

“The Top Ten Habits of Grateful People”
Rev. Kim D. Wilson
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos
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What is the secret to happiness? We’ve all heard that money can’t buy us happiness. But honestly, who doesn’t secretly think that it would be great to win the lottery? It does sound great, but most of us have also heard that lottery winners tend to be less happy after they win all that money. So, deep down, we know that’s not the answer.

I think it’s natural to wish for some dramatic, life-changing event that would bring us eternal happiness. The thing is, whatever happens in our lives, wherever we go, there we are –complete with our attitudes, our opinions, our beliefs, our habits and our feelings.

Our circumstances are much less a factor in our level of happiness that we tend to think. And I think we know this deep down. What matters most when it comes to the way we feel about life is this: it is directly related to the way in which we perceive the world and our place in it. That is where the journey toward living a happy and satisfying life must begin. Yes, I’m sorry. But you knew it wasn’t going to be that simple...

When things seem to be going our way, it’s often pretty easy to have a perception of the world as a good place and to feel happy. But as we all know, those feelings can slip away so easily when life disappoints us, when we experience major frustration, when we experience loss or trauma or some combination. When everything seems to go wrong, we may think, “There is nothing in my life I can be happy about right now.” That’s how we perceive things in that moment. At the same time, it’s also not a bad idea to stop and think about whether or not that perception is really true.

The happiest people are the ones who are able to “dig deep” no matter what happens to them, and find that there is still plenty to be grateful for. Grateful people are not simply born optimists. Gratitude is a spiritual practice and therefore it requires... practice. I will say that I try to practice it every day. I say a list of things, out loud, for which I am grateful. I find it’s a good way to start my day.

Sometimes, when we express gratitude, we are saying, “Thank you” to someone or something, whether to God, to the spirit of life, to the earth or the universe or to another person. Other times, we are simply expressing the feeling of gratitude. Sometimes, we may find ourselves saying the words without really feeling grateful. That’s OK. Many people have discovered that after saying the words anyway each day, listing all the things for which they can be grateful, the actual FEELING of gratitude eventually does make its way into their hearts. Sometimes you have to fake it till you make it.

Author Judy Belmont writes, “Those who tend to be more grateful than bitter are generally more positive, more satisfied with their lives, and will be able to see the silver lining even on cloudy days.”

As long as we are willing to make room in our hearts for gratitude, we can learn from other people who practice it, and we, too, can experience more of that happiness and a greater feeling of well-being.

So, here’s my list of the top 10 habits of grateful people.

1. Grateful people keep their expectations low.

When we practice gratitude, we accept life on life’s terms. We come to understand that good things do not always happen to good people. We give up the belief that life “owes us” something or that we “deserve” to have things go our way. Pain, illness, suffering and death are, unfortunately, parts of life. Life isn’t fair. It can be difficult to completely accept that fact. However, if we can, then we are free to focus on how to move forward in spite of what life has doled out to us. We can stop asking, “Why me?” And replace that question with, “Why not me?”

2. Grateful people keep their hopes high.

We can’t ever know what tomorrow will bring. But when we practice gratitude, we learn that there is every reason to have hope, because the future holds endless possibilities; there may be good things in store for us that are beyond anything we can imagine. It is risky to hope, because it is also possible that we may be disappointed. But I think it beats the alternative. If we try too hard to protect ourselves from pain, spending the present to imagine and prepare for terrible things that may or may not ever happen, we could be cutting ourselves off from the many delights that today has to offer. So why not enjoy the present and hope for the best?

3. Grateful people know what makes them happy.

The practice of gratitude makes us realize that we don't need to predicate our happiness on external events. We don't make our happiness conditional on some future possibility, as in, "If such-and-such happens, then I can be happy." Grateful people understand that happiness comes from within, and that a person can never attain true, lasting happiness through other people, places, things or events. If we place the fact of our happiness or lack of it in the hands of other people or make it dependent on things beyond our control, we are giving away our power. We alone have the power to change our attitudes and the way we respond to life. Our happiness is up to us.

4. Grateful people know there's no rainbow without rain.

It's natural to want to seek pleasure and avoid pain. But, as we become more grateful, we also get better at accepting the fact that life includes both pleasurable and unpleasant or painful aspects. Judy Belmont says, "You don't have the honey without the bee and you can't have the rose without the thorns...[We] admire the beauty of the rose even though it has its thorny side and savor the sweet taste of honey even though the bee can sting." Once we truly accept that it's a package deal, we don't get one without the other, we can learn to be grateful for both.

5. Grateful people forgive easily.

If a person is steeped in bitterness and grudges, there will be no space in their heart for gratitude. As we practice gratitude and gain more spiritual insight, we come to understand that forgiving someone for not being or acting in the way we had hoped doesn't mean we accept the behavior. It means letting go of the anger, the hurt, the resentment. The Buddha said, "Holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned." Giving up a grudge because someone "should have" or "shouldn't have" done or said something is ultimately a way of taking care of ourselves. It opens our hearts and frees us from a prison of our own making. It creates space for gratitude.

6. Grateful people know that a grateful attitude can be hard work.

Gratitude doesn't always come naturally, so we need to be intentional about practicing it, especially in challenging times. It can be very difficult to think about gratitude when our problems feel overwhelming. Sometimes talking to another person can help us regain a hopeful perspective. Those of us who pray (or are willing to give it a try) can ask God or our higher power for help in finding things for which we can still be grateful. In this way, we keep despair at bay. If we engage in a daily practice of gratitude, and it becomes a strong enough habit, it can keep us from getting stuck in misery.

Now, I'm not suggesting that gratitude is a panacea. Tough stuff is still tough stuff. But with a practice of gratitude, we will get whatever help we need, pick ourselves up and do whatever we need to do to weather the storm.

I'm reminded of the "Dear Abby" column which used to run every year around Thanksgiving. Abigail Van Buren writes: "If you awakened this morning and were able to hear the birds sing, use your vocal cords to utter human sounds, walk to the breakfast table on two good legs, and read the newspaper with two good eyes, praise the Lord! A lot of people couldn't."

7. Grateful people think healthy thoughts.

Healthy thinking is a big topic that we could spend a lot of time on. But one thing it means is that we take responsibility for ourselves and our reactions. We learn to think like grownups, not victims. For example, if I think, "When she did that, she made me so mad!" I have a victim mentality, because I believe that she caused me to be mad. But if I replace that thought with, "When she did that, I got so mad!" I'm taking responsibility for my own feelings.

Grateful people avoid crisis thinking like, "Oh, this is awful!" or, "I can't stand this!" when what they're dealing with are just everyday annoyances or discomforts. We can learn to put things into a more realistic perspective. So it's raining. Does that really make it a "horrible" day?

One more aspect of healthy thinking. Practicing gratitude can help us change a habit many of us have, which is worrying about things over which we have no control. Writer and spiritual teacher Eckart Tolle says, "Worry pretends to be necessary but serves no useful purpose."

I've often heard people say, "But I can't help it. I'm just a worrier." I respectfully disagree. I'm a recovering worrier myself, so I know from whence I speak.

Writer and physician Deepak Chopra offers this prescription:

First you must be aware of when you are [worrying] ... Without ever struggling against your mental habit, you will find that over time your silent witness awareness will spontaneously replace that unconscious habit with present time awareness.

In other words, each time we catch ourselves worrying, we can gently bring our thoughts back to the present moment.

8. Grateful people are flexible.

Flexible thinking is key to spiritual growth and wisdom. It's been said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Yet many of us do just that. Practicing gratitude helps us to be more open to life. We tend to stop clinging to ways of doing things that don't work. We become more willing to examine our beliefs and shift our attitudes in ways that work better for our lives. For example, suppose we've been trying for years to get a loved one to quit smoking. We've nagged, pleaded, shamed, gotten angry. None of these tactics has worked. Hmmm.... Maybe we need to accept the fact that we can't force another person to change. Flexible thinking means asking questions like, What's working well in our lives? Where do we get frustrated or upset? Is there a different way we might look at something? A different approach we might take to a problem?

9. Grateful people love to learn.

Every setback, every unforeseen event offers us opportunities for growth. When we're practicing gratitude, we're more likely to be able to focus on what we can learn from our experiences than on feeling frustrated, disappointed or upset. Life IS a great teacher; if we're open to what we can learn, our experiences can teach us powerful lessons.

Mistakes and failures are all part of the education program. I'm also a recovering perfectionist; I used to get so frustrated whenever I made a mistake. Once I admitted I wasn't perfect, I could then EXPECT to make mistakes. That made life a lot easier.

10. Grateful people let go of the past.

Perfectionism is a disease that can steal away happiness and contentment. Those of us who have lived with criticism, or who were told in one way or another that we weren't good enough, may get stuck in regret or "kicking ourselves" for past mistakes. "I should have known better." "If only I had done such and such." Blaming ourselves, feeling guilty. Please listen. Whatever it is, you did the best you could at the time, given what you knew then. So please, forgive yourself and move on. When we let go of the past, we free ourselves to focus on the present and on all we have to be thankful for.

Someone said to me recently, "Imagine if we could only have tomorrow the things we remembered to be grateful for today." Happy Thanksgiving, and may our hearts be filled with gratitude for our many, many blessings.