

A Grateful Heart: the Power Tool for Holistic Work

By Molly Cameron

Sara had hit bottom. In the throes of her addiction she had reached a moment of choice from which there was no return – to live, or to die. Her choice for life led her to a 12-step program, and now, 20 years later, she is successful and happy, with no trace of her old eating disorder. “I discovered that I did not know how to accept, or even recognize, the gifts that were in my life. I deflected them all, stuck in an old notion that I didn’t deserve good things. As a result, I just got emptier and emptier, which is ironic, since I ate more and more food to try to fill myself up.” Wholeness returned for Sara when she learned to see her world with a grateful heart.

Less dramatic versions of this story are more common: the man who breaks off a relationship because he’s afraid of getting too close; the single mom who refuses a cash gift because she doesn’t want to feel obligated; the person who just can’t seem to take a compliment gracefully. These are only some of the ways we refuse to acknowledge the gifts that life is constantly giving us. We label something as “a given,” but we forget that what is given is by definition a gift, for which a heartfelt “thank you” is an appropriate response.

There is proof that feeling grateful is good for us. In 2003 psychologists Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* their studies on the influence of grateful thinking on psychological well being (Feb Vol 84(2) 377-389). This is the first time that any assumptions about gratitude were ever scientifically tested. They did three different tests in which they randomly assigned one of three tasks: one group was asked to record moments when they felt gratitude throughout the day; the second group was to record moments when they felt harried or irritated; and the third group recorded neutral events, such as taking a walk, brushing their teeth, or watching television. These researchers found that the group that reported gratitude felt better about their lives as a whole, reported fewer physical complaints, spent significantly more time exercising, slept more hours and slept better, felt more connected to people, and were motivated to do something to help someone else more frequently. The study also found that those people who had a fairly large number of gratitude-eliciting experiences throughout the day seemed to have gratitude “moods” lasting for fairly long periods of time.

Esaru Emoto’s work with water crystals in his book, *The Hidden Messages in Water* (2005, Simon & Schuster), teaches a lesson about the healing properties of expressing thankfulness. After showing that water was susceptible to rage and hate, as demonstrated by the deformed and ugly crystals formed when it was frozen, Emoto then exposed the water to expressions of love. However, the water did not recover its ability to form brilliantly beautiful crystals until he added the expression of gratitude.

Gratitude is a very powerful emotion. It is the place on the give-and-take continuum where the line between giver and taker becomes blurred, because the pleasurable feelings

that come when we give meaningfully are the same as those that occur when we accept gracefully and gratefully.

So how do we use this power tool to improve our lives?

1. Look at your life. Look for the malformed crystals in your personality, experience, and emotional makeup. Apply gratitude liberally.

There is a very beautiful Japanese psychology called Naikan, developed in the 1940s by a devout Buddhist, Yoshimoto Ishin. In solitary thought, one examines one's life, asking only these three questions of each person encountered in life, beginning at birth:

- What did I receive from this person?
 - What did I give this person?
 - What troubles and difficulties did I cause this person?
2. Give more. Find a person or cause where you can get face to face with other people and give them a gift. Let yourself experience giving fully and completely.
 3. Use gratitude to fuel your intentions, your goals. The secret to affirmations and goal setting is to back it with a healthy dose of feeling grateful. Work with a phrase that you have chosen, using first person pronouns and action verbs. Phrase it as though it has already happened. Now feel deep and true gratitude for the gift. Then release the affirmation and sit back and be amazed at how things that you want come into your life.

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