created the habit of signing off with the following at the end of all our postings, which I’ve found comforting over time:

**“One thing at a time. All is well. ANYTHING is possible. And . . . Thank you for your generous listening!”**

Things only get handled **“one thing at a time”** – focus on what’s next not the whole thing when you’re overwhelmed. **“All IS well”** – your child isn’t dying, you’re not suffering from XYZ. **“Anything IS possible”** – there’s hope, and then **“thanks for the generosity ‘listening’”** inherent in reading your list. We wanted to acknowledge the efforts of readers and fellow-posters who committed to reading and taking in our Love and Gratitude.

**17. Summary of Overall Structure:**

- i) Today I Love and am Grateful for . . . (10 items, with emphasis on “being,” no qualifiers)
- ii) Create your day (#15 above)
- iii) Affirmations and Thanks for the Generous Listening of readers

For related research/science: [This article](#) in Atlantic Monthly talks about the practice of gratitude and how to generate gratitude by — wait for it — creating a Grateful list every day! There are even links to various scientific papers on the quantifiable effects of generating gratitude. Harvard's Health Publication also had related articles. Yay for science!