

Inquiring Minds: FOSTERING GRATITUDE IN OUR LIVES

#52 Nov. 28, 2018 “When I started counting my blessings my whole life turned around.” [Willie Nelson](#) (other quotes)

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OUR FAMILY’S 14-DAY EXPERIMENT TO MAKE DAILY GRATITUDE A HABIT (FOR LIFE?)

This Thanksgiving our daughter asked us and our son if we were interested in doing an exercise to make us all more appreciative and happy: *agree to write down three things we are grateful for during a day and email that to each other in the evening.* She said there were studies that doing this would make a profound change in our lives. (I googled it and found many, of which this link is [one such study](#).)

We’ve been doing this ever since Thanksgiving, almost bound by a social contract so effective in so many programs these days, and the change has really been noticeable. I find myself going through the day noticing what things to be thankful for. That alone is making me notice the positive things in my life especially when I see so much negative news and suffering around me as well as personal challenges and illness in our immediate and extended family. We all agree that exercise is keeping us more in touch with ourselves and each other.

“Some people grumble that roses have thorns; I am grateful that thorns have roses.”

— Alphonse Karr

ON THE RECEIVING END OF COMPASSION

After being “out of sports” for 2-3 months because of a knee injury, I thought I would give it a try when three friends asked me to be the fourth in *an easy game* of doubles tennis. Even fit I would be the weakest guy on the court with these 40-year-olds, but my immobility and my glaucoma-weakened eyesight made things even worse. My timing was off, the ball came too fast, and I actually whiffed shots—an embarrassing first. My partner Shawn sensed my frustration and was very positive both during and after the worse set I ever played. (I do not know if I will ever play again, at least in the way I was accustomed.) The other guys also felt my anguish, and their words of encouragement were like a healing balm on my sorely bruised ego.

CAN ONE HAVE GRATITUDE WITHOUT GOD?

Can one be thankful without having someone to thank? AA refers to the necessity of believing in “a

[higher power](#),” someone, thing, or force which is greater than ourselves. There are many forces greater and more influential than ourselves including religion: tradition, science, law, art, literature, music, nature, friends, family, and so on. Any or all of those and more can influence and transform us, or just allow us to be comfortable with whom we are. So, yes, Virginia, gratitude can exist on its own for those who believe such and search for reasons to be grateful.

IS GRATITUDE BY ITSELF JUST SELF-SERVING?

You see where this is going. A more interesting distinction I found was between **empathy** and **compassion**. Empathy is defined as “feeling another’s pain,” and compassion is doing something about it. ([more](#)) Yet there is so much pain in this world, and there’s only so much one can do. Does that justify our doing nothing? Again, the answer is self-evident. Just as one’s definition of a “higher power” or God, if you will, is a personal one, so is how much one acts on one’s empathy. And it’s not just about giving money. If it were that, one could say our taxes and government should take care of all the problems in our neighborhood, state, nation, or world. May our gratitude motivate us to have empathy for others, and our empathy move to compassion where we do something: i.e., be a good parent, aunt or uncle, volunteer as one’s talents and time allow. Patricia, for example, is helping a 6-year-old neighbor boy learn how to read. How we make the world a better place is up to each to decide. Most of us think we do so, whether our job fulfills a social need, or whether we’re encouraging a friend who is struggling to see and hit a tennis ball as he struggles with age and injuries.

SO MUCH NEEDS RETHINKING AND TRADITIONAL BELIEFS CAN GET IN THE WAY

The only small book I have ever read for the third time is called *A Better Ten Commandments*. I recommend the Kindle version for \$3 [on Amazon](#). I summarized this book in a previous *Inquiring Minds* [issue](#), but I am just amazed and grateful at the wealth of information contained in these 100 pages and the clarity with which it is presented. **Practice gratitude. -J**

