

Gratitude

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For many of us, the holiday season is a mixed bag. It is a joyful time of year, when families and friends gather in celebration to reaffirm their love and commitment to one another. It can also be a nostalgic time, when we feel our losses and disappointments more acutely. And it's a time of shopping deadlines, invitations, greeting cards, out-of-town visitors, and elaborate meals, all of which have the potential to bring us joy or stress or both. Practicing gratitude is an especially beneficial way to counter the painful emotions and stressors that come with the holiday season.

For our hunter-gatherer ancestors, opening themselves to the good in their lives did not have the same evolutionary urgency as remembering and reacting to the bad. The biological inclination to feel threatened and react served them well. It kept them alive in extreme environments, and allowed them to pass their genes on to us, who are less well-served today by the inclination to register and react to whatever threatens us or causes discomfort. In fact, this hard-wired tendency is the cause of many emotional, physical and psychological problems, some large, many small. Gratitude, the experience of what is good in one's life, even abundantly good, is a powerful and direct antidote to thoughts and feelings of being threatened.

What follows are three brief essays stitched together into one article: a meditation on gratitude, an exercise to help open your heart to the good in your life, and a reflection about the real gifts of the season.

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A Meditation on Gratitude

Set aside a quiet time during which you can reflect on some of the many things you could be thankful for. As a starting point, you might read the passage below to yourself or out loud, adapting it to your situation as you like.

There really is so much to be thankful for.

I am grateful to my friends. For their good qualities, for the good things they have done for me. For the ways they are fun, for the good times we've had.

I am grateful for my children - if I have any - for the delight and love they bring, for the sweet smell of their hair and the soft touch of their skin. For the first time they smiled at me or walked into my arms. For the meaning they bring to life. For receiving my love and lessons. For being their own persons, for giving me their own love and lessons. Having them at all is a miracle, and the rest is details.

I appreciate myself. For the love I have given to others, for all the conversations had, for all the helpful acts toward others, for all the dishes done. For the long hours I've worked, the hoops I've jumped through to keep all those balls up in the air. For the efforts I've made, the many times I've stayed patient, the many times I've found more to give inside when I thought I was empty.

I appreciate my lovers and mates, past and present. I can focus on one of these persons, perhaps my spouse or mate if I'm currently in a relationship, and bring to mind the ways he or she has been good to me. I appreciate the fun we've had together, the humor and the companionship. I feel grateful for the times of support, understanding, and sympathy. For sweating and suffering too.

I feel thankful for the life I've already had, for the good parts of my childhood, for everything I've learned, for good friends and beautiful sights. For the roof over my head and the bread on my table, for being able to have a life that is healthier, longer, and freer than most people have ever dreamed of. For this beautiful world, where each breath is a gift of air, each dawn a gift of light. For the plants and animals that die so I may live. For the extraordinary gifts of evolution I carry in each cell of my body, for the capabilities accumulated during three and a half billion years of life's presence on our planet.

I feel thankful for the wonder of the universe, for all the atoms in my body – the carbon in my bones, the oxygen and iron in my blood – that were born in the heart of a star billions of years ago, to drift through space, to form a sun and planets, to form the hand that holds this piece of paper and the eye that reads this word.

I feel thankful for all that was in order for me to be. For grace, for wisdom, for the sacred, for spirit as I know it. For this moment, this breath, this sight. For every good thing that was, that is, that ever will be.

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Opening Your Heart

As you probably know, compassion and lovingkindness are central elements of Buddhism.

They arise naturally in response to one of those three fundamental characteristics of existence: interdependence/ not-self/ emptiness. They are also a beautiful path of spiritual practice. And they just feel good: "Through compassion one is free from lethargy and depression." (Acariya Dhammapala)

Interestingly, a scientifically based tradition as hard-headed as Western psychology is also beginning to find that working with compassion and related heartfelt feelings has both mental and physical benefits.

For example, the Institute of HeartMath (in Boulder Creek, California) has researched connections between the heart and emotional well-being.

Even a regular heartbeat - e.g., 60 times a minute - still has a little variability in the interval between each beat. A large and smoothly changing variation in those intervals changes your brain waves, activates the para-sympathetic nervous system, lowers blood pressure, supports the immune system, and has other health benefits.

It also helps you feel more peaceful and happy and caring.

So let's try a simple technique that can bring your heart beat into a healthier rhythm. It has three parts:

- Breathe in such a way that the length of your inhalation and exhalation are the same (perhaps counting in your mind to make the breaths even).
- Imagine that the breath is coming into and out of the area of your heart.
- As you breathe evenly through your heart, call to mind a pleasant, heartfelt emotion such as gratitude, kindness, contentment, or love -- perhaps by thinking about a happy time, being with your children, gratitude for the good things in your life, a close friend, etc. You can also imagine that feeling moving through your heart as part of the breath.

Why don't you try this for a few minutes, right now?

Just three to five cycles of this sort of breathing can have a noticeable effect. Also try five to ten minutes straight sometime, and see how that feels.

Of course, there are other ways to cultivate compassion, such as through metta - or compassion and lovingkindness - meditation that many people here are familiar with. In fact, metta practice could also help release oxytocin, a hormone that is involved in warm feelings of safety and contentment - and is released in women when they are nursing, to give you a sense of its qualities.

Enjoy!

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The Real Gift of Parenting

Here's a comment about the holiday season that I have heard from many parents - and we've sometimes felt much the same way myself:

Last year, the holidays were crazy! I seemed to spend most of my time standing in line or carrying bags. We spent a small fortune on assorted complicated gizmos -- which got opened and then ignored as my daughter and son spent most of the day playing with \$2.99 worth of stickers. We got stressed out in order to relax and suffered in order to have fun. My husband and I stared at each other across the flotsam and jetsam of wrapping paper and various pieces of who-knows-what, and you could see the look in each of our eyes: Say what?!

As you brave the holiday shopping crowds -- trying to decide whether to give Barbie or Big Bird, Legos or (good grief) an iPod -- or hassle with returns and sales in January, it's easy to feel a little overwhelmed, and distracted from the real gifts that are at the heart of parenting.

But happily, when you relax a bit and come back to yourself, the true gifts of parenting come back to mind, the ones that go deeper than giving our kids toys and games -- or even a college education.

Over and over again, a hundred times each day, we freely offer a hug, a smile, a touch, a scolding, a sandwich, a paycheck earned, a story read, a bed tucked in, a goodnight kiss. So many things, so rapidly readily given that we hardly notice them - but they are the fabric of family, new threads added many times each hour, warm and cozy and nurturing, the blanket of love in which we wrap our precious vulnerable beloved children.

We offer our lap when our back hurts, we offer our heart when it feels empty. We let our children enter our thoughts when our minds seem stuffed with grown-up concerns and plans.

Our offerings are not just material or actions. We also offer restraint, wise not-doing. We let small things slide. We take into account a no-nap, hungry day . . . or a tough strike-out in Little League . . . or a major dump on our daughter by her best friend. We give the gift of self-control, of not swatting or yelling or overreacting - even when, yes, it would be a relief.

We let our children have us when we feel all too "had" by others. We give even when others haven't given enough to us: our coworkers, our boss, our spouse, our own parents.

We give even when a part of ourselves may not want to; often the most meaningful giving to our children is offered when our personal preference would be to do something else.

We find more water when the wellspring seems to have run dry.

Most fundamentally, we give our *selves*. We open the door wide; we give our children access to the vulnerable places in our heart; we let them enter our souls; we let them crawl oh so deeply under our skin.

Our children give us so much to be sure. The act of parenting has its own rewards. And we need to take care of ourselves so that we can continue to have something to give to our children.

But parents don't give to get. And in the moment of giving to a child we often don't get back much at all. Fundamentally, parenting is not an exchange: we are not playing let's-make-a-deal with our children.

Parenting is an ongoing process of healthy *sacrifice*: the sacrifice of attention, time, energy, money, personal agendas, and all the activities we would prefer to do if we were not parenting.

Of course, we sacrifice not as martyrs but with our eyes open, freely, with strength, with all the ordinary little heroic acts that make up the daily life of a parent.

We sacrifice our individual selves into relationship with our children. We release for a moment the sense of contraction as an isolated self into the joining of love, a love that may feel for some as if it partakes of something that's ultimately Divine.

Sacrifice means "sacred act." During this seasonal time, of plunging into the dark to be renewed for the swelling of the light, a period that's sacred in many cultures around the world -- it's a lovely, self-nurturing thing to reflect a bit on what may be for you the sacred essence of parenting.