

GROWTH wisdom

GOODBYE WITH GRATITUDE



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"The ship of my life may or may not be sailing on calm and amiable seas. Stormy or sunny days, glorious or lonely nights, I maintain an attitude of gratitude."

– Maya Angelou

2021!

How does one say goodbye to you!

A year punctuated by merciless storm of trauma and loss, stubborn whirlpool of pain and grief – worse than the year before. A relentless barrage of adversities. Humankind as a whole felt stuck in a long dark tunnel that seems to have little hope for light. And yet what continues to stay alive and strong nonetheless is the unswerving human spirit of faith, hope, reverence for life, resilience, compassion, care and gratitude.

Gratitude, indeed. The **attitude of gratitude** is much more than just a popular catchy phrase. It is a blessing from Supreme Grace, and a gift we make to ourselves and others. It is a unique human virtue and capacity to notice what is **life-affirmative**. It is natural human will and ability for authentic appreciation and thankfulness, in good and dark times alike. The spirit of gratitude is an innate gift we all are born with.

It is natural and easy to feel appreciative and grateful in good times. And it is also natural and normal to feel anxious, sad, desperate, disappointed or even resentful through trying and traumatic times. We shouldn't shame ourselves if we feel so. Instead, acknowledge your feelings, and invoke a sense of gratitude for whatever life-circumstances you are faced with, for there is new wisdom and renewed strength to be found even in trying times.

The focus of this article is on practicing gratitude in dark times. Why? Because gratitude is one of the most meaningful personality attributes that helps us stay calm, maintain faith and hopefulness, and act with resilience and purposefulness. It is no hogwash. There is enough research evidence to suggest that a life-view and practice of gratitude improve immune system, reduces risk of inflammation and boosts health in an overall way. If not dramatically apparent, it definitely influences our physiological, and overall wellbeing in subtle positive ways.

The spirit and stance of gratitude adds to our positive psychological capital that we so need to sail through hard times and circumstances. An appreciative and grateful mindset inspires wisdom and strength to see beyond our struggles, and guides us to look for possibilities. Though all of us are innately gifted with this virtue, sometimes the spirit of gratitude remains hidden under layers of routine behavioural patterns, or deeper existential struggles. No need to lose heart. It is always possible for us to uncover our inner grateful disposition, consciously cultivate an appreciative eye, and learn to actively practice a grateful stance not just in everyday life, but as much

through dark times. Let us learn the ART of it.

Appreciate

Dr Viktor Frankl, the famous holocaust survivor and neuro-psychiatrist who founded **Logotherapy**, the psychotherapy of meaning, shared in his legendary book "Man's Search for Meaning" about some concentration camp inmates who transcended their own pain and misery, comforted others and gave away even "their last piece of bread".

How does one do that in punishing northern Europe winters, with starved and sick bodies, tattered clothes, frost-bitten feet, constant fear of death, and most hurtful of all – robbed off basic human dignity? Why and how does one maintain a spirit of compassion and generosity in such horrendous circumstances? To each their own reason and way. One thing though is universally true – when we are able to keep our **appreciative eye** open, we continue to see what is meaningful, possible and still working, even in the face of all the trials and tribulations.

In recent times, how many stories of compassion and generosity you and I have heard of migrant workers helping one another, even as they walked thousands of kilometers on empty stomachs, braving risk of dying to highway accidents, hunger, exhaustion or heat on the way. The human ocean of despair evoked compassion in many amongst us, and we stepped out of the safety of our homes to help as best as we could. Similar spirit of humanity inspired many people to transcend their fears and help those caught in the deadly second wave of corona.

While serving on ground, and later observing life in the ICU during my corona encounter, I noticed that each one, whether patient or staff, felt gratitude much more than any other emotion. Many patients recounted small or big joys and blessings of life, rather than worrying whether they would return home alive. All of us felt deep gratitude for the healthcare warriors, family, friends and just about everyone. And we counselled and motivated each other, forgetting our own pain.

Why! Because appreciating and building on **what is still working** has far stronger pull than regret over what has gone wrong.

How! Keeping **appreciate eye** open and continuing to see what life holds for us beyond what we are faced right now.

Let us pause and ponder

Think of a trying or difficult matter you are faced with. Something that is making you feel low on hope, clarity or strength. Take a pause. Breathe deep. Close eyes and contemplate within. Notice your one or more such value/strength/quality that you think will sail you through this situation. Notice the possibilities your inner guide is trying

to show. Not all of these may work. Nonetheless, for now, appreciate your special value/strength/quality and the inner guide. We will take this contemplation forward in the next section.

Re-View

How does one even appreciate what-is, leave alone seeing and savouring beauty in brokenness? It is our ability to review, reflect and reframe that helps us **see the yet un-seeable**. Albert Einstein wisely noted, "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it." To view a thing or matter well, we need to view it from many angles, and with fresh eyes every time. The word 'review' is better understood as re-view. As we re-view the same situation with appreciative eyes, and re-engage with a grateful mind and heart, we are able to focus on what is still working, notice the hidden prospect, and **re-frame** the problem as possibility.

Going back to the stories that Viktor Frankl shares of inmates' inner strength, I feel particularly moved and inspired by this one about **reverence for life**. One evening, a prisoner nudged his fellows out to the open grounds, when all that their broken and famished bodies needed was some rest and a ladle of watery soup. Those who came out witnessed a mesmerizing play of colours of sunset on a cloudy sky. Moved and awestruck, one prisoner sighed, "how beautiful the world would be!" Can you and I even imagine contemplating beauty of nature in such tragic circumstances! Yes. All humans can. If only we re-view.

Let us pause and ponder

Taking forward from previous section – Think of one person, living, dead or even fictional, whose resilience and wisdom inspires you. Imagine yourself to be this person, and re-view your situation. Re-think your options, even if sense of resourcelessness persists. What new perspective shows up? Still want more clarity. Imagine the ideal opposite that you would rather have in place of what you are stuck with. What do you see? What are your thoughts and feelings about it? Not all of this may make sense yet. Nonetheless, appreciate your ability to re-view and re-think. Let us take it forward in next section.

Transform

Keeping faith and maintaining a sense of hopefulness and gratitude, we are able to invoke our will-to-meaning, make a choice to face our circumstances, find meaning in suffering, and carve our way-forward, even when it feels as if we have hit the dead-end.

The other day I met a vegetable seller who lost a leg in a highway accident while walking home during the first lockdown. The sense of despair and destitute-ness that

the migrant worker brethren must have felt, when they were abandoned on the roads by a heartless system and society, is something you and I can't even begin to imagine. Yet the only stories that this gentleman had were of random kindness that some compassionate people extended. I held quiet space for him to give voice to his feelings, only to hear him say – "Behanji (sister), life is ultimately only as good or bad as you see it to be. It may try you in thousand punishing ways, but if there is even one thing to smile about every day, all is good." I was both awe-struck and awe-inspired. "But what about your leg?" I probed. "Ofcourse, sometimes I do feel bad. What matters though is that I am alive and able to work. If that is not good enough a reason to feel grateful, what else is." In that moment of humbling and gratitude, I got reminded of Meister Eckhart's words – "If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough."

Of all that this amazing human being inspired me with, one life-lesson I loved the most is that we all have the **power of choice to re-story** our life.

Let us pause and ponder

Taking forward from previous section – Imagine this ideal scenario has come true. Future-forward yourself and notice the mindset and action-steps you took to make it come true. Grasp this new self-narrative. Come back to present moment. Re-ignite that mindset. Yes, you already have it in you. Your unconscious just brought it to fore through visualization. Now re-engage with your situation with the new perspective, can-do mindset, and creative thinking capacity that you just uncovered and re-kindled. Get on with the action-map you just visualized. Your situation may not get resolved right away. Hold on to whatever tiny spark you see. Don't fight with your sense of despair. Instead offer it the company of your determined will. Keep going. The worthy positive change seeks you as much as you seek it. Remember to thank your transformative inner guide.

And allow me to close this article by underlining that embodying and exemplifying spirit of gratitude is our noble responsibility to our children, more than it is a positive personal attribute. If there is only one thing you could choose for your new year resolve, I suggest you commit to practice gratitude. I will share more about gratitude practice in a future article. For now, join me in saying goodbye to 2021 with gratitude for all that went well, and as much gratitude for what went wrong, for that too left us wiser, humbler and stronger.

"When the seasons shift, even the subtle beginning, the scent of a promised change, I feel something stir inside me. Hopefulness? Gratitude? Whatever it is, it's welcome."

– Kristin Armstrong

THE ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE IS MUCH MORE THAN JUST A POPULAR CATCHY PHRASE. IT IS A BLESSING FROM SUPREME GRACE, AND A GIFT WE MAKE TO OURSELVES AND OTHERS. IT IS A UNIQUE HUMAN VIRTUE AND CAPACITY TO NOTICE WHAT IS LIFE-AFFIRMATIVE. IT IS NATURAL HUMAN WILL AND ABILITY FOR AUTHENTIC APPRECIATION AND THANKFULNESS, IN GOOD AND DARK TIMES ALIKE. THE SPIRIT OF GRATITUDE IS AN INNATE GIFT WE ALL ARE BORN WITH.



THE SPIRIT AND STANCE OF GRATITUDE ADDS TO OUR POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL THAT WE SO NEED TO SAIL THROUGH HARD TIMES AND CIRCUMSTANCES. AN APPRECIATIVE AND GRATEFUL MINDSET INSPIRES WISDOM AND STRENGTH TO SEE BEYOND OUR STRUGGLES, AND GUIDES US TO LOOK FOR POSSIBILITIES.