

---

## Gratitude and the Science of Positive Psychology

*Robert A. Emmons & Charles M. Shelton*

The concept of gratitude recently has attracted considerable interest in the popular culture. The prevalence of books targeted to general audiences on the topic (Breathnach, 1996; Hay, 1996; Miller, 1995; Ryan, 1999; Steindl-Rast, 1984; Turner, 1998; Van Kaam & Muto, 1993) testify to the broad appeal of this timeless concept. Following a similar format, these popular books generally consist of reflections on the value of gratefulness, along with strategies for cultivating an attitude of gratitude. The essential message of these volumes is that a life oriented around gratefulness is *the* panacea for insatiable yearnings and life's ills. Grateful responses to life can lead to peace of mind, happiness, physical health, and deeper, more satisfying personal relationships.

Surprisingly, despite the public's fascination with gratitude, this emotion has received relatively little sustained attention in scientific psychology. Although intuitively compelling, many of the general claims in popular books concerning the power of a grateful lifestyle are speculative or empirically untestable. In one popular book on gratitude, for instance, the author asserts, "Gratitude is the most passionate transformative force in the cosmos" (Breath-

nach, 1996, p. 1). All in all, the contribution of gratitude to health, well-being, and overall positive functioning remains speculative and without rigorous empirical confirmation.

Popular writings are not the only sources on the topic of gratitude. Classical writers who focused on the good life emphasized the cultivation and expression of gratitude for the health and vitality of both citizenry and society. Across cultures and time spans, experiences and expressions of gratitude have been treated as both basic and desirable aspects of human personality and social life. For example, gratitude is a highly prized human disposition in Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu thought. Cicero (*Pro Plancio*) held that "gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others." The Buddha suggested that thankfulness is a core aspect of the noble person. Christian devotional writers such as Thomas à Kempis, Thomas Aquinas, and Bernard of Clairvaux expounded on the virtues of gratitude and the sinfulness of ingratitude. Indeed, the consensus among the world's religious and ethical writers is that people are obligated to feel and express gratitude in response to received benefits. Moreover, on the basis of these quotations, one

can infer that the response of grateful people benefit not only themselves but also the wider community.

In recognition of the importance of gratitude, members of the United Nations General Assembly declared 2000 as the International Year of Thanksgiving. Although around the world people experience and express gratitude in diverse ways (Streng, 1989), they typically feel grateful emotions (i.e., thankful, appreciative) and have developed linguistic and cultural conventions for expressing such gratitude. For example, in Japanese culture the conventional expression of apology—*sumimasen*—is also used to express the feeling of thanks. Gratitude may in fact be a positive, universal characteristic that transcends historical and cultural periods. Therefore, illuminating the nature of gratitude and its functioning in both individual and societal contexts might help to elucidate cross-cultural similarities and differences in emotional experience and expression, and, consequently, advance psychology's mission in identifying a taxonomy of human strengths (McCullough & Snyder, 2000).

#### **Gratitude as an Emotional Response to Life**

Gratitude is derived from the Latin *gratia*, meaning grace, graciousness, or gratefulness. All derivatives from this Latin root "have to do with kindness, generousness, gifts, the beauty of giving and receiving, or getting something for nothing" (Pruyser, 1976, p. 69). As a psychological state, gratitude is a felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life. It can be expressed toward others, as well as toward impersonal (nature) or nonhuman sources (God, animals). Some of the most profound reported experiences of gratitude can be religiously based or associated with reverent wonder toward an acknowledgment of the universe (Goodenough, 1998). The roots of gratitude can be seen in many of the world's religious traditions. In the great monotheistic religions of the world, the concept of gratitude permeates texts, prayers, and teachings. Worship with gratitude to God for his many gifts and mercies is a common theme, and believers are urged to develop this quality. As such, gratitude is one of the most common emotions that religions seek to provoke and sustain in believers. Thus, for many people, gratitude is at the core of spiritual and religious experience. The spiritual

quality of gratitude is aptly conveyed by Streng (1989): "In this attitude people recognize that they are connected to each other in a mysterious and miraculous way that is not fully determined by physical forces, but is part of a wider, or transcendent context" (p. 5). Emmons and Crumpler (2000) discuss the theological foundations of gratitude in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In addition to its association with religious traditions, the sense of wonder and appreciation for life was one of the core characteristics of self-actualizing individuals studied by Maslow (1970). Self-actualizers, according to Maslow, had the capacity to "appreciate again and again, freshly and naively, the basic goods of life with awe, pleasure, wonder, and even ecstasy, however stale these experiences may have become to others" (p. 136). This ability to freshly appreciate everyday experience enabled self-actualizers to derive a sense of pleasure, inspiration, and strength from even mundane happenings. Toward the end of his life, Maslow regarded the ability both to experience and to express gratitude as essential for emotional health and lamented the paucity of research on this noble and vital topic (Lowry, 1982). Maslow believed that life could be "vastly improved if we could count our blessings as self-actualizing people do" (p. 137), and he suggested some specific experiential techniques for enhancing gratitude (Hoffman, 1996). Sadly, as he surveyed the human condition, he became convinced that taking one's blessings for granted was a primary cause of suffering and misery.

In addition to its merit as an intrinsically rewarding state, gratitude may lead to other positive subjective experiences. Chesterton contended that "gratitude produced the most purely joyful moments that have been known to man" (1924, p. 114). Empirically, gratitude is a pleasant state and is linked with positive emotions, including contentment (Walker & Pitts, 1998), happiness, pride, and hope (Overwalle, Mervielde, & De Schuyter, 1995). In a recent Gallup (1998) survey of American teens and adults, over 90% of respondents indicated that expressing gratitude helped them to feel "extremely happy" or "somewhat happy." Also, Emmons and Crumpler (2000) have reported that a conscious focus on gratitude makes life more fulfilling, meaningful, and productive.

Although a variety of life experiences can elicit feelings of gratitude, prototypically grati-

tude stems from the perception of a positive personal outcome that is due to the actions of another person. Social psychologist Fritz Heider (1958) provided a commonsense view that people feel grateful when receiving a benefit that intentionally resulted from another's action. As a consequence, the Heiderian perspective sharpened the focus on the perceived intentionality of the sender as a critical element in shaping the recipient's sense of gratitude. Building on his viewpoint, in order to have gratitude, two elements are required. The first is an interpersonal context, for gratitude is an interpersonal emotion, which precludes it from being directed toward oneself. Second, implicit in the experience of gratitude is the recipient's theory of mind from which he or she infers another's well-meaning intention, resulting in one's feeling loved and esteemed (see Shelton, 1990). That is to say, we can logically infer that a person feeling grateful might be more inclined to feel loved and cared for by others (Shelton, 1990). From this more expansive perspective, gratitude is fundamentally a moral affect with empathy at its foundation: In order to acknowledge the cost of the gift, the recipient must identify with the psychological state of the one who has provided it. The benefactor's giving is interpreted by the recipient as freely offered, and with that comes the acknowledgment that such offering might prove costly to or incur hardship for the benefactor. Such an understanding blends fittingly with some object relations formulations of gratitude, where it is seen as a major derivative of the capacity for love (Klein, 1957). Klein summarizes this entire discussion nicely when she observes that gratitude "underlies the appreciation of goodness in others and in oneself" (1957, p. 187).

#### Gratitude in Emotion Theory

Given that gratitude is a commonly occurring affect, it is remarkable that psychologists specializing in the study of emotion have, by and large, failed to explore its contours. The term *gratitude* rarely appears in the emotion lexicon (Shaver, Schwarz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987). *Gratitude* appears nowhere in the index of the *Handbook of Emotions* (Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2000), only once in the wide-ranging *Handbook of Cognition and Emotion* (Dalglish & Power, 1999), and not at all in the presumably comprehensive *Encyclopedia of Human Emotions* (Levinson, Ponzetti, & Jorgensen,

1999). Widespread ambiguity and uncertainty concerning its status as an emotion account for its scant attention. For example, although Lazarus and Lazarus (1994) discuss the concept at some length, in his earlier comprehensive monograph, Lazarus (1991) remarked, "I have ignored gratitude—though with some misgiving, because in some instances, it may be a strong emotional state" (p. 265). In his structural theory of the emotions, de Rivera (1977) neglected gratitude, yet in a later chapter (de Rivera, 1984) he included gratitude as one of 80 common emotion terms. Yet another emotion theorist displaying this "gratitudinal ambivalence" is Keith Oatley, who omits gratitude from his scholarly treatise (1992) but groups it with the social emotions in a later work (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996). In his social-interactional theory of the emotions, Kemper (1978) locates gratitude within the overarching coordinates of status and power.

Appraisal theorists, on the other hand, are more inclined to include gratitude within their framework of emotion. Weiner's (1985) attributional model emphasizes causal appraisals about events as the main determinants of emotional responses. Underlying properties or dimensions of causal attribution, in combination with event valence, influence the direction and magnitude of the felt emotion. There are two sets of emotions: outcome-dependent and attribution-dependent. General affective reactions of happiness and unhappiness are outcome dependent, whereas secondary emotional reactions of, say, pride, anger, or gratitude follow specific patterns of causal attribution. In this framework, attribution to another for a pleasant outcome elicits gratitude. In a recent study using sophisticated causal modeling techniques, the researchers lent support to Weiner's attributional model (Overwalle et al., 1995).

Ortony, Clore, and Collins (1988) introduced a goal-based model of appraisal, where the consequences of events are appraised for their relevance to one's ongoing goal pursuits. Representational systems consisting of goals, standards (consisting of "oughts"), and attitudes (a dispositional liking or disliking of objects) mediate between objective events and the attendant emotional reactions. In their framework, gratitude is a compound of admiration and joy: It consists of approving of someone else's praiseworthy actions and feeling joy for the desirability of the outcome. The variables that affect the intensity of gratitude are (a) the degree

of judged praiseworthiness, (b) the deviation of the agent's action from role-based expectations, and (c) the desirability of the event. The main contribution of this model is that it specifies conditions under which gratitude is and is not likely to occur and calls attention to nuances that might remain undetected in other emotion-based frameworks. For example, felt gratitude may reflect the potential desirability of an event independent of the event's outcome, such as when someone aids in the unsuccessful search for a lost child.

Lazarus and Lazarus (1994) place gratitude in the class of empathic emotions because, along with compassion, it depends on the capacity to empathize with others. Each emotion is associated with a distinctive dramatic plot, defining what is happening to the person and its significance for the person's well-being (what he also has referred to as the emotion's "core relational theme"). The dramatic plot for gratitude is the appreciation of an altruistic gift. Both giving and receiving of the gift involve empathy because one must sense the donor's positive intention, and the donor must sense the need of the recipient. Lazarus and Lazarus describe the "many faces of gratitude" (p. 118) and suggest that within an interpersonal transaction, the personal meanings people attach to giving and receiving influence their experience of gratitude. More recently, Lazarus (1999) described several of the subtleties involved in gift exchanges and called attention to ways in which gratitude may be shaped by the dynamics between donor and recipient. Working within Lazarus's cognitive-motivational theory, Smith (1992) identified the appraisal components of gratitude as (a) a motivationally relevant outcome that is (b) motivationally congruent or desirable for the person and (c) credited to the efforts of another. Functionally, gratitude motivates the person to reward the other's prosocial behavior.

### **Gratitude as Virtue: Insights From Moral Philosophy**

In contrast to psychology's view of gratitude as an emotional state, moral philosophy and theology portrays gratitude as a virtue. Whether one considers the classical Hebrew, Christian, or Graeco-Roman writings, gratitude is viewed as a highly prized human disposition, or virtue. Virtues, in essence, are good habits that connote

excellence in personal character. Thus, the natural outcome of living a virtuous life is a greater attainment of or movement toward completeness and wholeness (Zagzebski, 1996). Virtues have been defined as "character traits that a human being needs to flourish or to live well" (Hursthouse, 1991, p. 224), as "a quality which expresses the highest potentials of human nature" (Jeffries, 1998, p. 153). For Thomas Aquinas, gratitude was understood as a secondary virtue associated with the primary virtue of justice (Aquinas, 1981). The Thomistic notion of justice entails rendering to others their right or due, and in accord with some measure of basic equality. Gratitude is a motivator of altruistic action, according to Aquinas, because it entails thanking one's benefactors and generating a fitting and appropriate response.

As a virtue, gratitude is expressed as an enduring thankfulness that is sustained across situations and over time. Gratitude represents "an attitude toward the giver, and an attitude toward the gift, a determination to use it well, to employ it imaginatively and inventively in accordance with the giver's intention" (Harned, 1997, p. 175). A grateful person recognizes the receipt of someone else's generosity. Perhaps the core element of gratitude is that it is a response to perceived, intentional benevolence. Furthermore, one is willing to be indebted to the benefactor. In contrast, a gift that is resented or perceived as an obligation or whose reception incurs an obligation precludes even the possibility of gratefulness. On the other hand, sheer dislike of the gift is irrelevant; one can be grateful for the intentions of the benefactor (e.g., "it's the thought that counts").

There is an intriguing aspect to gratitude, overlooked by psychologists, to which writers in the domain of moral philosophy have called attention. To be genuinely grateful is to feel indebted in a way that defies repayment. Given this reality, the very attempt to repay is an authentic grateful expression. Roberts (1991) soberly points out that no amount or form of repayment can compensate for sacrificial gifts. Even so, gifts obligate the recipient to recognize the gift and express appropriate gratitude. Gratitude is both a duty (Berger, 1975) and an obligation (Meilaender, 1984). Schimmel (1997) also writes about gratitude as a moral obligation, as something that we "owe" to others on whom we are profoundly dependent for our well-being. Echoing Maslow's sentiments

voiced earlier, Schimmel writes: "Gratitude as a moral virtue is not emphasized in our culture" (p. 208).

### Ingratitude as Vice

Ingratitude is the failure to acknowledge the beneficence of others. Throughout recorded history, the ungrateful person has been the recipient of harsh criticism.

- Tiruvalluvar: "There is salvation to those guilty of any wicked deed; but there is no life for those who are ungrateful."
- Cicero: "Men detest one forgetful of a benefit."
- Kant: "Ingratitude . . . is the essence of vile-ness."
- Seneca: "Ingratitude . . . is an abomination."

Reflecting on classical views of ingratitude, Amato (1982) declared, "Ingratitude is a universally powerful accusation" (p. 27). From these quotations, we can infer that people who cannot or will not acknowledge benefits that others have conferred upon them are widely scorned. The ungrateful person regularly responds to others' beneficence with resentment, hostility, or indifference. In this regard, Gabriel (1998) classifies ingratitude as a type of insult, equivalent to stereotyping, scapegoating, rudeness, and other interpersonally destructive defects. Because gratitude serves to sustain people's sense of personal goodness while linking them to a moral horizon toward which they might strive, it cultivates an individual's sense of interconnectedness and personal growth. By way of contrast, ingratitude leads ineluctably to a confining, restricting, and "shrinking" sense of self.

From a clinical viewpoint, ingratitude can be viewed as a characterological defect. For example, utilizing a psychodynamic perspective, Bergler (1945) described the psychopathology of ingratitude and speculated on the conscious and unconscious reasons for its occurrence (e.g., impugning the generous motives of their benefactor). In case material, Heilbrunn (1972) illustrates various negative emotional sequelae (such as rejection, depression, anger, anxiety, and guilt) that people suffered following the failure to acknowledge gifts received.

Above all, the ungrateful person is best characterized by a personality structure crippled by

narcissistic dynamics. The prominent features of narcissism include excessive self-importance, overt or covert arrogance, vanity, insatiable hunger for admiration, and interpersonal entitlement (Stone, 1998). People with narcissistic tendencies erroneously believe they are deserving of special rights and privileges. Along with being demanding and selfish, they exhibit an exaggerated sense of self-importance, which leads them to expect special favors without assuming reciprocal responsibilities. Further, they will express surprise and anger ("narcissistic rage") when others fail to conform to their wishes. The sense of entitlement, combined with insensitivity to the needs of others engenders, whether consciously or unconsciously intended, interpersonal exploitation. In short, if one is entitled to everything, then one is thankful for nothing.

Based on clinical observations, McWilliams and Lependorf (1990; see also Pruyser, 1976) noted that narcissistic people are incapable of experiencing and expressing sincere gratitude. A core issue for narcissistic people is their slavish adherence to self-sufficiency. Expressions of gratitude are acknowledgments that one is dependent on other people for one's well-being, and therefore not self-sufficient. Given this reality, such individuals find expressions of gratitude to be highly unpleasant. Furthermore, because narcissistic individuals possess a distorted sense of their own superiority, they might be reluctant to express gratitude in response to benefactors whose generosity or kindness they summarily dismiss as little more than an attempt to curry favor. In support of these conjectures, Farwell and Wohlwend-Lloyd (1998) found that in the context of a laboratory-based interdependence game, narcissism was inversely related to the extent to which participants experienced liking and gratitude for their partners.

### Beyond the Self: Interpersonal Consequences of Gratitude

While this chapter has conceptualized gratitude as primarily an internal psychological characteristic, gratitude has important implications both for societal functioning and for collective well-being. In this regard, gratitude can be conceived of as a vital civic virtue. Positing a theory that conceptualizes gratitude as a moral affect, McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson

(2001) hypothesize that by experiencing gratitude, a person is motivated to carry out prosocial behavior, energized to sustain moral behaviors, and inhibited from committing destructive interpersonal behaviors. By referring to gratitude as a moral affect, they are not proposing that the emotion and expression of gratitude itself are moral but that gratitude typically results from and stimulates moral behavior, that is, behavior that is motivated out of concern for another person. Because of gratitude's specialized functions in the moral domain, they liken it to empathy, sympathy, guilt, and shame. Like empathy, sympathy, guilt, and shame, gratitude has a special place in the grammar of moral life. Whereas empathy and sympathy operate when people have the opportunity to respond to the plight of another person, and guilt and shame operate when people have failed to meet moral standards or obligations, gratitude operates typically when people acknowledge that they are the recipients of prosocial behavior. In particular, McCullough et al. posited that gratitude has three specific moral functions: It functions as a *moral barometer* (an affective readout that is sensitive to a particular type of change in one's social relationships, the provision of a benefit by another moral agent that enhances one's well-being); as a *moral motive* (prompting grateful people to behave prosocially themselves); and, when people express their grateful emotions in words or actions, as a *moral reinforcer* that increases the likelihood of future benevolent actions. McCullough et al. review the empirical evidence for each of the three hypothesized functions of gratitude as a moral affect and conclude that there is considerable evidence for the moral barometer and moral reinforcer hypotheses but insufficient research to judge the veracity of the moral motive hypothesis.

In line with gratitude-as-moral-affect theory, some have compellingly argued that the cohesiveness of society would be seriously torn asunder were it not for experiences and expressions of gratefulness among its citizens. Sociologist Georg Simmel (1950), for example, referred to gratitude as "the moral memory of mankind. . . if every grateful action . . . were suddenly eliminated, society (at least as we know it) would break apart" (p. 388).

In all likelihood, the first influential theoretical treatment of gratitude from this broader communal perspective arose from the political economist Adam Smith (1790/1976) in his volume *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Deeply

influenced by both Christian writers and the Roman Stoics, Smith held the view that human nature is guided by intelligent design, and that even in the moral realm, human passions provide individuals with guidance for moral judgment and behavior. In this context, Smith proposed gratitude as an essential social emotion—on a par with emotions such as resentment and affection. Gratitude is, according to Smith, one of the primary motivators of benevolent behavior toward a benefactor. To this point, Smith wrote, "The sentiment which most immediately and directly prompts us to reward, is gratitude" (p. 68). When a benefactor has brought good fortune upon a beneficiary, gratitude prompts the beneficiary to find ways to acknowledge the gift. Until the beneficiary has been instrumental in promoting the well-being of someone perceived to have conferred a benefit, the beneficiary will continue to feel a sense of gratitude toward the benefactor.

Smith observed that society can function purely on utilitarian grounds or on the basis of gratitude, but he clearly believed that societies of gratitude were more attractive in large part because they provide an important emotional resource for promoting social stability. Similarly, Oatley and Jenkins (1996) more recently stated that "gratitude is the prototype of exchanges that are universal in human societies, perhaps the basis for modern economic relations" (p. 90). Likewise, Camenisch (1981) stated that a grateful outlook can even dominate the life of an entire culture, as when individuals in certain Eastern cultures view themselves as recipients of endless ancestrally bestowed blessings.

Following the line of thought initiated by Smith, Simmel (1950) argued that gratitude was a cognitive-emotional supplement to sustain one's reciprocal obligations. Because formal social structures such as the law and social contracts are insufficient to regulate and ensure reciprocity in human interaction, people are socialized to have gratitude, which then serves to remind them of their need to reciprocate. Thus, during exchange of benefits, gratitude prompts one person (a beneficiary) to be bound to another (a benefactor) during exchange of benefits, thereby reminding beneficiaries of their reciprocity obligations.

Moreover, Simmel expanded the sociological and psychological nature of gratitude far beyond isolated benefactor-beneficiary dyads. He argued persuasively that gratitude linked people

to wider societal networks, functioning, and concerns. People often experience gratitude for people whose roles (e.g., artists, politicians, or poets) have proven beneficial to them. As such, prosocial sentiments and attitudes are intertwined within a vast, interlocking social network. Simmel also enlarges the notion of gratitude-like "benefits" to include intangible goods of a psychological nature (e.g., love, support, and inspiration). He also addresses the obligatory nature of gratitude and notes that some people are disinclined to receive gifts or resources because of both the moral reciprocity imperative and the uncomfortable feeling of indebtedness. Gratitude might even be a response to the recognition that some gifts (e.g., the gift of life) cannot be returned, in which case, the only possible moral response, in Simmel's view, is a call to permanent faithfulness and obligation.

### **Intervention: Cultivating Gratitude**

Can gratefulness be nurtured? 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. A number of questions might be posed concerning gratitude-centered interventions. Could a depressed individual profit from learning thankfulness? Can the individual use gratitude to alleviate distress, as well as to enhance positive well-being? It is known that rumination prolongs and intensifies depressive mood (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). What if we redirected ruminative thoughts from self-inadequacy to ones of undeserved merit? Might these serve as a buffer for people at risk for depression? Similarly, by experiencing gratitude, perhaps a person could control anger or other interpersonally destructive emotions? Consider envy. In her classic work cited earlier, Klein (1957) argued that the person experiencing gratitude is protected from the destructive impulses of envy and greed. Conversely, envy is a breeding ground for ingratitude. The practice of gratitude as a spiritual discipline (a "thank-you therapy") has been suggested as a cure to excessive materialism and its attendant negative emotions of envy, resentment, disappointment, and bitterness (Clapp, 1998; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Schimmel, 1997). The core problem with envy is a nonawareness of the blessings that one is consistently surrounded by (Bonder, 1997).

Schwarz (1971) writes: "The ungrateful, envious, complaining man . . . cripples himself. He is focused on what he has not, particularly on that which somebody else has or seems to have, and by that he tends to poison his world" (p. 184).

At least two specific programs have been suggested for nurturing skills that allow for a greater awareness of gratitude in one's life. Miller (1995) offers a simple, four-step, behavioral-cognitive approach for learning gratitude: (a) Identify nongrateful thoughts, (b) formulate gratitude-supporting thoughts, (c) substitute the gratitude-supporting thoughts for the nongrateful thoughts, and (d) translate the inner feeling into outward action. By following these four steps, a person is able to live with greater contentment.

Shelton (2000) has framed gratitude as one of four key ingredients that make up a daily moral inventory which individuals can use to foster moral growth. According to Shelton, developing a healthy moral life involves, first of all, self-awareness that one is a moral being. Self-talk ("I am a moral person" or "I have a conscience") is a critical first step down the path toward moral growth. The theme of gratitude occupies the second step in his model. We will discuss the benefits of gratitude in a roundabout way by initially briefly sketching the final two steps. The third step is a self-examination of one's day, and the fourth step encourages the moral resolve to initiate at least some minimal behavioral change with an eye toward increasing, over the long run, one's moral maturity. It is the carrying out of a self-examination in an authentic and meaningful way that brings us to gratitude's key role. Assuming that one engages in a daily moral inventory with the genuine intention to foster personal moral growth, then experiencing gratitude and the positive feeling states associated with it (e.g., humility and empathy toward others) more than likely inclines one to enter any moral examination of one's life with greater sincerity and resolve. In this regard, gratitude might be conceived of as serving a "buffering" role that allays embarrassment, shame, or other negative emotions that might undermine self-honesty.

Moreover, though experienced for the most part as a pleasant affective state, a felt sense of gratitude can require, at times, considerable effort. Events, people, or situations that are apt to evoke gratitude can easily be taken for granted or shunted aside as one contends with life's

daily hassles and struggles to regulate intense negative feelings (e.g., anger, shame, resentment). Nonetheless, making the personal commitment to invest psychic energy in developing a personal schema, outlook, or worldview of one's life as a "gift" or one's very self as being "gifted" holds considerable sway from the standpoint of positive psychology. Indeed, numerous groups have absorbed this insight. For example, many religiously oriented events such as reflection days or scheduled weeklong retreats have as a recurring theme the idea of "gift" (e.g., those influenced by Jesuit spirituality), as do many self-help groups and organizations (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous). 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.

#### Research on Gratefulness in Everyday Life

Can an intentional, grateful focus such as that described in the preceding section, affect health and well-being? Many writers have commented on the happiness-bestowing properties of gratitude. Chesterton (1924) claimed that gratitude was the key to happiness. Recently conducted research (reviewed in Emmons & Crumpler, 2000) provides an empirical test of these assertions. Undergraduate students enrolled in a health psychology class were asked, for 10 weeks, to complete a weekly log of their emotions, physical symptoms, health behaviors (exercise, alcohol consumption, and aspirin usage), and predominant coping behaviors. They rated the extent to which they felt each of 30 different mood states and noted their experience of physical symptoms (headaches, runny nose, sore throat, etc.). Six items assessed their approach/avoidance coping tendencies with the most serious problem encountered during each week. If subjects received social support for help with this problem, they were asked to rate their feelings toward the support provider on eight adjectives (including *grateful*, *angry*, *embarrassed*, and *understood*). The weekly log also included two global judgments where participants were asked to evaluate their life as a

whole during the past week along with their expectations for the upcoming week.

In addition, one-third of the research participants were asked to record up to five major events or circumstances that most affected them during the week, another third were asked to write down five hassles or minor stressors that occurred in the past week, and the final third were asked to write down five things for which they were grateful or thankful. Was there an effect of these different attentional manipulations on emotional and physical well-being? Results indicated significant differences between the three groups. Relative to the hassles and events group, participants in the gratitude condition felt better about their lives as a whole and were more optimistic regarding their expectations for the upcoming week. In other words, the focus on blessings appeared to influence both concurrent well-being and anticipated affect. Looking at physical symptomatology, a similar pattern emerged. The thankful group reported fewer physical complaints overall than the hassles group, although it did not differ from the neutral condition. The largest difference on the outcome measures between the groups also was one of the most interesting: Subjects in the gratitude condition spent significantly more time exercising than did subjects in the other two groups. Specifically, they spent 4.38 hours in exercise compared with 3.01 hours for the hassles group. Although in need of replication, when combined with the differences seen in physical symptom reporting, this finding suggests that the emotional and mental benefits of thankfulness may extend to the somatic realm. Somewhat surprisingly, we did not find that the practice of gratitude buffered individuals from the experience of unpleasant emotions. In fact, persons in the thankful group reported higher levels of the agitation-related emotions (irritability, nervousness, anger) than did people in the other two conditions. Gratefulness does not appear to be equivalent to a Pollyannish state where suffering and adversity are selectively ignored, but it might induce the requisite psychological resources to successfully weather unpleasant emotional states.

We recently replicated the mental health benefits associated with the grateful focus in a daily study in which gratitude journals were kept over 21 consecutive days. In this study, participants who kept gratitude logs scored higher on measures of psychological well-being and were



also more likely to report having helped someone with a personal problem or offered emotional support to another, suggesting prosocial motivation as a consequence of the gratitude induction. Additionally, scores on an individual differences measure of gratitude were positively associated with frequency of engaging in prosocial activities (volunteering, tutoring, donating time or resources, and the like).

### Grateful in All Circumstances?

Cynics may argue that gratitude in the midst of abundance is easy. But what about in the midst of deprivation? One potential and perhaps surprising place to look for expressions of gratitude is in the aftermath of trauma. How common is it for people to be grateful in unpleasant life circumstances, and to what extent are these a significant context for gratitude-generating experiences? Is the biblical injunction to "be thankful in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18, RSV) realistic, even for religious persons? In this regard, the examination of gratitude in the lives of people coping with major adversities might be illuminating. An attitude of gratitude may be one means by which tragedies are transformed into opportunities for growth, being thankful not so much for the circumstance but rather for the skills that will come from dealing with it. The ability to discern blessings in the face of tragedy is a magnificent human strength. In fact, gratitude may require a degree of contrast or deprivation. One greatly appreciates a mild spring after a harsh winter, a gourmet meal following a fast, and sexual intimacy after a period of abstinence. Contrast effects have major influence on judgments of well-being (Schwarz & Strack, 1999); they may be equally potent in influencing one's felt gratitude.

Moreover, reminding oneself to "be grateful" or to maintain a grateful attitude might also be a common way of coping with particularly stressful life circumstances. In *The Hiding Place*, Corrie TenBoom (1970) gave thanks for the fleas in her World War II concentration camp barracks, for the fleas kept the guards at bay. There is actually some empirical research on gratitude in the face of adverse conditions. Coffman (1996) conducted intensive qualitative interviews with 13 parents who lived in the area of south Florida damaged during Hurricane Andrew in 1992. After conducting 90-minute in-

terviews, Coffman analyzed transcripts to identify the essence of the experience of persons' coping, as well as any additional descriptive themes that were frequently cited by parents. Parents reported an overwhelming sense of gratitude for what they had *not* lost during the hurricane. Although five of the families' homes had been so damaged that relocation had been necessary, *none of them had lost a loved one*. Because they were spared the loss of what was truly important to them, they experienced profound gratitude in the midst of life-changing disaster.

In their study of new parents, Ventura and Boss (1983) also found that "reminding oneself of things for which to be grateful" was rated among the most helpful coping behaviors (after "doing things with the child," "being a parent to the baby," "and trusting in one's partner"). "Reminding oneself to feel grateful" appears to be a commonly used coping strategy for many people, and one that potentially could be legitimately helpful to people undergoing significant life events. Reminding oneself to be grateful might be similar to the benefit-finding and benefit-reminding processes described by Afleck and Tennen (1996). A greater sense of appreciation for life appears to be one of the common positive reactions to major medical problems.

Two additional lines of research also prove illuminating. Colby and Damon (1992) reported that their moral exemplars were often overwhelmingly grateful for the opportunity to serve other, less fortunate individuals. What was especially remarkable about these extraordinary people was that their sacrifices and service to others were often met with *ingratitude*. In contrast to the normative responses to ingratitude described earlier, these moral exemplars responded with even greater love and compassion for the people they were serving. Although in general displays of ingratitude tend to be scorned, in this instance those helping were grateful for the opportunity afforded by those in need seemingly regardless of the beneficiary's reactions.

In their study of life narratives, McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, and Bowman (in press) identified "redemption sequences" as one of two distinct narrative styles that people use when telling their life stories. In a redemptive sequence, there is a transformation from an unpleasant circumstance to a positive outcome. For in-

stance, alcoholism might be followed by sobriety, job failure by promotion, or devastating failure by a confidence-building success. Notably present in the redemptive sequences generated in these interviews were feelings of thankfulness and appreciation. One sequence was that of an unwanted pregnancy and painful birth resulting in thankfulness and happiness for the pregnancy. Another was of a serious motorcycle injury resulting in a greater appreciation for life and a renewed commitment to life goals. One can draw a significant conclusion from these studies, in our estimation, in that grateful individuals are not naively optimistic, nor are they under some illusion that suffering and pain are nonexistent. Rather, these persons have consciously taken control by choosing to extract benefits from adversity, with one of the major benefits being the perception of life as a gift. Grateful people may have more psychic maneuverability than the ungrateful, enabling them to be less defensive and more open to life. As such, they are likely to express agreement with John Calvin (1559/1984), who wrote: "In short, we are well-nigh overwhelmed by so great and so plenteous an outpouring of benefactions, by so many and mighty miracles discerned wherever one looks, that we never lack reason for praise and thanksgiving" (p. 63).

#### **Developmental Issues: The Emergence of Gratitude**

Based on the evidence reviewed in this chapter, it appears that one of several positive attributes that parents might encourage in their children is a sense of thankfulness. As an emotion or as a characterological disposition, gratitude does not emerge spontaneously in newborns. Recall that virtues are acquired excellences. They are acquired only through sustained focus and effort. To be sure, we cannot claim originality for these ideas. The authors of children's books (Hallinan, 1981; Swamp, 1997) and articles in parenting magazines (Fisher, 1999; Kirkpatrick, 1999; Taffel, 1999) regularly encourage the cultivation of gratitude and thankfulness in children and offer strategies for parental inculcation. For example, Baumgartner-Tramer (1938) suggested that parents emphasize the sense of community created or strengthened through gratefulness and diminished or destroyed through ingratitude, rather than appeal to its politeness function or its obligatory nature. The

author contends that the latter two are more likely to elicit negative reactions.

From a developmental perspective, psychological research has shown that children's comprehension of gratitude is a process played out over several years (Baumgartner-Tramer, 1938; Graham, 1988; Harris, Olthof, Meerum Terwogt, & Hardman, 1987; Russell & Paris, 1994). More specifically, gratitude does not appear to occur regularly in response to receiving benefits until middle childhood. Gleason and Weintraub (1976), for example, found that few children (i.e., 21%) younger than 6 years of age expressed thanks to adults who gave them candy, whereas most children (e.g., more than 80%) of 10 years of age or older expressed gratitude in the same situation. Based on these data, it appears that the link between attributions of responsibility for positive outcomes, the experience of gratitude, and the desire to do good to one's benefactor probably is solidified between the ages of 7 and 10 (see also Weiner & Graham, 1988, for a review). Despite these studies, relatively little research has been conducted on the emergence of gratitude in children. In this regard, programmatic, developmental research stands out as a critical priority. Only a sustained research commitment would enable parents and educators to guide more effectively their children's passage into responsible and grateful adulthood.

#### **Conclusions**

Although social scientists have been slow to recognize it, the importance of gratitude is undeniable. With the emergence of the positive psychology movement, now is the time for a renewed focus on gratitude as a valued subjective experience, a source of human strength, and an integral element promoting the civility requisite for the flourishing of families and communities. A world without gratitude, one writer wrote, would be "unendurable" (Schwarz, 1971, p. 168). Gratitude is—at the same time—private and public, just as it is personal and communal. Its utility extends beyond a social convention. Gratitude provides life meaning, by encapsulating life itself as a gift. Within such a framework, it can come to dominate one's entire life outlook, seemingly even when sources of gratitude are absent. Moreover, in the context of material prosperity, by maintaining a grateful focus a person may avoid disillusionment (Csikszent-

mihalyi, 1999). A grateful focus can also enable an individual to confront and overcome obstacles by means of thanksgiving for the newly acknowledged strengths that result from such challenging confrontations.

Although some inroads have been made, the social scientific study of gratitude is in its infancy. By drawing upon classical sources of wisdom in combination with contemporary theory and rigorous methodologies, future researchers will enhance our appreciation and respect for this timeless concept.

*Acknowledgment* Preparation of this chapter was supported by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

### References

- Affleck, G., & Tennen, H. (1996). Construing benefits from adversity: Adaptational significance and dispositional underpinnings. *Journal of Personality, 64*, 899-922.
- Amato, J. A., II. (1982). *Guilt and gratitude: A study of the origins of contemporary conscience*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Aquinas, T. (1981). *Summa theologiae*. Westminster, MD: Christian Classics.
- Baumgartner-Tramer, F. (1938). "Gratefulness" in children and young people. *Journal of Genetic Psychology, 53*, 53-66.
- Becker, J. A., & Smenner, P. C. (1986). The spontaneous use of *thank you* by preschoolers as a function of sex, socioeconomic status, and listener status. *Language in Society, 15*, 537-546.
- Berger, F. R. (1975). Gratitude. *Ethics, 85*, 298-309.
- Bergler, E. (1945). Psychopathology of ingratitude. *Diseases of the Nervous System, 6*, 226-229.
- Bonder, N. (1997). *The kabbalah of envy: Transforming hatred, anger, and other negative emotions*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Breathnach, S. B. (1996). *The simple abundance journal of gratitude*. New York: Warner.
- Calvin, J. (1984). *The Christian life* (J. H. Leith, Ed.). San Francisco: Harper and Row. (Original work published 1559)
- Camenisch, P. F. (1981). Gift and gratitude in ethics. *Journal of Religious Ethics, 9*, 1-34.
- Chesterton, G. K. (1924). *St. Francis of Assisi*. New York: George Doran.
- Clapp, R. (Ed.). (1998). *The consuming passion: Christianity and the consumer culture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Coffman, S. (1996). Parents' struggles to rebuild family life after Hurricane Andrew. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing, 17*, 353-367.
- Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1992). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. New York: Free Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1999). If we are so rich, why aren't we happy? *American Psychologist, 54*, 821-827.
- Dalgleish, T., & Power, M. J. (Eds.). (1999). *Handbook of cognition and emotion*. New York: Wiley.
- de Rivera, J. (1977). *A structural theory of the emotions*. New York: International Universities Press.
- de Rivera, J. (1984). Development and the full range of emotional experience. In C. Z. Malatesta & C. E. Izard (Eds.), *Emotion in adult life* (pp. 45-63). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Emmons, R. A. (2000). *An experimental study of gratitude and its effects on psychological and physical well-being*. Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Davis.
- Emmons, R. A., & Crumpler, C. A. (2000). Gratitude as human strength: Appraising the evidence. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 19*, 56-69.
- Farwell, L., & Wohlwend-Lloyd, R. (1998). Narcissistic processes: Optimistic expectations, favorable self-evaluations, and self-enhancing attributions. *Journal of Personality, 66*, 65-83.
- Fisher, S. W. (1999, January/February). Raising thankful kids: How to develop the virtue of gratefulness. *Christian Parenting Today, 12*, 19-21.
- Gabriel, Y. (1998). An introduction to the social psychology of insults in organizations. *Human Relations, 51*, 1329-1354.
- Gallup, G. H. Jr. (1998). *Thankfulness: America's saving grace*. Paper presented at the National Day of Prayer Breakfast, Thanks-Giving Square, Dallas.
- Gallup survey results on gratitude, adults and teenagers. *Emerging Trends, 20*, 9.
- Gleason, J. B., & Weintraub, S. (1976). The acquisition of routines in child language. *Language in Society, 5*, 129-136.
- Goodenough, U. (1998). *The sacred depths of nature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Graham, S. (1988). Children's developing understanding of the motivational role of affect: An attributional analysis. *Cognitive Development, 3*, 71-88.
- Hallinan, P. K. (1981). *I'm thankful each day*. Nashville, TN: Hambleton-Hill Publishing.
- Harned, D. B. (1997). *Patience: How we wait upon the world*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley.

- Harris, P. L., Olthof, T., Meerum Terwogt, M., & Hardman, C. E. (1987). Children's knowledge of the situations that provoke emotion. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 10, 319-344.
- Hay, L. L. (1996). *Gratitude: A way of life*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House.
- Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley.
- Heilbrunn, G. (1972). "Thank you." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 20, 512-516.
- Hoffman, E. (Ed.). (1996). *Future visions: The unpublished papers of Abraham Maslow*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hursthouse, R. (1991). Virtue theory and abortion. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 20, 223-246.
- Jeffries, V. (1998). Virtue and the altruistic personality. *Sociological Perspectives*, 41, 151-167.
- Kemper, T. D. (1978). *A social-interactional theory of emotion*. New York: Wiley.
- Kirkpatrick, L. (1999, November/December). Giving thanks: Thirteen creative ways to encourage gratefulness this Thanksgiving. *Christian Parenting Today*, 12, 54.
- Klein, M. (1957). *Envy and gratitude: A study of unconscious sources*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1999). *Stress and emotion: A new synthesis*. New York: Springer.
- Lazarus, R. S., & Lazarus, B. N. (1994). *Passion and reason: Making sense of our emotions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Levinson, D., Ponzetti, J. J., Jr., & Jorgensen, P. F. (Eds.). (1999). *Encyclopedia of human emotions*. New York: Macmillan.
- Lewis, M., & Haviland-Jones, J. M. (Eds.). (2000). *Handbook of emotions* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford.
- Lowry, R. J. (Ed.). (1982). *The journals of Abraham Maslow*. Lexington, MA: Lewis Publishing Company.
- Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and personality* (3rd ed.). New York: Harper and Row.
- McAdams, D. P., Reynolds, J., Lewis, M., & Bowman, P. (in press). When bad things turn good and good things turn bad: Sequences of redemption and contamination in life narrative and their relation to psychosocial adaptation in adulthood. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.
- McCullough, M. E., Kilpatrick, S., Emmons, R. A., & Larson, D. (2001). Gratitude as moral affect. *Psychological Bulletin*.
- McCullough, M. E., & Snyder, C. R. (2000). Classical sources of human strength: Revisiting an old home and building a new one. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 19, 1-10.
- McWilliams, N., & Lependorf, S. (1990). Narcissistic pathology of everyday life: The denial of remorse and gratitude. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 26, 430-451.
- Meilaender, G. C. (1984). *The theory and practice of virtue*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Miller, T. (1995). *How to want what you have*. New York: Avon.
- Moore, D. W. (1996). *Americans most thankful for family and health: Young also thankful for career/job*. Report on 1996 Gallup Survey.
- Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (1998). Ruminative coping with depression. In J. Heckhausen & C. S. Dweck (Eds.), *Motivation and self-regulation across the life span* (pp. 237-256). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Oatley, K. (1992). *Best laid schemes*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Oatley, K., & Jenkins, J. M. (1996). *Understanding emotions*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Ortony, A., Clore, G. L., & Collins, A. (1988). *The cognitive structure of emotions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Overwalle, F. V., Mervielde, I., & De Schuyter, J. (1995). Structural modeling of the relationships between attributional dimensions, emotions, and performance of college freshmen. *Cognition and Emotion*, 9, 59-85.
- Prager, M. (1998). The spiritual practice of blessing. *Tikkun*, 13, 35-36.
- Pruyser, P. W. (1976). *The minister as diagnostician: Personal problems in pastoral perspective*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Roberts, R. C. (1991). Virtues and rules. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 51, 325-343.
- Russell, J. A., & Paris, F. A. (1994). Do children acquire concepts for complex emotions abruptly? *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 17, 349-365.
- \*Ryan, M. J. (1999). *Attitudes of gratitude: How to give and receive joy every day of your life*. Berkeley, CA: Conari Press.
- Schimmel, S. (1997). *The seven deadly sins: Jewish, Christian, and classical reflections on human nature*. New York: Free Press.
- Schwarz, B. V. (1971). Some reflections on gratitude. In B. V. Schwarz (Ed.), *The human person and the world of values: A tribute to Dietrich von Hildebrand by his friends in philosophy* (pp. 168-191). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

- Schwarz, N. N., & Strack, F. (1999). Reports of subjective well-being: Judgmental processes and their methodological implications. In D. Kahneman, E. Diener, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Well-being: Foundations of hedonic psychology* (pp. 61–84). New York: Russell Sage.
- Shaver, P. R., Schwarz, J., Kirson, D., & O'Connor, C. (1987). Emotion knowledge: Further exploration of a prototype approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 1061–1086.
- Shelton, C. M. (1990). *Morality of the heart: A psychology for the Christian moral life*. New York: Crossroad.
- Shelton, C. M. (2000). *Achieving moral health*. New York: Crossroad.
- \*Simmel, G. (1950). *The sociology of Georg Simmel*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- \*Smith, A. (1976). *The theory of moral sentiments* (6th ed.). Oxford: Clarendon. (Original work published 1790)
- Smith, C. A. (1991). The self, appraisal, and coping. In C. R. Snyder & D. R. Forsyth (Eds.), *Handbook of social and clinical psychology* (pp. 116–137). Elmsford, NY: Pergamon.
- \*Steindl-Rast, D. (1984). *Gratefulness, the heart of prayer*. New York: Paulist.
- Stone, M. H. (1998). Normal narcissism. In E. F. Ronningstam (Ed.), *Disorders of narcissism: Diagnostic, clinical, and empirical implications* (pp. 7–28). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- \*Streng, F. J. (1989). Introduction: Thanksgiving as a worldwide response to life. In J. B. Carman & F. J. Streng (Eds.), *Spoken and unspoken thanks: Some comparative soundings* (pp. 1–9). Dallas, TX: Center for World Thanksgiving.
- Swamp, J. (1997). *Giving thanks: A Native American good morning message*. New York: Lee and Low.
- Taffel, R. (1999, November). Thanks, mommy: Teaching kids to be grateful. *Parents*, 138–147.
- TenBoom, C. (1970). *The hiding place*. Washington Depot, CT: Chosen Books.
- Turner, D. (1998). *Grateful living*. Homewood, IL: High Tide Press.
- Van Kaam, A., & Muto, S. (1993). *The power of appreciation: A new approach to personal and relational healing*. New York: Crossroad.
- Ventura, J. N., & Boss, P. G. (1983). The family coping inventory applied to parents with new babies. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 45, 867–875.
- Walker, L. J., & Pitts, R. C. (1998). Naturalistic conceptions of moral maturity. *Developmental Psychology*, 34, 403–419.
- Weiner, B. (1985). An attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion. *Psychological Review*, 92, 548–573.
- Weiner, B., & Graham, S. (1988). Understanding the motivational role of affect: Life-span research from an attributional perspective. *Cognition and Emotion*, 3, 401–419.
- Zagzebski, L. T. (1996). *Virtues of the mind*. New York: Cambridge University Press.