

3 Reasons We Don't We Feel More Gratitude for Our Bounty

It is easy to overlook how much we are supported by the world; how little we give and how much we get.

My local organic farmer gambled this year with late plantings, and the weather cooperated. In mid-November he picked for us bushels of kale, mustard greens, and bok choy. He took the risk; he did the back-breaking work; and he is glad to fill our weekly order. Human cooperation creates miracles that make modern civilization possible.

While my local farmer is not a stranger to me, almost everything I rely on depends upon the mostly invisible, orderly web of relationships all around us. The food I buy in the supermarket, the clothes I wear, the car I drive, the power in my home, the computer on which I am writing this essay were all produced by countless strangers I will never meet.

How quickly we would perish if not for the continuous effort of others. The gratitude we feel for our bounty should be overwhelming and beyond measure; but often, we feel anything but grateful.

In his book [A Natural Approach to Mental Wellness](#), Greg Krech identifies three main reasons we don't feel more gratitude: expectations, self-preoccupations, and entitlement.

Our Expectations

The late American novelist, David Foster Wallace, began his [2005 commencement address](#) at Kenyon College with these words:

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods

at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

Wallace is pointing us to the truth of life that what we are immersed in all of the time we tend not to notice.

Consider this. In his book [*The Rational Optimist*](#), Matt Ridley instructs us that, in 1800, one hour of light from a candle was too expensive for an average worker to afford; it cost the equivalent of six hours of work. Today, an hour of indoor lighting costs about a half-second of work. In 1800, night fell, and most Americans found their way to bed in the dark.

I have been stunned by the number of my undergraduate students who simply refused to believe the facts Ridley presents. They have little knowledge of history and no idea of how far Western civilization has progressed in the past few centuries. Why should they feel grateful for something they know nothing about? What is our excuse for our own lack of gratefulness? Do we expect cheap electricity and feel little gratitude for it, until the power goes out?

The web of human cooperation that produces what we take for granted is largely invisible to us. We can choose to feel grateful for this immense order that we are unable to fully comprehend.

Our Self-Preoccupations

[Dr. David K. Reynolds observes the connection](#) between self-centeredness and the lack of gratitude:

I've never met a suffering neurotic person who was filled with gratitude. Isn't that something? Gratitude and neurotic suffering seem to be antagonistic. If there is anything characteristic of neurosis it is a self-centeredness.

Gratitude, on the other hand, is other-centered. It carries with it the desire to serve others in repayment, even if it causes some inconvenience to oneself.

Reynolds' observations are supported by clinical studies. [Dr. Robert Emmons and Joanna Hill report](#) research findings that "gratefulness tends to build and strengthen social bonds and friendship, while narcissism impedes the feeling of gratitude."

Doesn't honesty demand that we consider how often our mind engages in petty griping rather than feelings of gratitude? The supermarket is crowded in the days before Thanksgiving, and our mind fills with thoughts about how we are being inconvenienced. The outside temperature is too cold or too hot; we take for granted the miracle of central heating and air-conditioning. Our plane is an hour late, and our thoughts are full of gripes; the miracle of modern air travel is lost on us. The movie we are watching on Netflix is mediocre, and we forget the incredible range of choices we have on demand for a very modest monthly fee; we've forgotten having to stand in line at Blockbuster for limited offerings. Depending upon where we place our attention, is there not always something to complain about?

Our Sense of Entitlement

How often do we overestimate our own contributions and underestimate the contributions of others? Do we get irritated at our colleagues or our family for not supporting us in the ways we think we deserve? When we think we deserve more, it is difficult to feel grateful.

Krech observes a "sense of entitlement deprives us of the joy and appreciation we might otherwise experience when encountering the gifts and blessings of life."

Theologian and anti-Nazi dissident, Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it

this way in his book [*Letters and Papers from Prison*](#) written while imprisoned by the Nazis: “In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich. It is very easy to overestimate the importance of our own achievements in comparison with what we owe others.”

To strengthen his feeling of gratitude, Albert Einstein continually reminded himself how much his life depended on others: “A hundred times a day I remind myself that my inner and outer life depend on the labors of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the measure as I have received and am still receiving.”

Self-reflection, Krech observes, “allows us to pause to appreciate what is being given to us rather than focus on what we don’t have.”

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