

James L. Holly, M.D.

Gratitude: Exercise for the mind, the soul and the spirit

By James L. Holly, MD

Your Life Your Health

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This is my favorite day of the year. Thanksgiving Day is one of the grandest statements of what America is all about. On this day, perhaps more than any other, most people think about what they can give, rather than what they can get.

There are few emotions which add to your health as gratitude. Whether it is depression or cancer, gratitude improves both your sense of well-being and your actual health. The absence of gratitude is often associated with bitterness, anger and isolation. Your immune system is actually weakened by each of these emotions. Social isolation often associated with bitterness and anger, whether as a cause of an effect, can precipitate the onset or the worsening of many arthritic conditions.

The “practice” of gratitude is a habit, just as is the habit of complaining and bitterness. It is not an accident that those who have little, or even nothing, are often very grateful for what little they do have, while those who have great possessions are discontent and always want more. Contentment and gratitude are twins, just as bitterness and discontent are. One sage said, “He/she who is not content with what he/she has will never be happy with what he/she wants.” Contentment releases the power of the human spirit to express gratitude. Gratitude is the causative agent of contentment.

Thanksgiving Day is a great tradition as it reminds us of how important thanksgiving – gratitude – is and it is a great tradition as it teaches us how to express gratitude. Just like the little song, “Count your blessings; name them one by one,” acts of gratitude are volitional and cognitive, i.e., acts of gratitude are initiated by a decision to be grateful and are associated with the recalling of specific events for which you are grateful. Unfortunately, ingratitude and its associated bitterness can happen through neglect and almost by accident.

Like ingratitude which breeds bitterness, gratitude creates contentment, which contentment leads to greater gratitude. The cycle of gratitude/contentment adds to mental and physical health, not to mention its spiritual benefit as well. As you turn on the circular treadmill of expressions of gratitude, you increase your contentment which in turn increases gratitude. These positive emotions choke the life out of the negative ones just like immune cells destroy infectious organisms and even cancer-producing cells.

How do you learn gratitude? By practice principally, but you can also learn it from others. There are three Thanksgiving traditions, which my family celebrates. Each of these traditions represents acts of gratitude, which create contentment. First, there are people: the more, the better. Friends, family, neighbors, everyone is welcome. Why the emphasis on people? Only that which is shared is saved! Thanksgiving comes and goes so quickly that if it is not savored beyond the food, we can almost miss it. To capture the

moment of the Thanksgiving celebration for savoring all year requires that it be shared with others. It is through experiencing celebrations together that those events are invested with great value. Truly it is in giving our celebration to others that we enhance the value of them for ourselves.

Our family's second thanksgiving tradition is cornbread dressing. For those who have never enjoyed my mother's or my wife's cornbread dressing, gratitude will be hard, but possible. My wife and I have several traditional conflicts, which define our forty-one year marriage. One of them is, "Is there enough cornbread dressing?" Regardless of how much is made, I am always certain that there isn't enough, and my wife is always certain that there is. Sadly, unable to learn from past experiences, I fail to remember from one year to the next, that the inadequate cornbread-dressing supply has lasted from Thanksgiving to the week before Christmas each year for the past forty years. "There's not enough; you need to make some more. I'm sure of it." Alas, my ingratitude for the cornbread dressing I have makes me discontent and wanting more!

Then there is the singing of *America the Beautiful*. Beyond the hugs and kisses; beyond the aromas and furtive tastes of food before lunch is served; beyond the warm caress of a happy family; beyond the prayers gratefully offered to Holy God for His gift of life and family; beyond all this, perhaps the most wonderful part of our family tradition is singing *America the Beautiful*. As we gather around the piano, or as we hold hands around the table, the familiar strains of this wonderful anthem echo in my heart and memory.

Oh Beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain
For purple mountain majesties, above the fruited plain!
America! America! God shed His grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood, From Sea to shining sea!

On this very special day, we can glory in the wonder of our country, which glory will allow us to fulfill the responsibility which citizenship in this great country places upon every man, woman and child every day of the year. On this day, I am thankful for helicopters! In America, when we see a helicopter, my grandchildren and I marvel at its almost magical performance; in most parts of the world, when a helicopter is heard, children look for a place to hide, because they may come under attack. I am grateful that my grandchild may grow up never knowing fear or terror. I am saddened that many children will not.

I am thankful for Beau, my thirteen-year-old grandson. I am thankful for this child who is God's promise to my wife, when He said to her, "I will crown thy year with goodness," and then gave us this most precious gift. I am thankful for a perfect child, which simply means that he is real, not a toy. He is good, and sometimes he is mischievous. Once he didn't want to disobey his mother and get out of bed, but his two-year-old sister told him that she would bite him if he didn't. Now if you believe that one, let me tell you another. I am thankful for this perfect child, who isn't.

I am thankful for my other six grandchildren. I am thankful for Hannah Katherine who is the radiance and reflection of her mother and grandmother. I am thankful for her making her grandfather feel like a king when she says, "I luv ou Grandie, too much!" I am

thankful for her spontaneous enthusiasm when she bows her head, folds her little hands, and says, "Let's pray Jesus, Mommy!"

I thank God for Holly Victoria, Elizabeth Anne, Emma Caroline, Katherine Anne and for Richmond Everett II. Each is unique and wonderful; each individually is my "favorite" grandchild in whose countenance and smile I find the fulfillment of every dream a man can have. I am thankful for these special gifts, and I pray God's comfort upon all those who want, but do not have children.

Today, I am thankful for my wife, whose support and love could easily be taken for granted, as can anything which has always been there. I am thankful for my daughter, whose joy and radiance is a spectacle to behold. I am thankful for my son-in-law, who cherishes my daughter and my grandchildren. I am thankful for my son whose character and conduct make him an honor to his family. I am thankful for my daughter-in-law who fulfills ever hope and desire a father could have for a son.

Today, my heart is filled with thanksgiving to the One Who gave me life, to the One Who gave me love, to the One Who gave me everything for which today I give thanks. My heart is filled with thanksgiving to the One True and Great God, Jesus Christ.

And, oh, would you please pass the cornbread dressing before it's all gone. Thank you!

And for your life and for your health, today and every day, exercise your mind, your soul and your spirit with the exercise of gratitude. You will grow in your capacity as a person, your health will improve and you will bless those around you. Remember, gratitude, like ingratitude, is a choice.