

SundayReview | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

Choose to Be Grateful. It Will Make You Happier.

Arthur C. Brooks NOV. 21, 2015

TWENTY-FOUR years ago this month, my wife and I married in Barcelona, Spain. Two weeks after our wedding, flush with international idealism, I had the bright idea of sharing a bit of American culture with my Spanish in-laws by cooking a full Thanksgiving dinner.

Easier said than done. Turkeys are not common in Barcelona. The local butcher shop had to order the bird from a specialty farm in France, and it came only partially plucked. Our tiny oven was too small for the turkey. No one had ever

heard of cranberries.

Over dinner, my new family had many queries. Some were practical, such as, “What does this beast eat to be so filled with bread?” But others were philosophical: “Should you celebrate this holiday even if you don’t feel grateful?”

I stumbled over this last question. At the time, I believed one should feel grateful in order to give thanks. To do anything else seemed somehow dishonest or fake — a kind of bourgeois, saccharine insincerity that one should reject. It’s best to be emotionally authentic, right? Wrong. Building the best life does not require fealty to feelings in the name of authenticity, but rather rebelling against negative impulses and acting right even when we don’t feel like it. In a nutshell, acting grateful can actually make you grateful.

For many people, gratitude is difficult, because life is difficult. Even beyond deprivation and depression, there are many ordinary circumstances in which gratitude doesn’t come easily. This point will elicit a knowing, mirthless chuckle from readers whose Thanksgiving dinners are usually ruined by a drunk uncle who always needs to share his political views. Thanks for nothing.

Beyond rotten circumstances, some people are just naturally more grateful than others. A 2014 article in the journal *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* identified a variation in a gene (CD38) associated with gratitude. Some people simply have a heightened genetic tendency to experience, in the researchers’ words, “global relationship satisfaction, perceived partner responsiveness and positive emotions (particularly love).” That is, those relentlessly positive people you know who seem grateful all the time may simply be mutants.

But we are more than slaves to our feelings, circumstances and genes. Evidence suggests that we can actively choose to practice gratitude — and that doing so raises our happiness.

This is not just self-improvement hokum. For example, researchers in one 2003 study randomly assigned one group of study participants to keep a short weekly list of the things they were grateful for, while other groups listed hassles or neutral events. Ten weeks later, the first group enjoyed significantly greater life satisfaction than the others. Other studies have shown the same pattern and lead to

the same conclusion. If you want a truly happy holiday, choose to keep the “thanks” in Thanksgiving, whether you feel like it or not.

How does all this work? One explanation is that acting happy, regardless of feelings, coaxes one’s brain into processing positive emotions. In one famous 1993 experiment, researchers asked human subjects to smile forcibly for 20 seconds while tensing facial muscles, notably the muscles around the eyes called the *orbicularis oculi* (which create “crow’s feet”). They found that this action stimulated brain activity associated with positive emotions.

If grinning for an uncomfortably long time like a scary lunatic isn’t your cup of tea, try expressing gratitude instead. According to research published in the journal *Cerebral Cortex*, gratitude stimulates the hypothalamus (a key part of the brain that regulates stress) and the ventral tegmental area (part of our “reward circuitry” that produces the sensation of pleasure).

It’s science, but also common sense: Choosing to focus on good things makes you feel better than focusing on bad things. As my teenage kids would say, “Thank you, Captain Obvious.” In the slightly more elegant language of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, “He is a man of sense who does not grieve for what he has not, but rejoices in what he has.”

In addition to building our own happiness, choosing gratitude can also bring out the best in those around us. Researchers at the University of Southern California showed this in a 2011 study of people with high power but low emotional security (think of the worst boss you’ve ever had). The research demonstrated that when their competence was questioned, the subjects tended to lash out with aggression and personal denigration. When shown gratitude, however, they reduced the bad behavior. That is, the best way to disarm an angry interlocutor is with a warm “thank you.”

I learned this lesson 10 years ago. At the time, I was an academic social scientist toiling in professorial obscurity, writing technical articles and books that would be read by a few dozen people at most. Soon after securing tenure, however, I published a book about charitable giving that, to my utter befuddlement, gained a popular audience. Overnight, I started receiving feedback from total strangers who had seen me on television or heard me on the radio.

One afternoon, I received an unsolicited email. “Dear Professor Brooks,” it began, “You are a fraud.” That seemed pretty unpromising, but I read on anyway. My correspondent made, in brutal detail, a case against every chapter of my book. As I made my way through the long email, however, my dominant thought wasn’t resentment. It was, “He read my book!” And so I wrote him back — rebutting a few of his points, but mostly just expressing gratitude for his time and attention. I felt good writing it, and his near-immediate response came with a warm and friendly tone.

DOES expressing gratitude have any downside? Actually, it might: There is some research suggesting it could make you fat. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* finds evidence that people begin to crave sweets when they are asked to express gratitude. If this finding holds up, we might call it the Pumpkin Pie Paradox.

The costs to your weight notwithstanding, the prescription for all of us is clear: Make gratitude a routine, independent of how you feel — and not just once each November, but all year long.

There are concrete strategies that each of us can adopt. First, start with “interior gratitude,” the practice of giving thanks privately. Having a job that involves giving frequent speeches — not always to friendly audiences — I have tried to adopt the mantra in my own work of being grateful to the people who come to see me.

Next, move to “exterior gratitude,” which focuses on public expression. The psychologist Martin Seligman, father of the field known as “positive psychology,” gives some practical suggestions on how to do this. In his best seller “*Authentic Happiness*,” he recommends that readers systematically express gratitude in letters to loved ones and colleagues. A disciplined way to put this into practice is to make it as routine as morning coffee. Write two short emails each morning to friends, family or colleagues, thanking them for what they do.

Finally, be grateful for useless things. It is relatively easy to be thankful for the most important and obvious parts of life — a happy marriage, healthy kids or living in America. But truly happy people find ways to give thanks for the little, insignificant trifles. Ponder the impractical joy in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem

“Pied Beauty”:

Glory be to God for dappled things —

For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;

For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;

Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;

Landscape plotted and pieced — fold, fallow, and plough;

And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

Be honest: When was the last time you were grateful for the spots on a trout? More seriously, think of the small, useless things you experience — the smell of fall in the air, the fragment of a song that reminds you of when you were a kid. Give thanks.

This Thanksgiving, don’t express gratitude only when you feel it. Give thanks especially when you don’t feel it. Rebel against the emotional “authenticity” that holds you back from your bliss. As for me, I am taking my own advice and updating my gratitude list. It includes my family, faith, friends and work. But also the dappled complexion of my bread-packed bird. And it includes you, for reading this column.

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