



# High School Graduation

June 7, 2015

Speech by C.A. Pilling, HS Principal

Good afternoon parents, relatives, faculty and staff, distinguished guests, and of course, Class of 2015.

So my message to you today is simple. In fact, it can be summed up in just three words: Practice Being Grateful. It's three words and yet I know there is someone out there right now who because of the influence of our world of hashtags and twitter feeds, texting and celebrating everything that can be said in as short a sound bite as possible, is asking why isn't it just "Be Grateful"? Why use three words when you could have said it in just two? Because that first word—Practice—is the key. And here's why.

In study after study, those who actively practice gratefulness consistently report the following: improved physical health; improved psychological health; greater self-esteem; greater empathy, and reduced aggression. Those who practice gratitude also report that it opens the door to more relationships and improves the quality of those relationships. And finally, people who practice gratitude report sleeping better and waking more rested, even with less sleep. In other words, someone who actually practices gratitude is more resilient, less stressed, more engaged in life, and just plain old happier.

While many of these effects have primarily been based on self-reporting, such findings are now being supported by more objective measures—like brain scans. Practicing gratitude positively and literally changes brain chemistry. The frontal lobes and cerebellum show increased electrical activity and blood flow. Meanwhile focusing on negative thoughts shows just the opposite. When your frontal lobes are functioning well, you are making high performance decisions that serve you well. And you're getting that dopamine hit which feels really good to get, which is why it is known as the "reward" transmitter. And because of this, it's a reinforcer as well. So once you start seeing things to be grateful for, your brain starts looking for more things to be grateful for.

Dan Baker in his book *What Happy People Know* perhaps explains the chemistry of the brain the most simply: a person cannot be in both a state of appreciation and stress or anxiety at the same time. In other words, being mindful and actively practicing gratitude is an antidote to stress.

So what does practicing gratitude look like? Well, like a muscle, the brain has to be exercised, but unlike a normal workout, practicing gratitude takes very little time at all. And, the workout itself turns out to be pretty simple. Writing a thank you note or simply jotting down one or two things that you are grateful for even just once or twice a week seems to be all that is needed to begin experiencing the benefits.

Pretty simple, not very time consuming, and huge payoffs in terms of health, self-esteem, empathy, relationships, and again, don't forget—sleep. So why don't we do it more? Why don't we sit down and write thank you notes or take the time to think about or practice gratitude?

Well part of the problem according to Robert Emmons, a Professor of Psychology at UC Davis and the world's leading scientific expert on gratitude, is that we lack a sophisticated discourse for gratitude because we are out of practice. Despite the fact that it forms the foundation of social life in many other cultures, in the U.S., we usually don't give it much thought, with the notable exception of one day—Thanksgiving.

Indeed, we have a tendency in our culture to go first to a venting session or even a rant thinking it will make us feel better and yet, as mentioned earlier, expressing negative feelings decreases electrical activity and blood flow to the brain, sending you into a downward spiral. It does not improve your mood or make you feel better.

So how did we get here? How did we get to a place in our culture where we'll vent more frequently rather than express gratitude and where gratefulness is not only practiced less and less, but we've come to overlook, dismiss, or even disparage the significance of gratitude?

Well, Emmons claims that some deeply ingrained psychological tendencies get in the way. One is the "self-serving bias." When good things happen to us, we say it's because of something we did, but when bad things happen, we blame other people or circumstances. The second is our need to control our environment and the third is the "just-world" phenomenon, which says that

we deserve the good fortune that comes our way, that we're entitled to it.

By practicing gratitude we contradict the first one—self-serving bias—because when we're grateful, we give credit to other people for our success. We accomplished some of it ourselves, yes, but we widen our range of attribution to also say, "Well, my parents gave me this opportunity," or "I had teachers. I had mentors. I had siblings, peers—other people assisted me along the way." That's very different from a self-serving bias.

Gratitude also goes against our need to feel in control of our environment. Sometimes with gratitude you just have to accept life as it is (without claiming it is unfair because it just is) and be grateful for what you have. A tight roof over your head and food on your table is a good place to start; it's more than what a huge portion of the world's population has. However, simply realizing that other people are worse off than you, is not gratitude. Gratitude requires an appreciation of the positive aspects of your situation. It is not a comparison. Sometimes noticing what other people don't have may help you see what you can be grateful for, but you have to take that next step. You actually have to show appreciation for what you have for it to have an effect. Again, you need to practice it.

Finally gratitude contradicts the "just-world" phenomenon, as well. With gratitude we realize that we actually get more than we deserve. I found this quotation of a gentleman who happened to comment on one of Professor Emmons' talks and which to me, summed it up nicely: "It's a good thing we don't get what we deserve. I'm grateful because I've been given far more than I deserve."

So Class of 2015 today is a day where it is easy to be grateful. It's a milestone that we even mark for you with an event like this graduation ceremony, and I hope you will take the time to express gratitude to a number of people who have helped you get to this moment. But my message to you looks beyond today. It's really about how to live your life. Will you wait until the next milestone to express how grateful you are? Or might you make a plan and commit to setting aside some time to practice gratitude?

Class of 2015, for your engagement, for your leadership, and for your legacy, we are simply and sincerely grateful.

*Speech by C.A. Pilling, HS Principal  
June 7, 2015*