

POCKET POWER

GRATITUDE



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Hazelden

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GRATITUDE

"My name is George, and I'm a grateful alcoholic!"

A statement like this might sound strange to the ears of a newcomer to A.A. How can anyone be grateful for being an alcohol or other drug addict, a compulsive overeater, or the victim of any form of bondage that can make our lives a living hell? Surely this is some kind of exaggeration.

Yet, when we look into the eyes of such a speaker, we can see truth there. George *is* grateful. And that gratitude seems quite astounding. (It even astounds George at times!)

What is gratitude? Where do we get it? And why is it so important? The questions are easier to ask than to answer.

Gratitude is the admission that we are not self-sufficient and don't need to be — we can get help from outside ourselves. We become grateful when we give up trying to be self-sufficient and accept help. Our very lives depend on continuing to remember what we are grateful for, and why.

Sound familiar? It should. That is the meaning of the first three Steps.

I CAN'T; GOD CAN; I'LL LET GOD DO IT!

Gratitude is the result of the Twelve Steps in action. Why is gratitude so important? For starters, it's a constant reminder that we are not alone.

Gratitude: The Antidote to Ego

Any follower of the Twelve Steps learns that the main problem we must face is living with a diseased self that is totally out of control. Bill W. wrote about this.

Selfishness — self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles. . . . The alcoholic (user) is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though he (or she) usually doesn't think so. Above everything, we alcoholics (users) must be rid of this selfishness. We must, or it kills us! God makes that possible.

When we forget gratitude, we fall back into the trap of that diseased self. And we all do it! Self-centeredness does not die easily.

Most of us were raised to be self-reliant and independent. We weren't supposed to owe anything to anyone. We could make it on our own.

In the process, we have gotten ourselves into some pretty big messes.

We are the ones who, when driving into an unfamiliar town, insist on finding our own way without stopping to ask directions. (And end up late, or lost, or both.)

We are the ones who put new pieces of equipment together without reading the instructions because we've "done this sort of thing a million times." (And it either won't work or creates a monumental mess which costs us dearly in time and money.)

We are the ones who try to direct other people's lives, even though we are totally helpless with our own. (And the consequence is usually shame and embarrassment for us and pain for them.)

Remarkably, we do all this and never notice what fools we've been. We are quite capable of making the same mistakes all over again, and very likely will. This is "self-will run riot" as Bill W. called it, and, if left untreated, can be fatal.

One of the best ways to prevent this from happening is to cultivate an attitude of gratitude. When we are grateful, we can no longer be selfish. It is a spiritual impossibility. Why? Because gratitude is the admission we are not self-reliant; it is the exact opposite of ego.

What are the earmarks of ego and self-will? False pride is one. Keeping up a good front is a constant temptation for us. Never mind that we are frightened, frustrated, and lonely at times; we do not want the world to know.

Self-pity is another symptom of ego. People seldom pay as much attention to us as we would like, and when things aren't going our way, who else can feel as sorry for us as we can? In no time at all, depression has set in and we are behind a high wall of self-pity.

Our false pride and self-pity inevitably reduce us to helplessness. We tug and pull with resentment and hostility, striving to prove our independence like defiant children. But while they cry and throw tantrums, we "grown up" children react by sulking and feeling depressed. Most assuredly we are lonely. Quite often a moment's inventory will show the problem is ego; and when we are caught up in ego, we are on our own.

The Twelve Step program teaches us to surrender. We cannot make it on our own. We couldn't when we were using — whatever it was we chose to use — and we can't now. Bill W. reminds us that "we are not cured. . . . What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition." Daily contact with our Higher Power is our only

hope. Gratitude is the most concrete way of acknowledging that fact.

Gratitude Is an Inventory of Assets

Sponsors often advise us to make a "gratitude list" as an antidote to the blues. The idea isn't new to us; people have been "counting their blessings" for ages. And because it is such an old-fashioned and simple idea, we might look down on it today. Experience suggests we should not.

Quite often, our moments of gloom and trouble are made more difficult by the sheer weight of problems we keep seeing in front of us. Without actually meaning to, we are doing an inventory of all the *impossibilities* that surround us, and we are defeated before we begin.

"I'd apply for the job, but I don't have enough experience to qualify me; and even though they say experience is not needed, I can't get a good recommendation from my last boss — not after the way I acted. And since I can't get a new job, I can't get shoes for the children, which means they won't be able to go to school, and then my wife will have to stay home from her job because we sure can't afford babysitters." And on and on it goes. We don't mean to be negative — far from it! It's just that our

problems are so big, so visible, and so paralyzing we can't do a thing to help ourselves.

An attitude of gratitude always points us at what's going *right* for us, not what's going wrong. It may seem rather too optimistic to say, "God's in His heaven, all's right with the world," especially when some really *wrong* things are happening to us. But on the other hand, choices for action are made on the basis of possibilities, not impossibilities! I can't take a trip if all I know is the car is broken down, there's no cash for gasoline, and I can't find a map; besides, I don't know how to drive in the first place! Gratitude looks at what I *can* do. It helps me to sum up my assets and get in touch with my strengths rather than my weaknesses.

There may be many other ways to make that trip. What assets do I have? I have my health, for one. If worse comes to worse, I can walk. I have eyes and ears that work reasonably well. There's a good chance that I can follow directions. I have my wits about me and can make responsible decisions. *That's* a real blessing! And friends, let's not forget we truly are not alone. We have sponsors on whom we can rely, friends who will steady us, good people to whom we can turn for advice and help.

All these belong in our inventory of assets. And even though we are aware of problems,

difficulties, and impossibilities in our lives, another source of gratitude could be these very problems that hurt so. One piece of advice that has helped me comes from the poet Noel McInnis, who wrote,

Be loving
of your empty times
as well as of your full ones.
No one has ever had a filling
without an emptying
to give it room.

When our friend George says, "I'm a grateful alcoholic," his words make sense, for they are a reminder that this disease the world considers such a disaster was really the making of him. He learned truth about himself, and found new faith and confidence in his Higher Power — something he very much doubts could have happened without this "disaster" called alcoholism.

Although we certainly don't want to hang on to old character defects, sometimes our liabilities are assets in disguise. They can be valuable tools if we allow God to show us how to use them. What we need to do is cultivate positive ways of thinking and feeling to transform or replace old, negative habits.

It's hard to see how a character defect such as resentment can be an asset. It's more like a cancer that eats away our inner beings. Yet, it too can be a teacher. When Bill W. talks about making a list of our resentments, he says we must get rid of them or they'll kill us. But he also points out that they are but symptoms of a deeper disease, usually associated with our need for security or self-esteem or companionship. When resentment occurs, we can use it like a thermometer. It registers our spiritual temperature and alerts us that something is wrong. Without resentment, we would be blind to our deeper faults. With it, we can check our relationships and see how healthy they really are. We can look again at our self-image and see why we are feeling inadequate and vulnerable. We can review our relationships and test them for unhealthy dependencies, jealousy, and possessiveness. Resentment is the red flag that warns us something else is wrong. It can be very useful.

Taking an inventory of our assets puts us in touch with our strengths and enables us to act. The most painful part of personal problems is the feeling of helplessness they can create. "I'm trapped; I have nowhere to turn; there is no way out." This kind of thinking is an open door to a drink or a pill or a binge at the ice cream parlor.

"I hurt so bad, I must replace my hurt with a good feeling." The trouble is, the "good" feeling is an illusion, and the "bad" feelings of guilt and failure which are sure to follow hurt even more. The helplessness is compounded and we are weaker than before.

A gratitude list looks at strengths, and points the way to possibilities instead of impossibilities. It provides us with building blocks rather than mental blocks or stumbling blocks. It is the key to action. Without a clear understanding of real possibilities, there can be no action.

Gratitude Is in the Present Tense

Practicing gratitude keeps us in the present moment. One of the most basic lessons of our program is living one day at a time. We hear this simple piece of advice more often than any other in our meetings, and for good reason. None of us can handle a lifetime of regret or remorse. It's beyond us. Countless swearings on Bibles, or on the heads of our children, or on whatever we think of as most sacred in our lives, has produced absolutely nothing. Oh, some of us learned to hang on and "white-knuckle" it, sometimes for years and years, but the experience was excruciating, and most of us found we couldn't keep it up.

Then we were told, "Do it one day at a time." This simple advice sounded idiotic at first. It was a trick of the mind, it was a mental game, and it was cheating with common sense. We knew what they *really* meant. The real truth of the matter was we were being sold abstinence and sobriety for the rest of our long, long lives.

Only this isn't playing a mind game. It is not just a trick of thinking — it is a basic fact of existence. Reality is not static; it is constantly flowing. Tomorrow becomes yesterday through the portal of today. Tonight becomes this morning through the same door. The future becomes the past in one brief moment of time — so tiny it is indivisible. The only *real* moment is *this* moment. The only time that counts is *now*. If we can deal with this moment responsibly, there is no other moment we need to concern ourselves with. The only time we can make a decision and take any action at all is *now*.

When I practice gratitude, I look at myself now. I review what has happened, and consider what may be coming, but I do it in the present tense. I learn from the past; I propose possible ways to go in the future; *I act now*.

Gratitude comes from knowing who I am, what I am, and, therefore, what I can be, with the help of my Higher Power. It protects me from the ravages of helplessness and self-pity; it

reminds me of the strengths I have to meet my present moment. But best of all, it is a sure sign that I know I am not alone.

Thank God, I'm Not Alone!

Though we may not think of it this way, gratitude is an admission that we are not operating on willpower any longer. However, stubbornness persists. Self-reliance, that old habit of which we were once so proud, asserts itself. Self-will is the order of the day, and instantly we become powerless all over again. Our very refusal to reach out for help, either from our sponsor or from another friend, blocks the channel through which our Higher Power can help us. In loneliness and isolation we sicken and die. We dare not go off on our own.

I was fortunate to learn this crucial lesson early in my recovery. For several months I had sat in the back row of my meetings listening to people tell of the things God was doing for them that they could not do for themselves. I was happy for them but exempted myself. God would help them but not me: I was unworthy of God's help.

Then one evening my loneliness and self-pity grew so great I could stand myself no longer. I looked around the room, desperate for some

companionship, and realized I did not know a single person in the room. I had driven forty miles from my home town to seek the safety of total anonymity in a group in a large city. I had found it, and my anonymity was now killing me.

Then I recognized someone; I didn't know his name, but I trusted him, and reached out to grab him by the arm. "Would you sit next to me tonight?" I asked, fearful of his rejection and amazed at my own boldness. Much to my surprise, and infinite gratitude, he said, "Of course." He kept me company all through that painful meeting and took me out for coffee afterward, giving me a chance to pour out my fear and anger and frustration. He listened and understood and cared about what I was telling him. As I drove home that night, a new feeling found its way to me: hope. And it was based on the incredible notion that a total stranger had simply loved me. I found myself marveling, "If he can love me, why can't God?" The miracle of my recovery began when I found the courage to let a human being sit next to me and love me.

Since that night I have used that same path to find God many more times. When I have lost my direction, when I am confused, angry, frightened, caught up in self-will, I seek out a friend and sit beside him. I open up my heart

and let him see what's going on inside me. The result is always the same; I find my God once again.

Here is the reason for our gratitude. We are not alone. We need never be alone again. We are being helped to live our lives, one day at a time, by other people and by our Higher Power. They are doing for us what we could never do alone for ourselves.

No wonder a moment's reflection on all we have to be grateful for does us so much good. It puts us squarely in the hands of our Higher Power.

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