

# James L. Holly, M.D.

## Thanksgiving Day: The Health of Gratitude

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Your Life Your Health

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Few things are as fundamental to good health as gratitude expressed in thanksgiving. In Scripture the story is told of ten men who were healed of a dreaded disease when they expressed faith by following instructions given to them. Yet, only one of the ten felt gratitude and turned and gave the Lord thanksgiving for health. No matter who you are and no matter what your health or condition, you have much for which to be thankful today. Your health will improve simply by discovering what you have to be thankful for and by your expressing your gratitude to others.

Today, as my family travels to celebrate thanksgiving with my 90-year-old Mother; we will travel roads whose very curves and hills bring joyful memories each of which evokes in us gratitude. We will laugh and hug one another. Great-grandmother, grandmother, mother all rolled into one will be celebrated for continuing the tradition of mother's dumplings and pecan pie. Great-grandfather, grandfather and father gone for two years will be loved and remembered, bringing both joy and sadness, both borne of gratitude.

We will hold hands and for the 43<sup>rd</sup> time sing, *America the Beautiful*. We will be grateful for this great, wonderful and noble nation. The words which Katharine Lee Bates penned first in 1893 and refined until the final version was published in 1913, is our thanksgiving anthem. The words echo daily in my mind:

"O 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!

"O beautiful for pilgrim feet  
Whose stern, impassioned stress  
A thoroughfare for freedom beat  
Across the wilderness!  
America! America!  
God mend thine every flaw,  
Confirm thy soul in self-control,  
Thy liberty in law!

"O beautiful for heroes proved In liberating strife.  
Who more than self the country loved

And mercy more than life!  
America! America!  
May God thy gold refine  
Till all success be nobleness  
And every gain divine!...”

Whether native born, naturalized citizen, or permanent guest, everyone who breathe the air of freedom and opportunity which permeates this great land owes a debt of gratitude to those who made this freedom possible with their commitment and their sacrifice.

Today, my gratitude naturally flows from the heart of one who knows he has been:

- Blessed with more than he deserves,
- Given opportunities which he did not earn
- More successful than his abilities and efforts warrant
- Given a family which is straight out of a story book
- Given friends who add value to life
- Given by God the privilege of living in the greatest country in the world
- Given a life which demands gratitude and thanksgiving

In the same way that gratitude comes from a heart of humility; pride engenders demanding and ingratitude. The reality is that part of a healthy life is a grateful heart and at the root of much illness can be found pride, arrogance and bitterness. We have a choice; we can choose gratitude and life or bitterness and death. The choice is not a product of what we have, but of our heart.

### **Families Who Grieve on Thanksgiving Day**

I am grateful for my country today as I remember that there are over 3,000 American families and countless Iraqi families who, whether they celebrate this day or not, are as I am without the head of their family who has so often led them in worship at the time of a family meal together.

I remember the evocative words which I first heard in the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, but since have virtually memorized, in which President Abraham Lincoln consoled a mother with a nation’s gratitude. He said:

“Dear Madam, I have been show in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of th3 loved and lost,

and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom. (Letter to Mrs. Bixby, November 21, 1864)”

The records would subsequently be corrected as Mrs. Bixby had only two sons but lost them both, but that error neither changes her sacrifice nor the President’s sentiment. My personal gratitude and grief for those who have been lost is not conditioned upon any judgment of the conflict in which they died. It is only measured by the inestimable value of each human life which has been sacrificed and for the heartache of the parents, children and friends of each person who has died in service to this country. I could wish that each family could have been written, or could take as their own, the words quoted above, for these words imbues their loss with nobility and praise.

## **Gratitude and Health**

Can a grateful heart enhance your health? A growing body of research says, "Yes". Gratitude, as a conscious practice, offers a whole host of health benefits.

In the dark days of winter, surrounded by all the holiday hustle and bustle, we may feel out of sync with the merriment, and gratitude may seem elusive. Perhaps we believe our holidays are not so much like Norman Rockwell's perfection but more like the Simpson's chaos. In fact, in a small research study, only ten percent of American adults reported experiencing the emotion of gratitude "regularly and often" - so we have lots of gloomy company. The good news is we can give ourselves the joy we think others have by developing a practice of gratitude.

Why gratitude? A series of studies show gratitude promotes physical and emotional well-being, improves one's ability to cope with stress and bolsters positive interaction with others. Furthermore, research shows grateful individuals report having more energy and less physical complaints than their non-grateful counterparts! Positive emotions enhance heart health by interrupting the stress response caused by negative emotions. In short, the practice of gratitude offers a method for a more harmonious life.

## **Choosing Gratitude**

So, how do we choose gratitude? And, is it ok to “fake it”? Yes, because our emotions follow our thoughts; we can "act as if" we feel gratitude by concentrating our thoughts on things we are truly grateful for. In time, the real feeling of gratitude will follow. Our heart and our head will be in sync. As days turn into months, a shift in our thinking will occur, leaving us more peace-filled and content because we are focusing on the goodness in our life. And, typically, what we focus on becomes our reality.

Here are a few tips to get started:

- Set aside a little bit of time each day. Maybe you are a morning person, so first thing after you get dressed you give yourself 5 minutes to focus on gratitude.

- Night time works well for some - a few minutes at the end of the day to think about gratitude. Any time of day will do, just keep it consistent.
- Get a small notebook in which to record your gratitude thoughts. Writing your thoughts down helps them to stick. Writing also is a reflective activity - we have to think about it.
  - Make a short list (3 - 5 items) of things you are grateful for. Little things count - a lot. It can be something as every day as "I'm grateful for warm gloves," or "I'm grateful for my glass of hot cocoa with marshmallows," or "I'm grateful for knowing the sun is shining above these gray winter clouds."

Every time I am in a storm, with rain and cold surrounding me, I am thankful to know that my children and grandchildren are safe, warm and dry. I consciously thank God and I physically smile as I think of each of them nestle in their parents' arms and heart: safe, warm and dry.

The point is to think about what we are thankful for today. What small goodness surrounded us? So often we are hurried along through the day and the bad stuff gets a lot of our attention while the small, good things go unrecognized and unappreciated. In our gratitude journal, we are consciously noting the small good things and in doing so, we create awareness of gratitude.

- Write even when we don't feel like it. It's during down days that we need most to be reminded of the simple goodness in our life. If you're uninspired, read prior notebook entries. Sometimes just looking over our growing gratitude list helps us to shift our thinking to a more hopeful state of mind and brings to light things we can be grateful for even on a bad day.

By drawing gratitude into our life on a daily basis, we give ourselves an opportunity for improved health, both physically and mentally. We change our awareness of our world through this simple practice. One author wrote:

"Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. It turns problems into gifts, failures into successes, the unexpected into perfect timing and mistakes into important events. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow."

## **Science and Gratitude**

In recent years, many scientists have begun examining the links between religion and good health, both physical and mental. Now two psychologists are working to unlock the puzzle of how faith might promote happiness. Dr. Michael McCollough, of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, and Dr. Robert Emmons, of the University of California at Davis, say their initial scientific study indicates that gratitude plays a significant role in a person's sense of well-being.

McCullough and Emmons were curious about why people involved in their faith seem to have more happiness and a greater sense of well-being than those who aren't and decided to study the connections. After making initial observations and compiling all the previous research on gratitude, they conducted the Research Project on Gratitude and Thanksgiving. The study required several hundred people in three different groups to keep daily diaries. The first group kept a diary of the events that occurred during the day, while the second group recorded their unpleasant experiences. The last group made a daily list of things for which they were grateful.

The results of the study indicated that daily gratitude exercises resulted in higher reported levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, optimism and energy. Additionally, the gratitude group experienced less depression and stress, was more likely to help others, exercised more regularly and made more progress toward personal goals. According to the findings, people who feel grateful are also more likely to feel loved. McCullough and Emmons also noted that gratitude encouraged a positive cycle of reciprocal kindness among people since one act of gratitude encourages another.

In light of his research, McCullough suggests that anyone can increase their sense of well-being and create positive social effects just from counting their blessings.

Today, be grateful, even for the things you don't like because often it is our pain that we find that we are truly human. It is in tears that we express our caring and few things bring us as much health as genuine caring about others. Today be thankful. Call someone; tell them that you love them; tell them that you are grateful to God for them. Remember, it is your life and it is your health.