

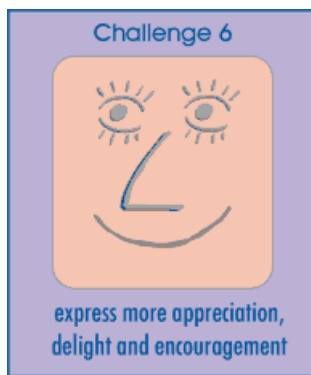
Challenge Six

EXPRESSING MORE APPRECIATION, GRATITUDE, ENCOURAGEMENT AND DELIGHT

SUMMARY(repeated from Introduction): In order to build more satisfying relationships with the people around you, express more appreciation, delight, affirmation, encouragement and gratitude.

Because life continually requires us to attend to problems and breakdowns, it gets very easy to see in life only what is broken and needs fixing. But satisfying relationships (and a happy life) require us to notice and respond to what is delightful, excellent, enjoyable, to work well done, to food well cooked, etc.

It is appreciation that makes a relationship strong enough to accommodate differences and disagreements. Thinkers and researchers in many different fields have reached a similar conclusion: healthy relationships need a core of mutual appreciation.



Expressing more appreciation is probably the most powerful and rewarding of the steps described in this workbook, and it is one of the most demanding. Some writers on the subject go so far as to propose that gratefulness is key to a happy life and peace with God! (If only how to get there were so clear!) Expressing appreciation is certainly a much more personal step than, say, learning to ask open-ended questions.

To express gratitude in a meaningful way, a person needs to actually feel grateful, and that

often involves looking at a person or situation from a new angle. Expressing appreciation thus involves both an expressive action and an inner attitude. So this chapter includes both exercises in how to express appreciation and also a lot of background information to help you explore your attitudes about gratefulness. My hope for this chapter is that it will help to put “Explore and Express More Appreciation” on your lifetime Do List. Unfortunately, there is no button in our brains that we can push to make ourselves instantly more grateful and appreciative. But there are countless opportunities each day to grow in that direction.

RESEARCH ON THE POWER OF APPRECIATION AND GRATEFULNESS

Couples. If, like me, you have not given much attention to the topic of appreciation, you will probably be as amazed as I was to learn the results of recent research on appreciation. What researchers call “positive interactions” are at the heart of good marriages, healthy development in children and successful businesses! For example, researchers at the University of Washington have discovered that couples who stay together tend to have **five times** more positive interactions than negative ones.²⁹ Couples who stay together often have real disagreements, but a strong pattern of appreciative and affirming interaction appears to give them the positive momentum they need to work through their problems.

Bringing up kids. The child development research of Betty Hart and Todd Risley produced a strikingly parallel conclusion regarding parent-child interaction. “They found that children who are the most intelligent, self-confident and flexible ... at ages six to eight had experienced five times

²⁹ See *Lifeskills*, by Virginia and Redford Williams. New York: Random House, 1977. Pg. 100, and *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, by John Gottman with Nan Silver. New York: Simon & Shuster, 1994.

more positive than negative interchanges with their parents by age three”³⁰ By age three, the children who would thrive had received an average of around 500,000 positive interactions!



Latvian mother and child
photo courtesy of www.FriedmanArchives.com

(The most important implication of the Hart and Risley research for this workbook is that *appreciation nurtures!* Self-esteem in both children and adults contains a large component of internalized appreciation. It is never too late to begin listening and appreciating, and paying attention to the qualities and behaviors you want to encourage in others.)

Creating successful businesses. In his book for managers, *Bringing Out the Best in People*,³¹ management consultant Aubrey Daniels argues that recognition and appreciation are the most powerful motivators of improved performance. But in spite of this many managers are still more focused on punishing the low performers than on recognizing the high performers. Building a successful business means most of all bringing out the best in people, according to Daniels, and only people-oriented positive reinforcement, in the form of appreciation, recognition and gratitude, can do that.

Living more gratefully. In his book, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*,³² Brother David Steindl-Rast suggests that spiritual life makes much more sense if we see all spiritual virtues as radiating out from gratefulness. To be

³⁰ *Lifeskills*. by Virginia and Redford Williams. New York: Random House, 1977. Pg. 101.

³¹ *Bringing Out the Best in People*, by Aubrey C. Daniels. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994.

³² *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer, An Approach to Life in Fullness*, by David Steindl-Rast. Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984.

grateful for the goodness of the simplest things, bread baked by an neighbor, the turning of the seasons, the sound of water running in a brook, the sound of children playing in a schoolyard, is to affirm that there is a source of goodness in life, in spite of the many sorrows that life also includes. For Brother David, our gratefulness is our deepest prayer, prayed not with words but with our hearts.

EXPLORING THE DEEPER SIDE OF GRATEFULNESS

Gratitude as a way of seeing. The only problem with all these great discoveries in favor of gratitude is that appreciation and gratitude are not like mental faucets that we can just turn on at will. Gratefulness has two sides. Expressing gratitude is partly a conscious action, like opening a door or telling a story. It is also a result of deep attitudes: *the way we look at our lives* and *the way we turn the events of our lives into meaningful stories*. Parents teach their children to say “thank you,” the action part, in the hope that their children will grow into the attitude part. For adults, I believe, the path toward gratitude includes an exploration of both.

Stories, suffering and gratitude. Human beings need to make sense out of what can be a bewildering variety of life experiences. Life is not particularly consistent. Joy comes one day, sorrow the next. Success alternates with failure. Sometimes our efforts matter a lot and sometimes it is a matter of luck, good or bad. One of the main ways we bring coherence to this mind-boggling variety is to develop our own personal organizing “themes” such as “my life of adventure” or “my struggle with alcohol.” Since no one theme can hold all the events in our lives, we pick out and emphasize the experiences that illustrate our main theme and let all the other events fade into the background.

Most people do not consciously pick their themes. We more often borrow them from our parents, or are pushed into them by powerful events in our lives such as love, war, abuse, success or failure. A former soldier might weave his life story around the theme of “I went to Vietnam and got totally messed up.” Another soldier from the same combat unit might organize

his life around the theme “In my family we get through difficult times by staying close.” These two men might have experienced the same horrors of war, but their different themes are going to keep them *looking for* and *paying attention to* different kinds of experiences in the present.

The important thing to remember about themes is that although they may be deeply true, they are never all of the truth about a person’s life or about life in general. Life is always larger than all our stories, and the events of a person’s life can be arranged, with effort, to illustrate many different themes, not just one. This fact can open a path toward gratitude, even for people who have endured great suffering and deprivation.

Exploring a new theme: Receiving each day as a gift. Becoming aware that our themes emphasize some events in our lives and ignore many others can be a real jolt. But this jolt can empower us to explore more energizing and more life-supporting story-lines. In offering for your consideration the theme of *receiving each day as a gift*, I draw on the inspiring work of two monks, Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Catholic, and Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist, who are modern apostles of the grateful heart. I also draw on the many wonderful current writers on the topic of narrative therapy.³³

With great inner kindness we can thank the themes that have helped us make sense of life up to now (they were the best we could do), and gently move toward themes that emphasize more of the good things that have happened in our lives and the directions in which we want to grow. This conscious work on developing a new story will make it easier for us to see opportunities for appreciation in all our daily environments (work, home, community).

One possible first step in receiving each day as a gift is to think of *any* days in your life that have felt like gifts or blessings. This can be even more helpful if you write down these wonderful times as part of developing a journal of gratitude.

Slowly, over weeks and months, you can begin to feel out an alternative way of telling the story of your life. I will never forget the smell of Christmas trees in our living room when I was a child. And the glow of the multi-colored lights when all the other lights in the room had been turned off. So in spite of the fact that I was part of a troubled family, I had moments of amazing wonder and delight, and those moments became an inner treasure for me that helped me endure the troubles.

If we were to think about it rationally, we would have to admit that the fact that gratitude-inspiring events do happen in our lives at least every now and then is proof beyond a shadow of a doubt that happy events are possible! If we pay more attention to such experiences we might find that we gradually become more willing to be surprised by new moments of joy. We might even find that events which we previously ignored, like the sun coming up in the morning, can start to seem like gifts, even miracles! All of this is not to say that we should deny or blot out the actual difficulties in our lives. But if we could find a way of giving our hearts and minds many small moments of rest from our problems, I believe we would find that we could work on them more creatively and more effectively. (*Text continues after exercise below.*)

³³ For a very engaging example of the narrative therapy approach, see *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities*, by Jill Freedman and Gene Combs. New York: Norton, 1996.

Thank you equals yes to life. Another possible step in cultivating a grateful heart is to look for small ways to say thank you to total strangers. When you are in a restaurant and the food tastes good, say something about it to the person who is serving you. When I get out of the dentist's chair, I thank the person who has just spent half an hour of their life trying with great effort and discipline to make sure that my teeth stay in my head. I have spent many an afternoon in front of some market gathering signatures for one cause or another, so when I see someone gathering signatures for a cause I support, I walk up to them and say "Thank you for being here." The possibilities are endless.

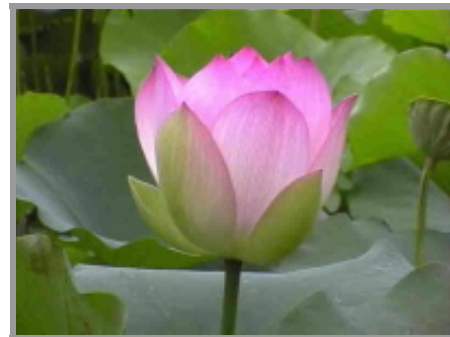
Behind this practice is the fact that, for me, my long history as an anti-nuclear advocate has required me to say "no" a great deal, and to say "no" very thoughtfully and consistently for years on end, a deep and heartfelt "no" to leaking waste tanks, contaminated water, radiation-induced cancers and so on. I realized some years ago that I seemed to be losing my capacity to say "yes." My practice of thanking people whenever I get the chance is my way of saying yes to life in small installments.

Expressing gratitude in the middle of a difficult life. Considered on a wider level, part of the problem of suffering and oppression is that people who are oppressed tend to become obsessed with the source of their suffering. Whether the oppressing force is nuclear weapons, an alcoholic parent, a chronic illness or a boss in a sweatshop, the oppressor tends to become the central feature in the oppressed person's life story. In this context, the practice of gratitude can be seen as a deep resistance to having one's life taken over.

A dear friend of mine, bedridden for years with a debilitating disease, has learned to find sustaining comfort in the stars that shine through her windows at night. She has become grateful for the galaxies, and is filled with wonder that the universe created her, limited though her movements may be. This kind of experience suggests to me that moments of gratitude, and expressing more appreciation for one another, do not have to mean that we are saying everything in

life is just fine. Quite to the contrary, in opening ourselves to experience even the smallest delight and gratitude we can be gathering strength to change what needs to be changed in our lives. And to struggle with our difficult life assignments.

Ultimately, it is even possible to give thanks for one's troubles. The difficulties of our lives, after all, challenge us to become deeper people, more aware and more compassionate. We would not grow without them, as Judith Viorst explains with great kindness in her book *Necessary Losses*.³⁴ But this is a very advanced form of gratitude and probably not the best place to begin, just as you would not try to climb Mt. Everest as your very first experience of hiking. I also doubt that it is fruitful to preach to others that they should be more grateful for their painful challenges. This lesson is best taught by our own example. By practicing gratitude in many small ways, we can learn from our own life experience how to go deeper. In the following section we explore one possible way of expressing this everyday appreciation more consciously and more clearly



³⁴ *Necessary Losses*, by Judith Viorst. New York: Ballantine Books, 1987.

EXPLORING THREE-PART APPRECIATIONS

The inner structure of appreciation. In Chapter 3 of this workbook, I introduced the “Five Messages” model as a way of understanding what we need to tell people in order for them to understand us better. Good listening involves the listener reconstructing the speaker’s experience. That can be done a lot more easily when speakers share all five of the basic dimensions of their experience. Here is an example of a fully expressed experience of appreciation, using all of the messages in the Five Messages model to express the various aspects.

STARTING WITH THE FIVE MESSAGES IN ACTION

| <i>The Five Messages</i> | <i>express:</i> | <i>Example:</i> |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| <i>seeing, hearing...</i> | 1. What are you seeing, hearing or otherwise sensing? (facts only) | “When I saw my paycheck in the mailbox today... |
| <i>and feeling...</i> | 2. What emotions are you feeling? | ...I felt really relieved... |
| <i>because I...</i> | 3. What interpretations, wants, needs, memories or anticipations of yours support those feelings? | ...because I need to pay my rent tomorrow morning... |
| <i>and now I want...</i> | 4. What action, information or commitment do you want now? | ...and I want to run down to the bank and deposit it right now... |
| <i>so that...</i> | 5. What <u>positive</u> results will that action, information or commitment lead to in the future? (no threats) | ...so that my rent check will clear if my landlord cashes it tomorrow.” |

Note: My deep appreciation goes to the work of Marshall Rosenberg³⁵ for helping me to understand messages 1 through 4, and to the work of Sharon and Gordon Bower³⁶ for helping me understand message 5.

Although the Five Messages model has a space for everything, many expressions of appreciation do not need Messages 4 and 5. Most expressions of gratitude convey a message of satisfaction that is not necessarily connected to any future actions (*and now I want*) or anticipations of positive results (*so that*). Every now and then you may need to include Messages 4 and 5 in order to express your feelings in a complex situation, but as you can see in the examples on the next page, Three-Part Appreciations really can tell the whole story in most situations.

³⁵ Marshall Rosenberg, *A Model for Nonviolent Communication*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers. 1983

³⁶ Sharon Anthony Bower and Gordon H. Bower, *Asserting Yourself: A Practical Guide for Positive Change*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. 1976

EXPLORING EXAMPLES OF THREE-PART APPRECIATIONS

| 1. When I saw/heard... | 2. I felt... | 3. because I...(need, want, interpret, associate, etc.) |
|--|--|--|
| When I saw the flowers on the table... | ...I felt so grateful to you... | ...because the flowers reminded me of all the nice things you do around here” |
| “When I tasted those strawberry pancakes... | ...I felt amazed and delighted... | ...because I don’t remember ever tasting pancakes so good in my whole life!” |
| “When I heard you reading the Blue Burp story to Susie and Jimmy... | ...I felt a quite kind of happiness... | ...because I know how much the kids love that story.” |
| “When I saw how neatly the tools were hung up in the garage... | ...I felt very thankful... | ...because I hate it when I’m in the middle of a job and I can’t find the tools I need.” |
| “When I saw Big Joe #37 hit that home run all the way out of the park... | ...man! I was really excited... | ...because I thought the Wranglers had a chance of winning the game after all.” |
| “When I finally got a call through to you in San Francisco... | ...I was so relieved and happy... | ...because I had been worrying that you had been hurt in the earthquake.” |
| “When I felt you put your arm around me at Aunt Nell’s funeral... | ...I felt very appreciative... | ...because I was feeling really awful at just then and needed some comfort.” |
| “When I smelled that chicken cooking in the kitchen... | ...I felt soooooo happy... | ...because I didn’t get any lunch today and I am really hungry.” |

“I-Statement” appreciations versus positive judgments. One very important aspect of Three-Part Appreciations is that the appreciator is sharing the details of her or his experience of another person’s action. These are quite different statements than saying “You are wonderful!”, “You are such a great guy.”, “You are the greatest cook in the world.”, “You are so beautiful.” and so on. Although such statements sound like the highest praise, there can be a big gap between what they intend to convey and how they are actually received by others. Here are three reasons why.

First of all, even though these are positive judgments, they still put the recipient in the position of being judged and the praise-giver in the position of judge, which is not necessarily a chair you want to sit in. Many people have experienced an unhappy lifetime of being judged by others, sometimes harshly, sometimes erratically, with the effect of making all judgments an unpleasant experience.

Secondly, notice how in the “You are so beautiful”-type statements the person doing the appreciating has disappeared. These are actually very impersonal statements. There is no “I feel” to anchor the feelings as belonging specifically to the giver of appreciation. One popular song said it better by at least saying “*You are so beautiful...to me!*”, making it more personal. Another popular song said it much better by saying “*Sometimes... all I need is the air that I breathe and to love you,*” which would bring the listener much closer to the speaker’s experience. This is a moving statement of appreciation because it connects the

“I” with the “you” very creatively in the same sentence.

And finally, “You are wonderful”-type statements are often vague and may lack descriptive richness and meaning. The person being appreciated has to do a lot of mental work trying to figure out exactly what about them is being appreciated. It would be more informative if I were to say something like “I love the way you take care of all the trees on your farm.” or “I love the way the sun shines through your hair.” By comparison, you can hear how Three-Part Appreciations say much more than that.

Challenge Six - Conclusion. I hope these ideas, examples and arguments have intrigued you about the possibilities of expressing deeper appreciation to the important people in your life, to the web of life that sustains us all, and for all the simple things that could delight us if we let them. Part of that process involves seeing with new eyes: standing back from the struggles and troubles of everyday life and making a space to notice what is good, healthy and delightful. Another part of the process involves expressing appreciation more mindfully and more self-revealingly. The reward for all this effort will be that the people you like will really understand that you like them. You will not always need the three-part format, but mastering it to the point where you can produce Three-Part Appreciations at a moment’s notice, to the point where you truly “know it by heart,” will greatly expand your vocabulary of appreciation. The exercise on the next page will help.

