

# The Reason So Many Americans Are Ungrateful

From May through October, we buy our produce at a local farm stand owned by a farmer who is vocally anti-Trump. Recently, I overheard the farmer banter with a customer about Trump. To his surprise the customer was an avid Trump supporter. As I watched their interaction, I admired the farmer's skill at backing off the ledge he had walked out onto. He made the customer feel welcome to express her views. At that moment, a happy customer was more important than being right.

Farmers tend to be realists. Perhaps their realism stems from experiencing the vagaries of the weather on a visceral level. In any case, why aren't more of us realists?

Psychologist David Reynolds has written extensively on gratitude. In his book [\*A Handbook for Constructive Living\*](#), he writes, "Gratitude is a natural response to taking a realistic look at the world, including our place in it. We aren't realistic enough to gain the benefits of gratitude often."

"Gratitude and neurotic suffering," Reynolds observes, "seem to be antagonistic." Neurotics, he explains, exhibit "self-centeredness." In contrast, gratitude "is other-centered. It carries with it the desire to serve others in repayment, even if it causes some inconvenience to oneself."

There seems to be little in the way of gratitude these days; neurotic self-centeredness seems prevalent. Is there too little desire to serve others? Is there too much desire to bend reality to meet our demands for how the world ought to be?

Why are there so many grievances and not more gratitude in America?

Would understanding our place in history lead to more realistic expectations and, in the process, bring forth more gratitude?

In his book [\*The Rise and Fall of American Growth\*](#), Robert Gordon points out how little progress was made over hundreds of years. He writes, “the annual rate of growth in the Western world from AD 1 to AD 1820 was a mere 0.06 percent per year, or 6 percent per century.” Most people were primarily concerned with where their next meal would come from.

Gordon reports, “A newborn child in 1820 entered a world that was almost medieval: a dim world lit by candlelight, in which folk remedies treated health problems and in which travel was no faster than that possible by hoof or sail.”

Such were the consequences of the lack of progress.

Then, miracles seemingly began to happen. In just over a century we went “from the first primitive railroads replacing the stagecoach in the 1830s to the Boeing 707 flying near the speed of sound in 1958.”

In 60 short years, Gordon reports, “Though not a single household was wired for electricity in 1880, nearly 100 percent of U.S. urban homes were wired by 1940, and in the same time interval the percentage of urban homes with clean running piped water and sewer pipes for waste disposal had reached 94 percent.”

Most of us think of being “networked” as having access to the Internet. Gordon gives networking another meaning:

“1940 houses were ‘networked,’ most having the five connections of electricity, gas, telephone, water, and sewer. The networked house, together with modern appliances, changed the nature of housework. The long days previously devoted to doing laundry on a scrub board, hanging clothes outside to dry, making and mending clothing, and baking and preserving

food had now transitioned into fewer hours of housework. Hours released from housework were now available for women to participate in market work. The improvement in working conditions for men was even more profound.”

Often, we hear people talking about the “good old days”; history reveals that those days were not so good in many ways, particularly in the creature comforts.

Consider food. Gordon found that even in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, households were spending half of their income on food. The first supermarkets, with their cornucopia of foods, were still decades away. If you are as old as I am, you may have known relatives who, in desperate times, relied on lard sandwiches to assuage their hunger.

Gordon’s work takes us on a wonderful journey; he gives us fresh eyes for the blessings of our contemporary lives. What made this incredible progress possible?

To preserve freedom, America’s constitutional republic delineated limits on government. As a consequence, an entrepreneurial-driven market process was unleashed, and the standard of living rose for billions of people all over the globe.

Why don’t we feel awe at this progress? We have, metaphorically speaking, won the lottery by being alive today in America. Is our knowledge of history so limited that we simply are unaware of our good fortune?

The less gratitude we feel, the more we want to control reality. The less respect we have for the entrepreneurial market process that creates wonders, the more we accept and even demand restrictions on our freedom.

The more we accept restrictions on freedom, the more the future will become like the forgotten past; we will not remember how progress is created. A more realistic attitude,

fueled by more knowledge of history, might be the antidote for our lack of gratitude.

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[Image Credit: [Youtube](#)]