

Resentful or Grateful?

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 16, 2025

There lived a wise rabbi in a small town in Poland, a widely respected and trusted recipient of myriad sorrows. The rabbi often heard similar concerns, “Why doesn’t he suffer like I do? Why does she not succumb to illness? Why is his marriage better than mine?” After a time, the rabbi became frustrated with these repeated laments. So, the rabbi devised a plan. He sent out word that the community would celebrate a special holiday. He then invited the town to bring their sorrows and troubles in a bag. The faith leader announced, “We will hang the bags on a large tree. Each villager will be allowed to exchange their troubles and go home with those of a neighbor.” The villagers filled with excitement as they anticipated trading their life for a lighter load. The holiday arrived and the villagers eagerly peered into one bag of sorrow after another. Then a strange thing happened: Each villager decided to go home with their own bag.¹

This Jewish wisdom tale offers a litany of lessons against ingratitude. I invite you to consider, how might your perspective change once you returned home grasping your own bag? The story highlights comparing ourselves to others; a common human endeavor that often leads to detriment and ingratitude. I offer this: Gratitude becomes a way of interacting with the world; it becomes a way of being. Rabbi Shefa Gold writes, “Gratefulness is not a feeling; it’s a practice.”² Our culture is inundated with ingratitude. How can we change our ingrained perspective? What is the enemy of gratitude? I offer three reflections that are by no means comprehensive.

“Comparison is the thief of joy,” wrote President Theodore Roosevelt. I cannot feel joyful and thankful if I focus on my own inadequacies. We are enculturated not to focus on the abundance of blessings that we have, but on the attainments of others. We unconsciously do this, not appreciating our own loving companions, beautiful gardens, good health, or secure

¹ *Doorways to the Soul* edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain “The Tree of Sorrows” pgs 71-72

² “Gratefulness as the Foundation of Practice” by Rabbi Shefa Gold

employment. We focus our attention on other's monetary gains, familial connections, tangible items, and abundant friends. Comparison breeds envy, disappointment, and feelings of inadequacy. It can make us resentful. It breeds ingratitude. Yet we all do it.

Our second reflection on the enemy of gratitude: We have an ingrained focus on the negative. When we encounter good experiences, whether praise, uplifting emotions, accolades, love, or achievements, the corresponding feelings of joy and excitement and pride slowly begin to fall to the wayside. When bad things happen, things that tear at our spirits, we hold on to these emotions. We ruminate and ruminate in seemingly endless litany of hardship. Psychologist Thomas Gilovich offers an example of tailwinds and headwinds. Imagine riding a bike into fierce wind. We struggle and struggle. Perhaps we feel frustration or even resentment to the natural world and how it seems poised against us. Then, we turn around. The wind is at our backs. We are no longer overexerting ourselves. At first, it feels like a blessing and a relief. Soon, however, we forget about the blessing of the tailwinds, and simply focus on the journey, still feeling echoes of resentment whispered within. Gilovich writes, "Successes disappear but failures lurk."³

Finally, we remain largely ignorant of the troubles of others. This time, we focus on ourselves. We focus on our own sorrow, our own anxiety, our own loneliness. As such we lose sight of our neighbors, our coworkers, our friends, even our enemies. We forget that they each hold their own litany of struggles and hardships within. We forget to inquire, we forget to offer compassion, we forget to offer concern. We are not the only ones that suffer. It is an inherent part of the human condition.

Months ago, I sat on my couch, journal poised for notes, listening to a podcast of Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield. Amidst the many notes I jotted down while receiving Buddhist insights and wisdom, I starred one particular phrase: "act beautifully without a connection to the

³ "The Enemies of Gratitude" an interview with Thomas Gilovich on the Hidden Brain podcast

result.” We are called to do good in this world, not in anticipation of receiving anything in return, but because it is a beautiful and gracious way to live. To me this is an embodiment of grateful living. We are appreciative of the abundant blessings in our lives, so we no longer engage with the world in self-centered, ungrateful ways. We do good out of the gratitude in our hearts.

Each Thursday evening for several months, my husband and I traveled to a Buddhist monastery in Baltimore to receive teachings from a resident nun. One evening as the nun sat in front of her audience, draped in her red and yellow robe, she offered the following reflection:

“wherever we look, we see the kindness of others.”⁴ In grateful living we no longer see others as simply an object of comparison. Instead, we are able to celebrate others in our midst as joyful, appreciative, and unconditionally kind. We are grateful for and aware of the beauty and kindness of each and every individual in our midst.

How can we release ourselves from ingratitude, and aspire to live as these learned Buddhists? It takes intention and practice and honest reflection. I offer three suggestions that promote grateful living that are not nearly exhaustive.

First, we prioritize fostering connections with those around us. Ingratitude isolates us. The remedy, then, is to connect with others. Make friends at work. Make friends at the gym. Shifting a relationship away from ingratitude allows us to see others in a different light – they no longer serve as a source of comparison. We are no longer indifferent to their heartfelt struggles. This offers such potential for intimate relationships. Others become beings of which we could genuinely love deeply and unconditionally, and who could love us in return. We become profoundly grateful for this potential for compassion and this love and this genuine care of which we both receive and give in abundance.

⁴ Gen Kelsang Chogden

Second, in achieving grateful living, we release ourselves from comparison. Lean into gratitude. Be thankful for just what you have at any particular moment. No longer create feelings of inadequacy or of “not good enough.” No longer grasp what others have. You see a friend who has great wealth. You wish you had enough money to spend frivolously. But you realize, “I don’t need excessive wealth. I have enough.” You see a partner whose job offers profound meaning, and you wish you could change careers. But then you realize, “I can find meaning elsewhere.” It no longer matters what others have; and, indeed, we become grateful that they have such security and love in their lives, just as we wish to have in ours. Anger, bitterness, and resentment slip away as we foster a deep and loving relationship of reciprocity and genuine well-being. I think of a note I took while on retreat, writing in all caps: “Don’t seek the minister you want to be. Cherish the minister you are.” What if we each felt within our beings an appreciation for just who we are in any particular moment?

Third, focus on gratitude practices. Neuroscientist Andrew Huberman writes that the two most effective gratitude practices are to receive gratitude and to observe someone else receive gratitude.⁵ We place ourselves in a position to humbly receive thanks; and to fully live into this offering as a true blessing. This seems to be out of our hands and dependent on those around us, but it is not. We can be the ones to offer gratitude and as such enhance the lives of myriad individuals all around us. “We act beautifully without attention to results” and offer appreciation in abundance. Thank you for offering me compassion. Thank you for sharing your cake with me. Thank you for being you.

I offer another gratitude practice that has been deemed far more helpful than a gratitude list. In a standard gratitude list, we have typical, though of course not universal, responses, “I am grateful for my husband. I am grateful for this meal. I am grateful for a joke I heard today.” Yet, as part of one particular study, participants were asked, instead of focusing on the presence of a positive event, to reflect on how life would be in its absence. What if we had never met our spouse? What if we didn’t have a meal to share? What if laughter was not a part of our days?

⁵ “Everyone Is Practicing Gratitude Wrong!” by Andrew Huberman

We imagine all of the ways our lives could be decidedly worse – lonely, isolated, hungry, sad. We would not have the love, companionship, joy, laughter, and abundance we now treasure deeply.⁶ I reflect, what if I never found the Unitarian Universalist faith? If I had never gone to seminary? If I had never met my husband? What would my life be like then? These “what ifs” lead to profound appreciation and positivity. Our lives are truly beautiful.

How can we bring gratitude into our spiritual lives? For me it is a daily practice. I begin each prayer with a recitation of my gratitude, both large and small. I see this as more significant than a gratitude list, as I do not simply reflect upon this goodness to myself, but lift up my appreciation to a blessed, unknowable essence of divine love. I am grateful for my God and for my fleeting yet sacred existence. There are meditations on gratitude that serve to guide us to deeply appreciate the people and experiences that bring us joy and meaning. This is not experienced topically but deep within our subconscious through practices of focus and deep breathing. Furthermore, in receiving and offering sincere and heartfelt gratitude, we embody the interdependent web of existence. We slip outside of isolation by realizing that both the joy and sorrow we offer ripples throughout society, reaching each finite being, and realize that we help heal both the world and our spirits through practices of gratitude. Prayer, meditation, interconnection – gratitude is a sacred, holy, and divine practice.

So may we leave these sacred and hallowed walls with words of gratitude echoing in our ears. May our spirits and souls and bodies and minds know peace and joy and companionship as we embody lives of deep and abiding thanks. May we know, not comparison, but profound and enduring reciprocity of love and compassion in each relationship we foster. What about the wisdom of the rabbi? If we are going to envy someone else’s luck, looks, success, partner, or wealth, would we really change places with them? Would we really want their bag of troubles in exchange for ours? The more time we spend feeling that life is unfair and that others have it easier, the less we notice the beauty of our own life. So may we know, yes, beloved, you are enough. Yes, beloved, you are worthy of joy. And may we respond with a passion for life. “Act

⁶ “Don’t count your blessings. Do this instead.”

beautifully without a connection to the result,” the Buddhist teacher offered. “Wherever we look, we see the kindness of others.” May we know that, though successes disappear and failures lurk, there is wonder and awe in abundance, and that with intention, we cultivate and sustain this beauty within. So may it spread and spread and spread, through our words and deeds and actions, as we touch the world with our gratitude.

May it be so, and Amen