

A Message from the Head of School

Everything is a Gift:

The Power of Gratitude and How to Cultivate It

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Have you ever lost power to your home for an extended period of time? Assuming you did not have a generator when this occurred, all of a sudden you were thrust into a world without the benefit of your lights, furnace/air conditioning, water heater, refrigerator, oven, internet, and more. Do you remember how you felt when you saw the lights pop on, heard the refrigerator hum back into service, and felt the warmth of hot water flowing across your hands for the first time in days? If you were like many individuals, you felt a rekindled appreciation for these conveniences that you usually take for granted, and your gratitude was accompanied by a sense of happiness. Then, as the hours passed, your thankfulness for these marvels of technological advancement faded as you resumed your normal routine.

What if you could retain a sense of gratitude and its associated feeling of contentment virtually all the time? Well, you can. And, if you did, there is evidence to suggest that you would not only be happier, but you would realize a wide range of additional psychological, social, and physical benefits, too. It is no wonder that the theologian, philosopher, humanitarian, physician, and Nobel Prize winner Albert Schweitzer believed that the “greatest thing” in life is “giving thanks for everything” (Schweitzer, 1975, p. 16).

What is gratitude?

The Oxford dictionary defines gratitude as “the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and return kindness.” Psychologists elaborate by suggesting that gratitude entails not only affirmation of conditions in our lives we consider favorable (and for which we are thankful) but also recognition that the sources of those favorable conditions lie at least partially outside of ourselves (Emmons, 2007).

Why does it matter?

Demonstrating gratitude is important because it is associated with an extensive list of benefits to our well-being, and those benefits have positive ramifications for the well-being of our society, too. Starting with the benefits to our personal well-being, “Gratitude has one of the strongest links to mental health and satisfaction with life of any personality trait – more so than even optimism, hope, or compassion” (Emmons, 2013, p. 9). Research indicates that gratitude is correlated with feeling happier and more optimistic about our lives, coping more effectively with ongoing stress, exhibiting greater resilience in the face of adversity, feeling a greater sense of connectedness, experiencing improved relationships, acting more altruistically, increasing the quality and duration

of sleep, and reporting fewer health problems (Allen, 2018; Emmons, 2007, 2013). When individuals experience these psychological, social, and physical benefits for themselves, there are subsequent benefits for society. For a start, when people feel grateful, they also feel more loving and forgiving (Emmons, 2007). In addition, as mentioned above, people who are grateful display more altruism and feel a greater sense of connectedness. All of these outcomes facilitate constructive dialogue, effective problem solving, and collaborative resolutions. As the world faces increasingly complex challenges, these benefits will be advantageous to arriving at solutions that benefit us all.

Barriers to Gratitude

While gratitude has been recognized as a virtue by philosophers and religious leaders since ancient times, the number of people for whom deep-seeded, heart-felt gratitude is a consistent expression of their perspective on the world is relatively small. You may wonder what gets in the way. The biggest barrier to gratitude is a preoccupation with self (Emmons, 2013). This impediment manifests itself in a number of ways. If we feel that we alone are responsible for the positive outcomes in our lives (what Emmons would call “the myth of self-sufficiency”), we will have difficulty recognizing the contributions of others in our lives, and, given that gratitude is “other-focused,” we are unlikely to feel grateful. If our focus is on satisfying our own wants and needs and we perceive the world through the filter of our expectations of how things “should” proceed, when life does not fulfill our goals and expectations - as is often the case, we will almost certainly feel frustrated and dissatisfied rather than grateful. Returning to the power outage example, when we lose electricity, it is easy to wonder, “Why is this happening to me?” and “What is taking the electric company so long to restore power?” We may reflect on all of the things we “should” be doing but can’t because of this infernal power outage. It is easy to feel that we have a right to the conveniences we have lost instead of recognizing these conveniences as privileges we typically enjoy whose absence opens up new experiences we might not otherwise have had the opportunity to appreciate. Beyond preoccupation with self, we may genuinely want to be grateful, but struggle to stay focused and disciplined in the pursuit of that goal. Additionally, we may simply not know how to cultivate gratitude (Emmons, 2013). Indeed, it is important to recognize that if you are not presently feeling grateful, cultivation will be required. You cannot simply expect yourself (or anyone else) to be grateful instantly.

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Cultivating Gratitude

If you want to develop any skill, trait, or mindset, you need to consistently and purposefully work on cultivating that goal.

Gratitude Journals

One valuable method of cultivating gratitude is through gratitude journals (Emmons, 2007, 2013). With gratitude journals, you set aside five to ten minutes at least every other day to write down things for which you are grateful. You could write about the wonders of nature, the value of a particular person in your life, appreciation for physical health, resolution of a problem, overcoming an obstacle, improvement of a challenging situation, the occurrence of a positive event, an exciting discovery, something for which you are grateful related to someone you love, or any number of other subjects. As a general rule, it is helpful to be specific about each entry without getting too elaborate (Emmons, 2013). Consider addressing why you are grateful and how this helped you. The idea is to reflect enough to deepen your appreciation while avoiding the journal becoming either a collection of extended entries you come to dread completing or a rote exercise that generates a perfunctory list of minimalist entries. Remember, there is no one "right" way to journal. You need to find what works for you.

Gratitude Letters and Visits

Another valuable way to cultivate gratitude is through gratitude letters and visits (Emmons, 2013; Seligman, 2002). Ideally, gratitude is not only felt, but also moved into action. Gratitude letters and visits achieve this end. The idea is to select a person who has had a significant influence on your life though you have never fully expressed your appreciation to that person. Write a letter to them sharing your gratitude, what they did that helped you, and how their actions affected you. Then, send it to them or, better yet, deliver it personally, reading it aloud to them before presenting it. Research indicates that the positive effects of writing and delivering gratitude letters exceed even the benefits of gratitude journaling. There is a boost to happiness and a decrease in symptoms of depression that persists for some time.

Creating a Strong Foundation for Gratitude

These practices, and others like them (e.g., visual reminders to keep us mindful of our intention to notice things for which we are grateful or gratitude buddies who support and encourage our practice – Emmons, 2007) are incredibly valuable to cultivating gratitude. When you immerse yourself in the practice of being grateful, it certainly strengthens your orientation toward gratitude. However, in order to cultivate deeply rooted, enduring gratitude, I would argue that it is equally important to concurrently build a steadfast foundation of constructs that justifies the consistent expression of gratitude. This emphasis is compatible with Emmons' (2013) persistent promotion of gratitude as an overarching attitude rather than simply a feeling, although he does not speak of systematically developing this foundation, as I suggest below. While a thorough review of this topic extends well beyond the scope of this column (see Gaskins, 1999, for a detailed discussion of the same general set of ideas), in what follows, I provide a concise overview of the most basic components of the foundation.

I would argue that deeply rooted, enduring gratitude is grounded in the realization of the fundamental importance of (1) interfusion, (2) impermanence, and (3) mindfulness. Each individual's thoughts and actions are guided by a set of beliefs about how the world works. If we did not apply these personal construct systems to interpret our experiences, we would be confronted with an overwhelming flood of undifferentiated raw data and we would not know where to begin in our attempt to not only survive, but also flourish. Thus, we form these belief systems by breaking experience into manageable parts, ascribing values to those parts, and defining those subsections of reality by focusing on particular aspects of their potentiality at the expense of other aspects. While these expectations do provide us with a means of understanding and determining actions in any given situation, the problem is that these distinct constructs are essentially no more than partial and positional theories, assumptions, and expectations that form an ill-fitting template of reality.

One of the most significant problems generated by our construct systems is that they create the illusion that reality is comprised of distinct entities instead of all aspects of reality being inextricably intertwined. In fact, ironically enough, the meaning of each aspect of reality is determined by the other aspects of the current context. For example, water is a liquid, solid, or gas depending on the temperature. Most importantly for this discussion, while we tend to think of ourselves as distinct, self-sufficient entities, we are completely dependent on our context to survive and flourish. Without oxygen alone, we perish. This does not even consider the importance of water, food, a particular range of atmospheric pressure and temperature, and many other aspects of the context we need to survive. Similarly, we are social beings, and while the myth of the self-made individual persists, we would not achieve anything, realize happiness, or even last more than a few days of infancy without the contributions of others. Without question, the realization of the interfusion of all things clarifies the depth of our interdependence, thereby revealing the extent to which we have grounds for being grateful every day.

Another understanding that establishes a strong foundation for gratitude is the realization that all things are impermanent. No matter how indestructible something might seem, it will change and eventually cease to exist in its current form. Consequently, when circumstances exist that we recognize as favorable to us, our loved ones, our society, or the Earth, we have reason to relish those circumstances and be grateful that we are experiencing them. The contribution of impermanence to gratitude helps explain why those who endure significant illness, hardship, or loss often emerge as more grateful individuals. When you realize that everything you hold dear can be taken from you and you are powerless to stop it, you are likely to have a newfound appreciation for when times are good and for the aspects of those favorable times that make it positive (Emmons, 2013).

Finally, a foundation for gratitude is solidified by a full appreciation of the importance of being mindful. At any given moment, it is easy to get lost in the past or future. Even if we are attempting to engage in the present, our physical condition, emotional state, and activated cognitive filters channel our interpretation of the situation and decision making processes so that we are likely to select a less optimal course of action than we might have chosen if we were mindful. When we are mindful, we are fully present in the situation and perceive it

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with clarity. We settle our minds, loosen our attachment to our preconceptions, hold our expectations lightly, and open ourselves to the full range of potentiality that exists in the situation. Unless our mindfulness is deeply cultivated, we must intentionally choose to be fully present. Otherwise, our default system of preconceptions, assumptions, and expectations directs the spotlight of our attention on particular facets of a situation, shapes our perceptions, and limits our understanding of the elements that comprise the situation, including our recognition of aspects of the environment that may warrant gratitude. Thus, learning to be mindful facilitates the appreciation of blessings and the expression of gratitude.

Cultivating Gratitude

Since Benchmark School was founded, we have been committed to developing students' social, emotional, and self knowledge in addition to their conceptual and strategic knowledge. We firmly believe that all of these components are essential to students' learning to thrive in school and life. The cultivation of gratitude is just one more component that strengthens our students' experience and helps prepare them to find success and fulfillment in all that they do.

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