

Be Intentional about Practicing Gratitude

Seriously, start today. You'll help yourself and others.

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Greetings Courier readers from Catholic Charities in Rochester!

I have a question for you: How many of you have a gratitude practice? Some of you are nodding and some saying "Yes, of course!" Others, though, may be wondering what exactly I am talking about.

Now many of you may remember a parent, teacher or pastor telling you to count your blessings. A gratitude practice is very similar to counting your blessings, but generally more formal and more detailed.

Let me tell you about this, and why I believe a gratitude practice can offer real benefits and help make most peoples' lives much better.

First let's tackle the question: Just what is a gratitude practice? In its simplest form, it involves taking time, usually toward the end of your day, to sit down and make a list of at least three things you are grateful for from that day. Many people keep a journal specifically for their "gratitudes".

To start, most of us find it easier to begin with small things. For instance, a couple of days ago I came home to find a bunny sprawled in my front yard, front feet stretched out and chin resting on the grass. He looked so content that I decided to put that in my gratitude journal. Another gratitude I listed recently was how much my dad, who has dementia, enjoyed his 90th birthday party. Of course it can be much more elaborate, but you get the picture. If you put gratitude practice into your computer's search engine, you will get enough citations to keep you busy for a month.

Here are a few suggestions that I believe will sustain you in your practice. Helen Russell, writing on the *Tiny Buddha* website, stresses the importance of making a commitment to do this. I suggest that you make your commitment in writing and sign it. For instance, "I commit to making a gratitude list of at least three items

five out of seven days for the next two weeks.” There is good evidence that we are more successful when we do it in this way.

Another way is by bringing gratitude into your day and spreading it around. Be sure to thank those that help you or acknowledge them in some other way. In my earlier example I suppose I could have tossed a carrot to that relaxed rabbit that I saw in my yard. Finally, graciously accept and acknowledge other people’s expressions of thanks and gratitude to you. That will inspire both of you. I should also point out that the gratitude practice helps us be more mindful of noticing good things as they happen.

Now I am sure many of you are practicing gratitude already, perhaps in your prayers or just in the way you choose to live your life. However there are some good reasons you may want to formalize your practice.

Those reasons? Research! Rigorous scientific research. Back in 2003 Robert Emmons, who has been called the world’s leading scientific expert on gratitude, published along with Michael McCullough a study called Counting Blessings Versus Burdens. That study found that journaling for five minutes a day about what we are grateful for can enhance our long term happiness by 10%. This study was groundbreaking and continues to be cited today. There followed hundreds of studies and mass quantities of books on the subject.

The message remains consistent. There are incredible benefits to a gratitude practice. The most recent studies cite happiness and contentment increases up to 25%! There are many other documented benefits in addition to increased happiness. They include a general increase in positive emotions, improved self-esteem, we become more optimistic, health issues such as blood pressure and sleep problems improve, and other people tend to like us more! There is even good evidence that a gratitude practice makes us more content with what we have and less likely to envy others. What’s not to like about that?

So, here's the bottom line. There is no good reason not to start and sustain a gratitude practice. It’s cheap, requires no special equipment, makes you and those you live with happier, and can improve your health. Please accept my encouragement to give it a try and by late November you’ll have something new to be thankful for.