

Chapter 7 | Lesson on Appreciation– The Magic Power of Gratitude: You better believe it!

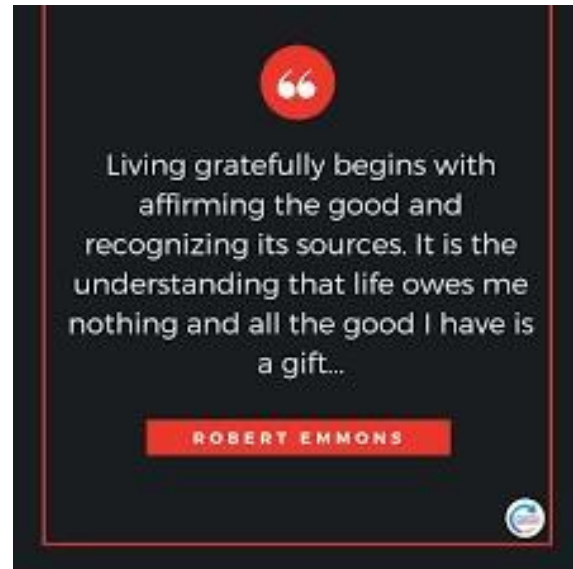


How can I keep being positive when everything goes wrong? How can I be happy when thousands of people are dying? True, very true. I hear you and share your sadness.

But I want challenge you to entertain the possibility that there is a magical power in gratitude. You all know that gratitude is the most robust positive psychology intervention, but its real power has not been really tested empirically.

When the whole world is enveloped in dark clouds, you have everything to gain and nothing to lose by when you willingly decide to experience the magic of gratitude.

Let's me share a little bit of my experience. I was once kept in an isolation room because I was infected with a very contagious virus in the hospital during my stay after a surgical procedure. No visitor was allowed in my room. How did I spend my days in complete solitude? Apart from my creative writing, prayer, and meditation, I spent a lot of time counting God's blessings. Yes, I even tried to write a poem about God's grace and blessings in my life. The simple exercise of counting my blessings magically transformed my mood from sadness to gratitude and joy. That's magical.



“Gratitude is About the Origin”

The above quote is from Robert Emmons, the foremost authority on gratitude in the entire world. The gist of that quote is that gratitude comes from recognizing the origin of all things good in our lives.

No matter how bad the circumstances, there are still many good things for which we can give thanks for. There is an origin, a source for all the good things we enjoy – food, medicine, friends, and even life itself.

It is a simple matter of changing our focus. We only see what we focus on. If we focus on the good things in life, we can always find them.

The second step is to appreciate the good things, until our heart is full of gratitude and joy. Most people do not realize that Viktor Frankl recognized that concept many years ago; that the second enduring value or meaning in life is to experience life with appreciation – whether it comes in the form of social interactions, food on the table, or wearing something warm. All good things come from somewhere.

Even all the good aspects of unpleasant, even painful experiences come from somewhere; they come from our awareness of the benefits of suffering in helping us to grow – psychologically and spiritually.

Frankl like to cite Nietzsche that “What does not us make us stronger.” This is just one of the paradoxical truths of existential positive psychology (PP 2.0) as illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1

Paradoxical Truths of Existential Positive Psychology

Here are some **paradoxical truths** from existential positive psychology:

- 1 Find **happiness** by embracing suffering.
- 2 Find your **life** by pursuing something greater that's worth dying for
- 3 Experience the joys of **gratitude** by not using it as a tool for happiness.

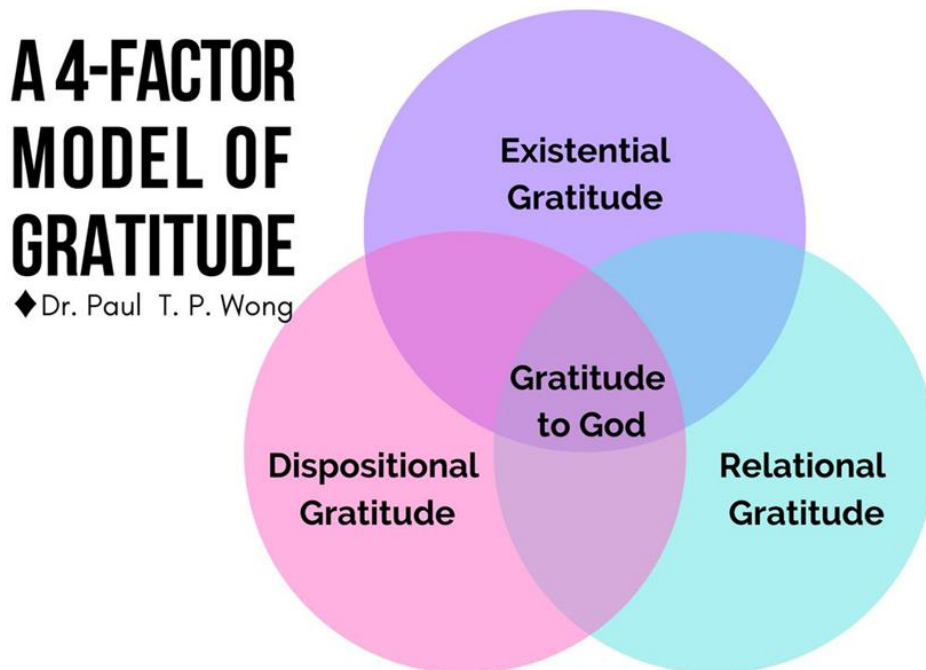
 **THE WORDS OF TRUTH ARE ALWAYS PARADOXICAL**
— LAO TZU

Different Types of Gratitude

It is difficult to fully understand gratitude. In fact, we can never know for sure whether gratitude was part of our nature or planted in our heart by our parents. Let's assume that there are different types of gratitude as shown in figure 2.

Figure 2

A 4-Factor Model of Gratitude



- 1) **Gratitude to God** is the origin and root of all gratitude.
- 2) **Existential gratitude** refers to feeling grateful for life in its totality—both good and bad.
- 3) **Relational gratitude** refers to the good manner of saying "Thank you" and the repaying of kindness to others.
- 4) **Dispositional gratitude** refers to the habit or tendency to be appreciative and thankful.

Even if you are an atheist, you can still consider what magic might happen if you thank God as the creator of all life and the source of all the blessings we simply take for granted, from the fresh air to the rain and the sun. Here is a brief list of things we can thank God for (figure 3):

Figure 3

A list of things that we can thank God for

EXISTENTIAL GRATITUDE

... it is inexhaustible.



1. For life itself.
2. For the Creator of life.
3. For your parents who gave birth to you.
4. For all those who make your life possible.
5. For all those who have taught you how to be a good person.
6. For all the previous memories.
7. For each new day and all the tomorrows.
8. For all the good things and good people that bring you happiness.
9. For all the bad things and bad people that taught you precious lessons.
10. For the beautiful planet earth and the wonderful universe.

Gratitude...goes far beyond saying 'thank you'. When we are grateful, we affirm that a source of goodness exists in our lives.

- Robert A. Emmons

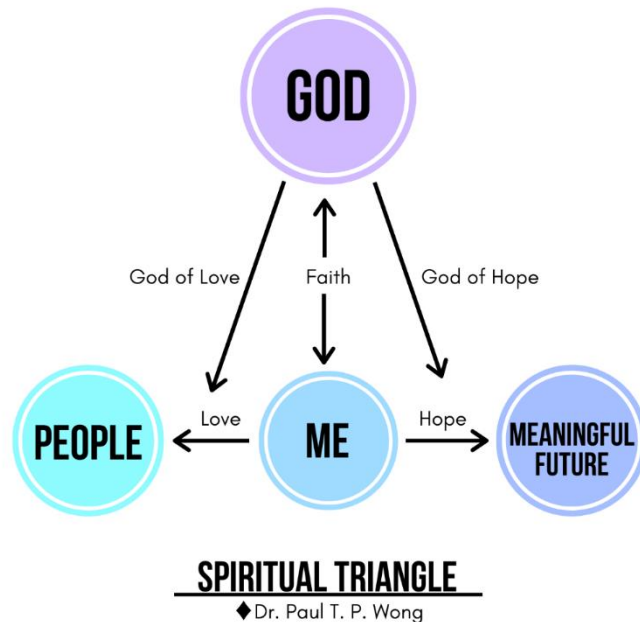
This existential gratitude eventually brings us back to God as illustrated in figure 4.

Figure 4

The Origins of Existential Gratitude

Origins of Existential Gratitude:

- Grateful to God for being the source of all creation & blessings;
- Grateful to the people for being the source of love & support;
- Grateful for the hope of living a meaningful life of using my gifts to serve others.



Gratitude Exercises

The most popular gratitude exercise is Martin Seligman's Three Good Things (e.g. <https://happyproject.in/three-good-things/>). It may be difficult to find three good things each day when you find yourself in a "hellhole", but it is always possible to discover three hidden blessings in all the problems you have to endure. Try the following existential gratitude exercises:

- Discover three opportunities in today's troubled world.
- Express thanks to someone who still cares for you in difficult times.
- Feel grateful that you still have the gift of life, because as long as you can breathe, there is always hope.
- Give thanks that this disaster brings out the generosity and altruism in so many people.
- Feel grateful for all the frontline healthcare workers who risk their own lives to care for others.
- Feel grateful for our government, who are able to take care of their citizens and rally all the resources in the mortal combat against the pandemic.

I bet you will feel much better after doing the above exercise for just 3 minutes a day. That is the magic power of gratitude.

Try this life-changing Gratitude exercise.
It is one of the many existential positive interventions in meaning therapy:

(1) Be thankful for your life with all its opportunities for creative contributions.

(2) Be thankful for your family and friend and all those who have contributed to your life.

(3) Be thankful to nature or the Creator for giving us beautiful planet earth as our home.

If you meditate on the above three areas daily, it will make you a better and happier person. I invite positive psychologists to compare this Gratitude exercise with any other gratitude exercise.

paultpwong.wordpress.com

Existential Gratitude Scale

This survey is developed to assess the level of existential gratitude. Please read each statement and indicate to what extent each item characterizes your own life. You may respond by circling / clicking the appropriate number according to the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Completely disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Completely agree

1. My life is full of hardships and suffering, but I can still count my blessings.
2. I am grateful for my life even in times of suffering.
3. I am resentful that life has treated me unfairly.
4. I am grateful that my inner resources have increased as a result of overcoming adversities.
5. I wish that I had never been born.

6. I am grateful for the people in my life, even for those who have caused me much pain.
7. I still feel bitter for all the bad experiences that have happened to me.
8. I am thankful that I have something to live for, even though life has been very hard for me.
9. I am grateful that every crisis represents an opportunity for me to grow.
10. I give thanks at the end of each day, even when nothing went my way.
11. I have learned the importance of gratitude through suffering.
12. I am grateful that suffering has strengthened my faith and character.
13. In desperate times, I am grateful for my faith that I will overcome.

Items 3, 5, and 7 need to be reverse coded before calculating a mean score for Existential Gratitude

For the scoring key, please refer to the "Measures and Scales Scoring Keys" section.