

How Gratitude Makes Suffering Sufferable

Robert A. Emmons

University of California, Davis

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Author's Address: Dr. Robert A. Emmons, Department of Psychology, University of California,
One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95618.

Abstract

Gratitude and suffering are two of the most fundamental aspects of the human experience. While they may seem to be polar opposites, they are deeply intertwined, and understanding the relationship between the two can help us live more fulfilling and meaningful lives.

Gratitude is an affirmation of the good and a recognition of where that good is sourced.

Suffering, on the other hand, refers to the experience of pain, hardship, or adversity. Suffering is an inevitable and unavoidable part of the human condition, and is something that we all must learn to cope with. Gratitude helps. Although gratitude is generally associated with receiving a good, it is not just a switch to turn on when life is going well. Gratitude is also a light that shines in the darkness, opening new vistas for seeing and new possibilities for living.

Keywords: Gratitude, suffering, flourishing, joy, spirituality

Introduction: Paul and Me

Twenty-five years ago, a landmark volume entitled *The Human Quest For Meaning*, was published (Wong & Fry, 1998). I was honored when the editor, Paul Wong, graciously invited me to contribute a chapter to the book. Up to that time, the personal search for meaning had largely been confined to the realm of philosophy and religion, or quoting from the introduction, compartmentalized for “hundreds of years in the wilderness of philosophical and religious discourse.” The book, dedicated to the great existentialist Viktor Frankl, consisted of a collection of essays designed to explore the connection between personal meaning and well-being, flourishing, and optimal functioning. Wong and his co-editor constructed a compelling and convincing case for why meaning making as a profound unique human activity deserves to be at the center of psychological research and practice joining their rightful place along philosophical and religious approaches to meaning making, flourishing, and the quest for the good life.

Today, more than at any previous time in history, the nature of the flourishing life is a pressing concern. The issue is not new, of course. It is timeless. Questions like, “What virtues should we nurture and how should we act?” “Under what conditions—cultural, political, and natural—should we aim to live?” “What kinds of emotions should mark and energize our lives?” or, summing up all three, “What does it mean to flourish in the face of suffering?” have occupied human beings intensely for millennia. We owe the most enduring and, arguably, the most profound answers to these questions to ancient philosophies and world religions. But today we ask and have to answer the ancient question of human flourishing in a new way, and we use rigorous empirical methods to answer them.

Ironically, the inclusion of the chapter (Emmons, Colby, & Kaiser, 1998) I wrote for Paul's book was made possible because I had received a taste of some of the same bias Paul has faced throughout his career. An earlier version of the chapter was to appear in a volume on subjective well-being. I was asked to write about the connection between suffering, adversity, and well-being. My draft was rejected by the editors for being too religious in tone. I do not know how one can do justice to the topic of suffering and flourishing by censoring discussion of the spiritual dimension of human nature. Secular or "thin" conceptions of flourishing only imperfectly capture the far more ancient traditions of religious and philosophical inquiry, and often miss their most important insights. These traditions typically attend to flourishing not only in terms of our relational and physical nature, but also as reflecting our participation in a world of more than empirical presence: Flourishing is a phenomenon that has roots in worlds normatively experienced, speaking to realities and relationships that more narrowly empirical approaches can have a hard time incorporating. The editors argued that there was no place for religious perspectives in their collection of scientific perspectives on well-being, despite the fact that for the majority of the world's population, faith and spirituality are core determinants of personal meaning making (Emmons, 1999; Wong, 2023).

A couple of years after *The Human Quest For Meaning* was published, Paul invited me to present at the first international conference on personal meaning that he was organizing. I was just beginning my empirical work on gratitude, and discussions I had with Paul at the conference convinced me for the first time that gratitude contributes to human flourishing largely through its ability to imbue life with meaning and significance and started me on a trajectory to declaring and demonstrating that gratitude is the best approach to life. This is a personal quest that I continue to this day, and I am grateful to Paul for lighting this spark within me.

Since that time, I have considered Paul a dear mentor, valued colleague, and trusted friend. I am delighted to contribute a chapter to this volume that is dedicated to the legacy that Paul has built. I think of us as kindred spirits on the road to uncover evidence-based and faith-based routes to human flourishing. Religion's essential role in society is often ignored or minimized in much modern discourse and thinking. Rigorous scientific research and compelling theoretical accounts of human nature will help make clear the need to think about the power of religion in making human flourishing possible. I know that Paul feels the same.

Gratitude in the Face of Suffering: Introduction

In 2008, while watching a movie at home, Lisa Vannalee's mentally ill brother attacked her with a machete, delivering life changing injuries and leaving her a quadriplegic at age 16. Her brother was diagnosed with schizophrenia, found guilty and was sentenced to 25 years in a correctional facility that treats the mentally ill. After nearly six months in a hospital, she returned to high school and graduated with a 3.83 grade-point average. She went on to obtain a psychology degree from the University of California, Davis in 2013. Lisa never dwelt on the attack that left her paralyzed or detailed the struggles she's endured. She said she never had to forgive her brother for the attack that took the use of her arms and legs because she didn't have to. She was never angry with him. Lisa wrote about her brother in her blog. "In our case, the voices in his head told him that I was possessed and that he needed to save me," she blogged. Instead, she credited her faith, thankful that God had given her and her family hope and inspiration to press forward in the aftermath of this family tragedy. It was gratitude that empowered Lisa to overcome the awfulness of her circumstances. "There is not enough gratitude I can express or praise I can offer to God..." she wrote nearly a decade after the attack. "I have

witnessed the amazing things that happen when we choose to life our hands to help instead of hurt, to open our hands to receive or give, and to spread out fingers to grasp our loved ones who are unable to do the same.”

Gratitude is fundamental and foundational to flourishing. Each of us, whether we are aware of it or not, tend to look at life through one of two prisms. We either see life through a lens of abundance, sufficiency, surplus and security or through a lens of scarcity, deficiency, deficit, and insecurity. The former outlook leads to freedom and joy; the latter bondage and oppression. The difference between these default modes is gratitude. In gratitude, we experience an abundant life. In gratitude, we experience freedom and fullness. Gratefulness leads to joyfulness. Gratitude literally breathes new life into us, as it did for Lisa Vannalee.

My work, and for that matter, my life over the past 25 years, has been devoted to declaring and demonstrating one basic idea: That gratitude is the deepest touch point of human existence. Gratitude is a human quality with unusual power, so much so that it would not be an overstatement to say that a flourishing life is impossible without it. As the moral memory of mankind gratitude makes life better for self and others. Awareness of its importance raises inescapable big questions: How gratefully or ungratefully will each of us live our own lives? Why will we choose to do so, and what effects on ourselves and those around us? Writing in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics, and Public Policy*, Elizabeth Loder noted “Gratitude affects how a person conceives the world and expects others to behave. It increases interpersonal receptivity. It seeps into one’s being and affects all dispositions pervasively (Loder, 2006).” As the positive emotional response to benevolence, gratitude is perhaps the quintessential positive trait, an amplifier of goodness in oneself, the world, and others (Watkins, 2016).

Throughout history, the concept of gratitude has been seen as central to the smooth running of society, a mainstay of philosophical and religious accounts of living, leading it to be deemed by Cicero not only “the greatest of the virtues, but the parent of all others” (Harpham, 2004). Gratitude speaks to a need that is deeply entrenched in the human condition—the need to give thanks. It is a basic instinct—but one that is easily trampled on in today’s increasingly secular world. And we are worse off because of this. Without gratitude we fall prey to envy, greed, resentment, entitlement, and victimhood. Gratitude, on the other hand, generates a positive ripple effect through every area of our lives, potentially satisfying some of our deepest yearnings—our desire for happiness, our pursuit of better relationships, and our ceaseless quest for inner peace, health, wholeness, and contentment. Gratitude is more, though, than a tool for self-improvement. Gratitude is a way of life.

Gratitude also is the truest approach to life. There is a very basic reality about gratitude. We all begin life dependent on others, and most of us end life dependent on others. If we are lucky, in between we have roughly 60 years or so of unacknowledged dependency. The human condition is such that throughout life, not just at the beginning and end, we are profoundly dependent on other people. And we are aware of this dependence. Moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has referred to humans as “dependent rational animals.” To be alive is to be in relationships with others, relationships that are vital to our well-being. Gratitude takes us outside ourselves where we see ourselves as part of a larger, intricate network of sustaining relationships, relationships that are mutually reciprocal. Gratitude is the truest approach to life. We did not create or fashion ourselves. We did not birth ourselves. Life is about giving, receiving, and repaying. We are receptive beings, dependent on the help of others, on their gifts and their kindness. As such, we are called to gratitude. If we choose to ignore this basic truth, we steer

ourselves off course. If we choose to ignore this, we cannot live lives of flourishing, lives of joy, lives of meaning, of purpose and value and significance.

The Science of Gratitude

It took me a dozen years after completing my doctorate to conduct my first scientific experiment. Perhaps I should explain. As a personality psychologist, I studied what people were like, not what they could do under laboratory conditions. My methods were surveys, interviews, and experience sampling or “beeper” studies. This was until I decided to study gratitude.

Well, I didn’t exactly decide. It was an assignment. In 1998, I was invited to a small conference focused on the virtues: Wisdom, hope, love, spirituality, forgiveness, gratitude, and humility. Each scientist was given the charge of presenting the known body of knowledge on the topic and developing a research agenda for the future. My first choice, humility, was taken; instead, I was assigned gratitude. I discovered that there was virtually no scientific research on it. I set out to alter this state of affairs by conducting the first randomized controlled trial on the effects of gratitude using journaling as a technique.

We randomly assigned participants one of three tasks, each of which created a distinct condition. We encouraged some participants to feel gratitude, encouraged others to be negative and complaining, and created a third, neutral control group to compare the others with. Every week, the participants kept a short journal. They either briefly described, in a single sentence, five things they were grateful for that had occurred in the past week or, they did the opposite, describing five daily hassles from the previous week that they were displeased about. The neutral group was simply asked to list five events or circumstances that affected them in the last week, and they were not told to accentuate the positive or negative aspects of those circumstances.

The experiment lasted for ten weeks. A wide range of experiences sparked gratitude: cherished interactions with other people; awareness of physical health; their ability to overcome obstacles; and simply being alive, to name a few. At the end of the 10 weeks, we examined differences between the three groups on all of the well-being outcomes that we measured at the outset of the study. Participants in the gratitude condition felt better about their life as a whole, and were more optimistic about the future than participants in either of the other control conditions. To put it into numbers, they were a full 25% happier than other participants. They also reported fewer health complaints and spent more time exercising than control participants did. We discovered scientific evidence that when people regularly engage in the systematic cultivation of gratitude, they experience a variety of measurable and sustainable benefits.

Our results have now been replicated and extended in labs around the world. Study after study declares the benefits of gratitude for psychological, physical, relational, and spiritual flourishing. People who live gratefully are more generally appreciative of the positive in themselves, others, and the world. Research and practice suggests that setting aside time on a daily basis to recall moments of gratitude associated with even mundane or ordinary events, personal attributes one has, or valued people one encounters has the potential to interweave and thread together a sustainable life theme of highly cherished personal meaning just as it nourishes a fundamental life stance whose thrust is decidedly positive.

Gratitude as the Foundation for a Flourishing, Joyful Life

Is there a connection between living gratefully and living joyfully? The evidence appears unequivocal. Gratitude is foundational for human flourishing. Grateful people appreciate the good in their lives and view life through a lens of giftedness. It is a state of readiness that

predisposes one to interpret experiences and opportunities as gifts. This way of thinking and seeing should enhance joy because one has to first be able to find and recognize the good and then incorporate and absorb this good before they can experience joy. Unlike happiness, joy can occur in the face of trials and suffering. Moreover, seeing the good as gifts that are neither deserved nor earned based on personal efforts amplifies the experience of joy. Both gratitude and joy reflect a fully alive, alert, and awake state of attunement between the self and the world. The cultivation of joy can be fostered by activities designed to increase the grateful awareness of the giftedness of one's existence. Because joy depends on construing the world a certain way, the cultivation of joy can be formed by intentional gratitude practices (Watkins, Emmons, Greaves, & Bell, 2018). Theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Miroslav Volf theorize that joy is an awareness of the world as creation and creation as gift (Volf & Crisp, 2015). As a way of opening up to the world, gratitude not only makes joy possible, but nearly inevitable, in that they each result from construals of goodness, giftedness, and unmerited blessing. Joy is being in a state of enjoying being a recipient, where being on the receiving end of a gift is not a resentment of being indebted but an open welcome of such gifting. Joy has to do with a reading the world—as gift, as good (now or in the future), as abounding and overflowing, as connection with the sources of goodness. Gratitude is a foundational aspect of this hermeneutic, and is likely one of the final links in a causal chain that ends in joy (Watkins et al., 2018).

This link between gratitude and joy is based on the amplification or magnification theory of gratitude. Just as an amplifier increases the volume of sound coming into a microphone, gratitude “turns up the volume” of the good in one's life. Just as a magnifying glass enlarges the object it is focused on, so gratitude enlarges the good that it is focused on. With gratitude there is amplification, strengthening, and deepening of the entire awareness of life. Stated differently,

gratitude increases the signal strength of what and who is good in one's life. Perceiving a positive experience as a gift may be a form of cognitive amplification.

Amplification theory implies that it is the grateful processing of positive memories that should be important in building joy. If gratitude amplifies the good in cognition, when one recalls a positive event and then processes it in a grateful fashion, this should enhance the event in memory. Amplification theory suggests that it was the grateful processing of positive memories that is of prime importance, and research has verified this hypothesis.

There is another very important reason why gratitude is vital in the face of suffering. There is a negativity bias that is built into our brains, part of our factory-installed equipment. Left to its own devices, our mind tends to hijack each and every opportunity for happiness. Negativity, entitlement, resentment, forgetfulness, ungratefulness all clamor for our attention. Whether stemming from our own internal thoughts and struggles or to the daily news headlines, we are exposed to a constant drip of negativity. Weighed down by negativity, we are worn down, worn out, emotionally and physically exhausted. To offset this chronic negativity, we need to continually and perpetually hear good news. Gratitude rescues us from negativity. Gratitude enables us to regularly create and take in positive experiences. Gratitude is our best weapon, an ally to counter these internal and external threats that rob us of sustainable joy.

It is of utmost importance to distinguish between the emotion of gratitude and a disposition to see life through a lens of gratitude. Of course we do not feel grateful when we are going through trials and tribulations. I mean, how could we? But gratitude is a key element in the powerful human capacity for resilience. As a way of seeing, gratitude can alter our gaze. We begin to see opportunities where we once saw problems, we begin to see abundance where we

once saw deficits, we begin to see blessings where we once saw curses. That doesn't mean this will come readily or immediately, but may take considerable time and perspective.

As I look back on my own life, I realize that I have been very fortunate, far more fortunate than I deserve. I have been relatively unscathed by major traumas. My challenges are far more the slow drip of everyday stress type rather than the major calamities of disease, depression, death, disability—the deadly d's. Probably the most difficult thing I've been through was observing the effects of Alzheimer's on my Mom and the slow deterioration of her health and ensuing feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. Many of us live in pain and will die in pain. From our birthday to our deathday, life is painful on a number of levels. Have we ever known one day that did not have some kind of suffering, even minor, in it? Every day is wracked with trouble in one way, shape, or form. Suffering is inevitable and it is unavoidable. There is nothing more certain.

When Losses Lead to Gains: Gratitude and Suffering

The ability to perceive the elements in one's life and even life itself as gifts would appear essential if we are to transform challenges into potential opportunities. In doing so, we can begin to heal from past wounds and look forward to the future with a fresh affirmation toward life. We realize that we can *be* grateful even if we don't *feel* grateful. Suffering can be a reason for gratefulness in that it shatters our illusions of self-sufficiency, causes us to be accountable, and teaches us what is truly important. Experiencing gratitude leads to increased feelings of connectedness, improved relationships, and even altruism. When people experience gratitude, they feel more loving, more forgiving, and closer to God. Gratitude maximizes the enjoyment of the good—our enjoyment of others, of God, of our lives. These can all be reasons why gratitude helps us rebound from adversity.

Eventually, and over time, we come to realize that there is more to life than our losses, and gratitude for life gives us a realistic perspective by which to view our losses and not succumb to victimhood or despair. The ability to perceive the elements in one's life and even life itself as gifts would appear essential if we are to transform tragedies into opportunities. In doing so, grateful individuals begin to heal from past wounds and look forward to the future with a fresh affirmation toward life. We realize that we can *be* grateful even if we don't *feel* grateful. It is under these conditions where we have the most to gain by a grateful perspective on life. In the face of demoralization, gratitude has the power to energize. In the face of brokenness, gratitude has the power to heal. In the face of despair, gratitude has the power to bring hope. Having swum in the waters of gratitude for some time now, I've been contacted by numerous persons who have experienced painful suffering. An adolescent girl addicted to painkillers, and elderly great-grandmother who battled life-long depression, a prison inmate serving a life sentence, an adult survivor of child sexual abuse. What did they have in common? Gratefulness became their spiritual lifeline. Gratitude gave them hope. Gratitude healed, energized, and transformed their lives.

Gratitude and suffering are two of the most fundamental aspects of the human experience. While they may seem to be polar opposites, they are deeply intertwined, and understanding the relationship between the two can help us to live a more fulfilling and meaningful life. At its core, gratitude is the act of expressing appreciation for what one has. This might include material possessions, personal achievements, or relationships with others. However, gratitude is not just about acknowledging the good things in our lives. It is also about recognizing the people, circumstances, and events that have contributed to our well-being, even if they may not be obvious at first glance.

Suffering, on the other hand, refers to the experience of pain, hardship, or adversity. This might include physical or emotional pain, loss of a loved one, financial difficulty, or other types of challenges that we may face throughout our lives. Suffering is an inevitable part of the human experience, and it is something that we all must learn to cope with in our own way.

At first glance, gratitude and suffering may seem to be at odds with each other. How can we possibly be grateful when we are experiencing pain or hardship? However, it is precisely in times of difficulty that gratitude can be most powerful. When we are faced with suffering, it is easy to become overwhelmed by negative emotions and lose sight of the good things in our lives. However, by consciously focusing on the positive aspects of our lives, we can cultivate a sense of gratitude that helps us to cope with our struggles.

One reason why gratitude is so effective at helping us to cope with suffering is that it shifts our focus away from our problems and towards the things that are going well in our lives. By consciously acknowledging the good things that we have, we can develop a more positive outlook on life, which can help us to navigate the challenges that we face. Additionally, expressing gratitude can help us to build stronger relationships with others, as we show appreciation for the people who support us during difficult times.

It is also important to note that gratitude is not just about acknowledging the good things in our lives. It is also about recognizing the people, circumstances, and events that have contributed to our well-being, even if they may not be obvious at first glance. For example, we may feel grateful for the challenges that we have faced in our lives, as they have helped us to grow and develop as individuals. We may also feel grateful for the people who have supported us during difficult times, even if they were not directly involved in our struggles.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that there are times when suffering can be overwhelming, and gratitude may seem impossible. In these situations, it can be helpful to remember that gratitude does not mean ignoring or minimizing our pain. Rather, it means recognizing that even in the midst of suffering, there are still things to be grateful for. This might include the support of friends and family, the beauty of nature, or the simple pleasures of everyday life.

Ultimately, the relationship between gratitude and suffering is complex, but it is clear that cultivating a sense of gratitude can have a powerful impact on our lives. By acknowledging the good things that we have, even in the face of hardship, we can develop a more positive outlook on life, build stronger relationships with others, and become more resilient in the face of stress.

Relatedly, there is growing evidence that gratitude can be a useful tool in managing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Here are some key findings from the research on gratitude and PTSD: Gratitude can reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety: People with PTSD often experience symptoms of depression and anxiety. Studies have found that practicing gratitude can help reduce these symptoms and improve overall mental health (Emmons, 2020; Lies, Mellor & Hong, 2014). Gratitude can improve relationships: PTSD can often make it difficult for individuals to connect with others and form healthy relationships. Gratitude can help individuals feel more connected to others and improve their social support, which can be beneficial for those with PTSD (Watkins, 2016). Gratitude can increase resilience: PTSD can be a challenging and traumatic experience. Practicing gratitude can help individuals develop resilience and cope with the stress and trauma associated with PTSD. Gratitude can improve overall well-being: Studies have shown that people with PTSD who practice gratitude report higher levels of overall well-being and life satisfaction and reduced depression (Van

Dusen, Tiamiyu, Kashdan & Elhai, 2015). Overall, the research suggests that gratitude can be a helpful tool for individuals with PTSD in managing symptoms and improving overall well-being. It is important to note, however, that gratitude is not a replacement for professional treatment and therapy for PTSD.

Theological Dimensions of Gratitude: Relevance for Suffering

Gratefulness is commonly associated with celebrations and victories and successes and good things in life. For that reason alone, gratitude is appealing, even irresistible. On a deeper spiritual level, it is however, much more than this. It is also an expression of thanks to the God of the universe who creates, liberates, redeems, reconciles, and abides, even in the most troubling of times. Since nothing compelled God to create the world, gratitude to God comprises a central human response to God's gift of creation. St. Paul suggests that ingratitude constitutes an essential breach in relationship with God (Romans 1:18-23). Thankfulness is broadly the attitude and disposition towards recognizing the good one experiences in life, especially the unmerited good. The importance of acknowledging the unmerited favor surrounding our lives is an important contributor to meaning-making. Psychological gratitude interventions have been found to lead people to recall deeply meaningful memories and identify the presence of meaning in their lives. All in all, setting aside time on a daily basis to recall moments of gratitude associated with even mundane or ordinary events, personal attributes one has, or valued people one encounters has the potential to interweave and thread together a sustainable life theme of highly cherished personal meaning just as it nourishes a fundamental life stance whose thrust is decidedly positive. On this point, a grateful outlook does not require a life full of material

comforts, but rather an interior attitude of thankfulness regardless of life circumstances, and an appreciation of the deeper spiritual dimensions of life.

The experiences of divine grace and mercy are two aspects of this undeserved good. Divine grace is the positive unmerited favor that all humans experience to varying degrees in life. In contrast, mercy is the undeserved withholding of negative consequences for wrongdoing. Additionally, the goodness of existence itself, the act of divine love in creation and the sacrifice of Christ for the redemption of this world ensures that there are always an abundance of things for which to be thankful. As a disposition, gratitude inclines one globally toward the reception of the world as a gift and not as an entitlement. Such an orientation has the potential to shift how losses are experienced. When grateful, we acknowledge our insufficiency and dependence. We are not self-made but rely on others for our well-being. Gratitude can also be a facet of one's initial appraisal of event, perhaps even including difficult circumstances. Much care must be exercised here, but there appears to be room to be grateful for suffering itself (e.g., 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; James 1:2-7).

A spiritual understanding of gratitude is essential if we are to understand how grateful thinking can transform difficulty into opportunity, adversity into prosperity, problems into possibilities. The tradition of showing gratitude in tough times is deep in human history. In October of 1929 the stock market crashed and people throughout this nation began to feel the effects of what was to become known as the Great Depression. Life savings were wiped out and jobs and incomes that were taken for granted dried up overnight. Bread lines formed in the streets of cities across the country. One of the darkest times in this nation's history was upon us. In mid-November of that year, a group of church leaders came together in Boston to determine what message they could give to their flock at the upcoming Thanksgiving services. Some

wanted to skip the topic altogether, thinking that it would not be appropriate to ask people to focus on gratitude in the midst of their suffering. However, Pastor William Stiger rallied the troops and told them this was not the time to avoid the topic of thanksgiving, this is exactly what people need to hear at this time. In times like this, he told them, is when we need to be most thankful and most need to affirm the goodness that remains despite current afflictions. The spiritual and emotional prosperity brought by a celebration of thanksgiving was just the remedy needed for the economic devastation that was gripping the country. Thanksgiving is a powerful impulse of the human spirit. And it is not the private possession of people of a particular theological persuasion.

This is just one illustration in a long historical tradition of the juxtaposition of suffering with thanksgiving. Gratitude starts with remembering, and memory of adversity serves as a basis for thanksgiving. The late Rev. Peter Gomes of Harvard University cites the 19th Century Pilgrim Baptists whose theme of the first service in their new sanctuary following years of adversity was “our years of affliction serve to enhance our present joy” (Gomes, 2002). In ancient near Eastern culture, the Israelites celebrated deliverance from oppression and slavery with public proclamations of God’s faithfulness as written about in the Hebrew scriptures. In these stories, affliction or suffering are redeemed by the recognition of goodness received, accompanied by powerful feelings of contrast and relief. When times are good, people take prosperity for granted and begin to believe in their own invulnerability. In times of uncertainty, people realize how powerless they are to control their own destiny and this realization can lead to the perception of a deeper reality. If you begin to see that everything you have, everything you have counted on, everything that you think matters to your well-being may be taken away, gratitude becomes a way of rebuilding one’s foundation so that it can not be easily dismantled.

The joyful act of praising God is a thankfulness flowing nearly automatically from a recognition of divine gifts. In keeping with our desire to bridge theological and psychological understanding of gratitude and joy, we are inspired by C. S. Lewis's *Reflections on the Psalms*. In trying to understand the function of praise, Lewis observed:

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete until it is expressed.

Here, Lewis suggests that those praising may actually benefit as much if not more, than those receiving it. Thus, expressing gratitude may provide direct emotional and social benefits for those who express their thanks. In suggesting that expressions of gratitude complete the enjoyment of a blessing, it follows that gratitude benefits insofar as it amplifies the good in one's life.

Suffering is often taken to challenge God's goodness and even existence. Yet the Christian tradition, in particular, encourages believers to be grateful to God even for suffering (Emmons, 2008; McMartin, 2020). First, gratitude to God (GTG) shifts the way we think about suffering by expanding our vision of what we can be grateful for; it can lead us to accept even painful experiences as gifts in themselves and as resulting in yet further gifts, such as perseverance and hope (Romans 5:3-5). When we thank God for the gifts God lavishes on us, we develop a habit of trusting in God's generosity, a virtue that will lead us to acknowledge God's goodness even when we may not feel God's caring presence, when the pain of tragedy or loss is

so acute that it appears to overshadow God's benevolence and love. GTG directs us to trust in God even in our suffering and thereby cultivates in us perseverance and faithfulness.

Second, GTG orients us to involve God in our suffering. When we thank God for God's provision, we do so by presuming a divine counselor who listens to our expressions of gratitude, who is intimately involved in our lives. GTG consequently can alter our interpretation of suffering by helping us to understand that we are not alone in our suffering. As we trust in God's goodness despite our suffering, we build our capacity for hope.

Third, when we practice GTG in our suffering, our relationship to God moves beyond exchange, a mere expression of gratitude for the gifts God gives us (Leithart, 2014; Barclay, 2015). Instead, we not only learn to love God for the gifts we receive, but also come to understand something more fundamental about God's character and our own identity (Job 40:4). The shift in perspective that results from practicing GTG shapes our experience of suffering, even enabling us to thank God for the gift of suffering, a gift that moves us into a deeper spiritual maturity.

Gratitude Orients Us Toward the Good

As an integral element of moral character, gratitude is an open and receptive stance toward the world that energizes a person to return the goodness received. Gratitude's intrinsic function is to affirm the good in life, embrace that good, and then transform the good in purposeful actions to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self. The late moral philosopher Charles Shelton captured the essence of gratitude as a way of life:

Gratitude is an interior depth we experience which orients us to an acknowledged dependence out of which flows a profound sense of being gifted. This way of being, in

turn, elicits a humility just as it nourishes our goodness. As a consequence, when truly grateful, we are led to experience and interpret life situations in ways that call forth from us an openness to and engagement with the world through purposeful actions in order to share and increase the very good we have received (Shelton, 2004, p. 273).

From a psychological perspective, this fullest sense of gratitude represents a substantial altering in a person's outlook. To elaborate, to experience this degree of gratitude brings about an expansive enlargement of a perceptual hermeneutic. In short, this degree of gratitude nourishes a more or less all-encompassing hermeneutics of appreciation. This appreciative lens fosters within individuals a radical openness to and receptivity of the world. This openness and receptivity allows for an altruistic acuity that enhances the giving away of goodness. Stated succinctly, as one experiences life, gratitude's intrinsic function allows one to approach the world by embracing it, nourishing it, and transforming it. Authentic gratitude leads people to experience life situations in ways that call forth from them an openness to engage with the world to share and increase the very goodness they have received. It is the feeling of connection with humanity emerging from a sense of wonder and joy that participating in an intricate network of existence brings.

Making Suffering Sufferable Through Gratitude Practices

Lest the preceding discussion appear exclusively cerebral, let me offer some concrete, evidence-based actionables for approaching suffering through a lens of gratefulness. In so doing, I am ever mindful that one size does not fit all nor is there a prescribed timeline that must be followed in making sense of suffering through grateful processing. We must remember that

people may be at different stages in their gratitude journeys, especially when in the throes of deep personal suffering.

1. *Engage in a practice of gratitude.* Find ways to practice gratitude intentionally through both private activities and public expressions. Journaling, prayer, fasting, worship— all these become ways that we can practice thankfulness. We may not feel grateful, but the practice of gratitude can eventually lead us to develop the inner disposition of thankfulness. Start with journaling. In the tradition founded by St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, the examination of conscience (the *Examen*) is a specific method employed to assist in acquisition of one particular virtue or in the elimination of one particular vice. As such, it is very useful for anyone who wants to grow in gratitude. This prayer can be made anywhere: on the beach, in a car, at home, in the library. Many people make the Examen twice daily: once around lunchtime and again before going to bed. There are 5 steps in the examination of conscience:

- a. *God's presence:* no matter where you are, whether you are in front of a computer screen, in freeway traffic, mowing the lawn, in a crowd or alone, in the city or in the country, you become aware that God is present within you.
- b. *Thanksgiving:* Spend a moment looking over your day with gratitude for this day's gifts. Be specific and let particular pleasures come to mind. Recall the morning dew, the smell of freshly cut grass, a strength you discovered you had. Give thanks for favors and blessings received.
- c. *Self-knowledge:* Take a look at look at your actions, attitudes and motives with honesty and patience. Be open to growth and learning something new about yourself.
- d. *Now review your day:* Consider is a gentle look at how you have responded to God's gifts. Did you receive them without grumbling or complaining?

Could you have chosen gratitude rather than complaint in specific situations throughout the day?

- e. *Communicate with God:* You share your thoughts on your actions, attitudes, feelings and interactions. Perhaps during this time you may feel led to seek forgiveness, ask for direction, share a concern, but above all give thanks for grace.
2. *Write a letter of gratitude.* Recall someone who has had a major impact on your life but whom you have never properly taken the time to thank. Remember a time in your life when you were grateful for something that another person did for you and then write a letter to that person. It is up to you whether you send the letter or not. In the letter, describe specifically why you are grateful to this person and how they have affected your life, and how often you reflect on their efforts. What did he or she do, and how does that still affect your life? This should be someone that you have never properly taken the time to thank, and could be a parent, teacher, friend, relative, coach, or God. You can compose it using whatever medium (stationary, e-mail, video) that you feel comfortable with. Spend at least 10-15 minutes on this letter. Your letter should be around 250 words. Whether or not you actually send it, imagine how reading the letter will make the recipient feel.
3. *Engage in a virtual gratitude visit.* Sometime the person to whom we wish to express gratitude is unavailable. It may be a person from childhood who has moved or a friend with whom one has lost contact. Perhaps the person has passed away. Or, it may be an intangible supernatural being. In that case, we can engage in a virtual gratitude visit (VGV; Emmons, in press; Tomasulo, 2019). The VGV employs this essence of verbal expression to others by using an empty chair in the way of a psychodramatic role-play.

For this activity, two chairs are arranged, one for the expresser or sender of gratitude and the second the auxiliary empty chair for the receiver of the gratitude (the unavailable other). The expresser arranges the chairs in a way that symbolically depicts the relationship. You may place the chairs close to each other, far apart, side by side, or one behind the other. The expresser sits in his or her chair and expresses gratitude and appreciation toward the imagined unavailable/other in the empty chair. They then reverse roles with the expresser imagining how the receiver feels about receiving gratitude.

4. *Remember the bad.* Gratitude starts with remembering, and memory of adversity serves as a basis for thanksgiving. Bad to good thinking works this way: Think of your worst moments, your sorrows, your losses, and your sadness and then remember. Focus on how you got through the worst day of your life, the trauma, the trial; you endured the temptation; you survived the bad relationship; you're making your way out of the dark. Remember the bad things, and then look to see where you are now. Try now to focus on the positive aspects or consequences of this difficult experience. As the result of this event, what kinds of things do you now feel thankful or grateful for? Has this event benefited you as a person? How have you grown? Were there personal strengths that grew out of your experience? How has this event helped you appreciate the truly important people and things in your life? In sum, how can you be thankful for the beneficial consequences that have resulted from this event? Using questions such as these, Watkins (2008) showed how grateful processing could close the door on memories associated with personally upsetting events.

Concluding Thoughts

I hope that I have made clear that expressions of gratitude in the face of suffering are not attempts to sidestep the reality of trials and tribulations. Viewing life through a lens of gratefulness is not merely a positive thinking veneer. Rather, the practice of gratefulness testifies that a deep and abiding sense of goodness dwells even under the rancor and devastation of daily life. It maintains that pain and suffering are redeemable. Gratitude to God is trust in the ever-moving, ever-working love of God and this trust is a wellspring of strength and hope. Trusting God involves trusting that God will act and God will also call forth, empower and be thankful for the action that we take. As the authors of the contributions to this volume have clearly and convincingly articulated, the work and life of Paul Wong illustrates these fundamental truths. And for that, and for his impact on my life and my professional work, I am overwhelmingly grateful.

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