How to be grateful

Sarah Broscombe

'Gratitude, being nearly the greatest of human duties, is also nearly the most difficult,' wrote G.K. Chesterton. Luckily, St Ignatius is on hand to help us to cultivate gratitude, so that our hearts may be disposed 'to receive more, to appreciate more, to love and be loved more.' Sarah Broscombe views gratitude through psychological, spiritual and Ignatian lenses, helping us to see how and why growing in gratitude is a priority as well as a joy.

Virtually every language has words for it, and all the world religions encourage it.[1] Positive psychology is researching its sources, attributes and impact, and popular psychology is extolling its virtues. Gratitude, long understood as a spiritual heavyweight, is now known to be a psychological heavyweight, too. But why? What is it? Why is it important? And how can we use St Ignatius Loyola's insights to cultivate gratitude in our lives?

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What is gratitude?

The science of gratitude that has emerged within positive psychology provides us with useful definitions, distinct from the more generic 'thankfulness'. Gratitude is 'an acknowledgment that we have received something of value from others',[2] 'a compound of admiration and joy',[3] 'a felt sense of wonder, thankfulness and appreciation for life'.[4] 'An individual experiences the emotion of gratitude... when they affirm that something good has happened to them and they recognise that someone else is largely responsible'.[5] The etymology of gratitude shares with grace (from the Latin root, *gratus*) the sense of unmerited favour and intentional benevolence. My working definition of gratitude, therefore, is: 'appreciation of unearned favour, intentionally given'.

Positive psychology also gives us a helpful distinction between 'state gratitude' (an emotional state of gratefulness) and 'trait gratitude' (a disposition that makes gratitude relatively easy). We can see both types of gratitude right through the Christian scriptures and spiritual writing; for example, the Psalms are full of moments of state gratitude: 'What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?'[6] This poem by G.K. Chesterton gives a vivid expression of trait gratitude:

> Here dies another day
> During which I have had eyes, ears, hands
> And the great world round me;
> And with tomorrow begins another.
> Why am I allowed two?[7]

Measures have been developed to help researchers understand and explore the origins and impacts of both state and trait gratitude. This is important for psychological research because the correlations between life satisfaction, mental wellbeing and gratitude are so strong. Evidence is also emerging that if gratitude is instrumentalised, i.e. you cultivate it because you want happiness as payback, the demonstrable benefits may not occur.[8]

Why is it important?

Why be grateful? The scientific and spiritual answers to this question are complementary.

In brief, positive psychology evidences that 'gratitude is important to the good life'; it has the 'potential to enhance happiness' and is one of the strongest predictors of subjective wellbeing.[9] Brother David Steindl-Rast's hugely successful TED talk on gratitude[10] summarises this succinctly: 'If you want to be happy, be grateful'. The positive impact on relationships is also demonstrable. Because gratitude recognises a gift received, it is intrinsically relational, and thus 'prosocial'. Gratitude is about both me and 'the other', to whom I am receptive and appreciative. In brief:

> Highly grateful people, compared to their less grateful counterparts, tend to experience positive emotions more often, enjoy greater satisfaction with life and more hope, and experience less depression, anxiety, and envy. They tend to score higher in prosociality and be more empathic, forgiving, helpful, and supportive as well as less focused on materialistic pursuits, compared to their less grateful counterparts.[11]

Gratitude helps us in quite practical ways. Where the psalmist is 'cast down ... and disquieted', he uses remembering deliberately to invigorate his own gratitude: 'These things I remember as I pour out my soul...'[12] Samuel does the same, on behalf of Israel, raising an Ebenezer stone to aid remembering.[13] Gratitude is a virtue – but Ignatius approaches it from a different perspective, focusing less on benefits and virtuous practice, and more on the logic of gratitude.

Is there a distinctly Ignatian understanding of gratitude?

In the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola, gratitude is not just beneficial to us, it is the *only* logical response to the grace of God.

There is a logic of gratitude that grows through the Exercises, a dynamic of grace building upon grace. Ignatius does not begin the Exercises with his great call to trait gratitude, the Contemplation to Attain Love – he ends with it. First, we need to see clearly and in true perspective. We begin by seeing ourselves in the context of creation, of the Fall, and of the decision by the Trinity to enter into our ensnared world and set it free. We then walk with Jesus step by step, through birth, life, agony, death and resurrection. The daily drip-feeding of state gratitude with the Examen culminates in the trait gratitude of the Contemplation to Attain Love. So gratitude is the *fruit* of all that we have experienced. We do not create it; it is brought to birth through our encounter with Jesus. We also do not force it. Ignatius urges us throughout the Exercises to be honest about our desires and our responses. He notes that we do not always desire the best, and that sometimes we need to pray for the *desire* for the desire. Tell the truth, and then pray for the grace you need: this is the process. Gratitude *is* perspective. When I see myself contextualised in the whole of salvation history, my response will be 'the cry of wonder'. There is a natural welling-up of gratitude and love, which is intended to last, to make us people of gratitude at a deeper level.

For all Christians, there is a distinctive quality to their gratitude: belief in God as the giver. In a secular worldview, gratitude may be a response to a series of gifts from random 'others'. For Christians, our lens is our ongoing relationship with God, the architect of salvation. Our root gratitude is to the One who *has* given, who gives *now*, and who can be utterly trusted to *keep on* giving. As Michael Ivens SJ explains, 'Gratitude for the past... leads to trust for the future.'[14] Ignatius structures the Contemplation to Attain Love to reflect this past, present and future engagement with grace in my life and in the whole world, coming personally and intentionally from God.

There is broad agreement that gratitude is good for you, and that it's linked to happiness. But where the science of gratitude seeks to understand gratitude, Ignatius wants us to orient ourselves through it. Where positive psychology notes that 'gratitude has good outcomes', for Ignatius it is much stronger than that: more like, 'if you see God's world and your life as they really are, gratitude will well up in you'. All agree that 'if you want to be happy, be grateful', but for Ignatius it's fundamental: gratitude is the only disposition that makes sense.

What about ingratitude?

In 1542, Ignatius wrote in a letter that ingratitude is, 'the cause, beginning, and origin of all evils and sins.'[15] People whose upbringing, character, temperament or inculturation are conducive to trait gratitude may be baffled by trait ingratitude, and unable to understand

why gratitude does not come easily and naturally to everyone. But Jesus healed ten lepers[16] – it was not the majority that came back to express their gratitude, but the minority, the one. Fluency in gratitude is a gift; perhaps a rare one.

If trait gratitude does not come easily to you by character or habit, that is not abnormal. Eyesight is an apt metaphor – some eyes naturally see the world with gratitude. Some of us need to put on glasses, to choose this lens, because it is not intuitive in our way of seeing. Just as gift is a received thing, gratitude sometimes comes as a grace. We may need to pray for it. Furthermore, for many of us, ingratitude carries some precious and distinctive insights into our own habits of thought. Curiosity is more useful here than self-blame. It is worth considering whether the ingratitude in question is 'state ingratitude' or 'trait ingratitude'. For 'ingratitude' is surely not one condition, but several.

Certainly, the ingratitude of entitlement, dissatisfaction, forgetfulness and sloth are dangerous. Sloth/*acedia*[17] is a refusal of the gift of each day; all the things you should care for have lost their savour. The spiritual response to such a state is to cultivate diligence. Entitlement ('I deserve all the goods that I experience') is certainly the antithesis of humility – 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men.'[18] Forgetfulness is the great sin threaded right through the history of Israel, and is prime territory for ingratitude. Dissatisfaction ('it's not enough') may spring from materialism and lead to envy.

It seems to me that the case of the nine lepers is different. Often, our momentary state of ingratitude comes from simply not noticing, and from the inattention that comes with stress or hurry. Ignatius places more emphasis on the Examen than on any other form of prayer. The Examen cultivates in us habits of remembering, of paying attention, and of noticing the fine grain of our experience. It can be a profound antidote to accidental ingratitude.

We may also find ourselves, or others, in a state of ingratitude for good reason. A truthful impulse of ingratitude may be pointing us towards some disjunct that merits attention. Ingratitude is logical, for example, as a response to instrumentalised generosity. Conditional gifts, or love, or relationships, may trigger a less-than-wholehearted gratitude in us that is connected to the giver as well as to the 'ungrateful' one. Because ingratitude is often considered the worst of sins,[19] the temptation is to make it taboo, deny it altogether, or focus on self-blame. When we bring curiosity to it, we may find simply that our expectations were mismatched with the reality, or that we have an incident out of perspective.

I suspect that truthful ingratitude is more useful than forced, dutiful gratitude. Whatever the source of our ingratitude, de Mello reminds us, 'be grateful for your sins: they are carriers of grace'.[20]

How can I cultivate gratitude in my life?

All schools of thought agree that gratitude is an unequivocal good, and that we can grow in gratitude. This can happen in three ways – behaviour (adopting gratitude practices), mindset (cultivating a different attitude) and receptiveness (praying for the grace of gratitude). Whilst the science of gratitude focuses on practices, we may also find prayer vital.

I would summarise an Ignatian approach to cultivating gratitude into these five steps.

1) Tell the truth. Start from where you are. When gratitude is real, it wells up of its own accord. If you aren't grateful, what *are* you? Your desires and reactions, even if they are frustration or dissatisfaction or anger, are the right place to start.

2) Pray for the grace of gratitude in abundance.

3) Pay attention – or, in the words of Frederick Beuchner, 'listen to your life'.[21] Using the Examen, relish and savour your experience. Recent neuroscientific discoveries corroborate Ignatius's instinct: due to our brain's hard-wired negativity bias, negative experiences register instantly, whereas positive experiences generally have to be held in awareness for up to twenty seconds for them to register in emotional memory.[22] In the words of the late Gerry W. Hughes SJ,

> Ask yourself every day 'Has any event today surprised or delighted me?' More simply expressed, have I enjoyed anything today? Then focus your attention on what you enjoyed, relish it and suck all the enjoyment out of it that you can. It is only by doing this that you will begin to understand the wonder that is already in your life.[23]

Notice where your mind is dwelling. There might be learnings in your experience of ingratitude, too. When we notice what prevents, blunts, dulls, sabotages, hijacks, or sours gratitude for us, we can take action against it.

4) Cultivate a conducive environment. Whatever is conducive to gratitude for you, find it and do it. The science of gratitude researchers note that this will be different for different casts of mind. I find that, for me, gratitude comes in waves. I have days when I know without doubt that I am the most blessed person alive (and I can articulate exactly why, too). Sadly, I also have days when I feel ungrateful, and then stalemate myself with guilt and self-blame. I find Ignatius's past/present/ future insight of the *Contemplatio* extremely helpful here. You might find that remembering helps cultivate gratitude; you might find intentionally giving to others more stimulating.

5) Receive. When gratitude comes, don't rush away. Pay attention to the giver, to the gift and to the impact on your grateful self. Savour and relish this, too.

Gratitude as gift

According to Ignatius's Contemplation to Attain Love, gratitude disposes the heart to be able to receive more, to appreciate more, to love and be loved more. How utterly relevant to Advent! Gratitude can help us prepare our hearts to receive Christ, and Christmas, and one another more fully. Gratitude enlists your past (remembering) and your present (paying attention) to bless your future. It's a nursery of trust as well as happiness. We can practise gratitude. But sometimes, by the grace of God, gratitude just happens to us. It arrives, freely, as a gift.

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[1] Watkins, van Gelder & Frias, 'Furthering the Science of Gratitude' in C.R. Snyder & S.J. Lopez (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 2nd ed. (OUP: Oxford, 2011), chapter 41.

[2] R.A. Emmons & A. Mishra, 'Why Gratitude Enhances Well-Being: What We Know, What We Need to Know' in Sheldon, Kashdan & Steger (eds.), *Designing Positive Psychology: Taking Stock and Moving Forward* (OUP: Oxford, 2011), Chapter 16.

[3] Ortony, Clore & Collins, referenced in R.A. Emmons & C.M. Shelton, 'Gratitude and the Science of Positive Psychology' in C.R. Snyder & S.J. Lopez (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (OUP: Oxford, 2001) Chapter 33.

[4] R.A. Emmons & C.M. Shelton, *op. cit.*

[5] Watkins, van Gelder & Frias, *op. cit.*

[6] Psalm 116:12

[7] G.K. Chesterton, 'Evening,' in Aiden Mackey (ed.) *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton, Volume X: Collected Poetry, Part I* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994), p.38.

[8] Carey, Clicque, Leighton & Milton, referenced in Watkins, van Gelder & Frias, *op. cit.*, p.8.

[9] Watkins, van Gelder & Frias, *op. cit.*

[10] https://www.ted.com/talks/david_steindl_rast_want_to_be_happy_be_grateful

[11] G. Bono, M. Krackauer & J.J. Froh, 'The Power and Practice of Gratitude' in *Positive Psychology in Practice* (Wiley & Sons: New Jersey, 2015), Chapter 33.

[12] Psalm 42: 4-5.

[13] 1 Samuel 7:12.

[14] M. Ivens SJ, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Gracewing: Leominster UK, 1998), p.64.

[15] From a letter by Ignatius dated 18 March 1542 quoted in Brian Lehane SJ: http://www.jesuits-chgdet.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Partners_FA09.Sprituality.pdf

[16] Luke 17: 11-19.

[17] Rob Marsh SJ, 'Sloth' in *Thinking Faith* (15 March 2012): https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20120315_2.htm

[18] Luke 18:9-14.

[19] R.A. Emmons & C.M. Shelton (*op. cit.*) cite Thomas a Kempis, Thomas Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux.

[20] Anthony de Mello SJ, taken from *Hearts on Fire; Praying with Jesuits* (Institute of Jesuit Sources: Missouri, 1993) p.33.

[21] Frederick Buechner, in both *Listening to Your Life* and in his second memoir, *Now and Then.*

[22] Rick Hanson has written extensively on this subject. A brief summary can be found here: https://www.rickhanson.net/train-brain-taking-good-key-points/?highlight=taking%20in%20the%20good

[23] Gerry W. Hughes SJ, 'There is nothing we can change except ourselves' (17 November 2014): http://www.jesuit.org.uk/blog/there-nothing-we-can-change-except-ourselves