

## PRACTISING GRATITUDE: Turning our minds' jungles into gardens



Gratitude is over-preached and under-practised. Everyone knows we need to be thankful. "But what if we don't have anything to be thankful for?" or "Life has dealt us a bad hand. We are struggling. We have no energy left to be grateful," some would say. These are understandable responses.

Often, when we are in a dark place, the darkness overwhelms. Remembering what Martin Luther King Junior says about darkness when you are in such a place is useful.

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that....." Light dispels darkness. That is indisputable. The more light we introduce, the more darkness disappears.

Introducing the habit of practising gratitude into our life is like switching on the lights. People who have done so and experienced the effect have vouched for this. Albert Clarke asserts '...it is not happiness that makes us grateful, but the

gratefulness that makes us happy.' This dispels the common misconception that we must be in a good place before we can start practising gratitude. Cisero calls 'Gratitude' 'the mother of virtues'. The habit of gratitude somehow activates a virtuous cycle or momentum of attracting more virtues and healthy habits into our lives. Over time, it changes our level of happiness.

The Latin root of the word 'gratitude' is 'gratia' which means a gift that is freely given, unearned. Gratitude is hence an ability to acknowledge and express thankfulness for what has been freely given to us.

It is difficult for a child to express gratitude. When he cries for an ice-cream and we give him a plate of nutrient- rich freshly plucked cherries, we are not going to hear him say "thank you" and mean it. A child is typically self-centred and ego-centric. He is relentless in demanding that his expectations, even the inappropriate ones be met. He thinks the world owes him a good life. If he gets them, he takes them for granted. He feels a sense of entitlement.

Like the child, we are often blind to things that we should feel grateful for; the relationships in our life, life's lessons, the near disasters we were protected from, nature, what we are offered freely and life itself. The list goes on. Only when things go our way do we feel they are worth feeling thankful for. In our fallen world, grievances will always outnumber gifts. We can choose to focus on only our lack or choose to be thankful for what we already have, no matter how imperfect they are.

Another reason why we do not practise gratitude is perhaps because our whining serves a function we may not be fully aware of. Our complaints about our lot may draw the sympathy and attention of others. We lap these up as compensation for the deprivation we feel we suffer from. The truth is: even if others agree with us that there is nothing in our life worth feeling thankful for, it does us no good. It does not enlighten the darkness. Only introducing light to the dark situations does.

## Connect-Point

***'..it is not happiness that makes us grateful, but the gratefulness that makes us happy' (Albert Clarke)***

There needs to be a paradigm shift in the way we perceive the practice of 'gratitude'. This is more so in the light of medical and neuroscience discoveries.

Thanks to advancement in technology and research, we now know that when a thought arises in our mind, it comes in the form of an electric current. Each new thought creates a branch in a nerve cell in the brain. Each time we dwell further in the thought, more branches are created. As we continue to ruminate or meditate, these memories are reinforced and strengthened, much like how we see branches in a tree grow. How these clusters of branches look like depends on whether the thoughts are healthy or toxic. Clusters of memory of healthy thoughts will look like 'lush trees'. But those of toxic thoughts are like spiky 'thorn trees'.\* (\* terms by Dr Michelle Strydom )

Healthy thoughts are thoughts of love, contentment, gratitude, acceptance of others, forgiveness, kindness etc. Toxic thoughts are those of hatred, strife, self-pity, anger, bitterness, unforgiveness, selfishness etc.

Each time we add thoughts to whether the 'lush trees' or the 'thorn trees', brain chemicals and hormones are secreted. Examples are dopamine and serotonin. Toxic thoughts are found to affect the secretion of these brain chemicals and hormones, causing an in-balance and dis-ease in our well-being.

Another useful discovery is the role of our heart. It is found that the heart has a small brain. When a thought enters our brain, it goes into different areas and finally reaches the 'free-will' part. At this point, we engage our heart. The heart advises the free – will what to do with the thought (whether it is a conscious or sub-conscious one that arises automatically). It advises it to either reject the thought, check and change it or to store it long term. It is the free-will that will make the final decision.

Our heart advises our free-will based on our convictions. These convictions must be informed by either our faith or newly acquired knowledge or both. It is no wonder that King Solomon, the wisest man of his time cautioned, 'Guard your heart



because it determines the course of your life'. For someone who lived thousands of years ago, he understood the connection between our heart and what will come out of our life afterwards.

We may, at this point, not be able to cut ourselves off from toxic thoughts. We can counter it by sowing thoughts of gratitude each day. Gratitude is an attitude of the heart. Drive that conviction about the benefits of practising gratitude into our heart. Inform our heart of our desire for a change, for more light into the circumstances. Just entertaining that desire is like saying, "I cannot reach the switch but I want the light to be on." It is sowing the seed of the lush tree. Water that seed every day. Begin each day by choosing to be thankful for some things. End each day feeling grateful for some things that had happened in the day. Start a 'Good-finding' habit. If we lost that promotion, be thankful that the manager was kind and open during the appraisal. Be thankful that you now know what areas need strengthening. Be thankful for opportunities for growth.

Practising gratitude requires us to be open, receptive and humble. Practising gratitude is a choice. It requires us to be intentional and conscious. If we do not choose Gratitude, by default, we are choosing the opposite;- ingratitude, self-pity and self-centredness. There is no middle ground.

We may feel 'messed up' thus far. Be thankful that life is not over. It is forgiving and it offers us chances to start anew. Our mind may now be full of 'thorn trees'. Once we plant and grow a 'lush tree', they will have to give way to more. In time to come, your mind's jungle will turn into a fruit-bearing garden.

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To contact us: Please call 6340 4161 or email [admin@bcare.org.sg](mailto:admin@bcare.org.sg)