

Exploring the Link between Gratitude and Attention by Gregg Krech

As I sat at my computer this Thanksgiving day, I went to print out my "bowl of gratitude" (the bowl of quote scrolls I roll and tie with a ribbon as my offering to a Thanksgiving meal). While searching for the quotes in my computer I found this article.

Gratitude is like a metaphorical salve on an open wound. The wound being our troubled world. Laughter can vent pent up feelings, but gratitude is the ointment that soothes the soul.

What has this got to do with Hospital Clowning? Besides the obvious place of making us feel good, it is impossible to be grateful and depressed at the same time – it is a practice of an *Attitude of Service* - it helps keep our *Attitude of Service* out of our ego pocket.

I thought this article fits our human dilemma today - our terror alerts, our minds staggering around too much information, and too many opinions. How do we deal with all this, and keep from living in a state of fear, paranoia and hopelessness?



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Following is the article by Gregg Krech from the Ido Institute's Journal for Purposeful Living.

Your eyes are still closed when you hear the beeping of your digital alarm clock go off on the small wooden table next to your bed. Without opening your eyes your arm naturally reaches over to press the black "snooze alarm" button - a motion you repeat just about every morning. But this morning nothing happens. The beeping continues – and is getting a bit irritating. So now you open your eyes and watch your index finger press hard on the correct button. More beeping. You hit another switch which should just turn the alarm off completely. Still more beeping. In a fit of frustration you finally pull out the cord from the electrical outlet. Ahh.... quiet at last. Perhaps it's time for a new clock.

A few minutes later you find yourself about to get up from a brief stop at the toilet when . . . the toilet won't flush. "I'm really starting off the day in great shape," you think. You get dressed and start the coffee maker to give you a bit of a jolt, but when you come back to the kitchen there is hot water and coffee grounds all over the table. Now you're beginning to think that this is a bad dream and you must still be in bed. But it's not over. You open the door to grab the morning paper and quickly check the news before leaving for work but . . . no paper! You look to the left, to the right. Did someone take your paper? Did they forget to deliver it? No time to speculate further. Got to get to work. As you drive down the highway to work, you're thinking about how rough the morning has been when suddenly . . . the person driving in the next lane changes lanes – cutting you off and almost running you off the road. When you arrive at work your heart is still racing and you take every opportunity to share your "extraordinary" morning with your colleagues. What a relief it will be when this day is over!

If you've ever had a day when everything seems to go wrong you can probably sympathize with the subject of the story above and it appears understandable that he or she would feel frustrated and perhaps have a sense that the world is a pretty unfriendly place.

To begin to understand the relationship between attention and gratitude we need to turn the story around. Imagine a day when ...

- the alarm works perfectly
- the toilet flushes just the way it's supposed to
- the coffee maker produces a hot, aromatic cup of coffee
- your morning paper is waiting outside your door
- no other car crashes into you or cuts you off on the way to work

Now what happens? Do you arrive at work feeling overwhelmed with gratitude – with an attitude of appreciation for all the people and things that are supporting you on this glorious morning? Probably not.

Habits of Attention

Most likely your attention has identified and attached itself to some other problems. If there's no particular problem going on that morning, your mind may ruminate about something that happened in the past or anticipate some difficulty that may occur in the future. It is common for our attention to focus on the problems and difficulties we are facing because we have to pay attention to such challenges in order to handle them. Unfortunately we can develop a "habit of attention" in which we fail to notice the many things that are supporting our existence – our health, our work, our family, and our efforts to accomplish the things we want to do. The more this "habit of attention" has developed, the less likely we will be able to experience gratitude.

I first made the connection between Gratitude and Attention when I discovered a Japanese method of self-reflection called *Naikan*. The word *Naikan* means "inside looking" or "inside observation." This method of self-reflection is primarily based on three questions:

1. What have I received from others?
2. What have I given to others?
3. What troubles and difficulties have I caused others?

As you can, see these questions are very simple. And when I participated in a 14 day retreat in Japan in 1989, these questions became the framework for me to reflect on my entire life. I reflected

on each stage of my life and on every person who had playing a meaningful role in my life since my birth (my mom, dad, grandparents, teachers, friends, colleagues, ex-girlfriends, etc. . .) When I stepped back from my life and began quietly reflecting on everything that had been done for me and given to me (question #1) I was surprised and overwhelmed by how much I had received in my life. The day I left that retreat I felt more cared for, loved and supported than ever before. It was as if I had a blood transfusion and gratitude was now simply flowing through my veins and arteries. I had learned to notice what I had not been noticing. Through self-reflection I had learned about attention and gratitude.

That two week retreat inspired me to return to Japan many times to investigate, in more depth, the Japanese art and practice of self-reflection. I have yet to discover a more profound method for cultivating gratitude and reshaping our attitude and understanding of our lives.

Let's consider three of the greatest obstacles to gratitude. They are:

Self-preoccupation

We are so preoccupied with our own thoughts, feelings, needs and bodies that we have little attention left over to notice what is being done to support us. You might think of your attention as a flashlight. As long as you shine the light on your problems, difficulties, and aches and pains, there is no light available for seeing what others are doing for you.

Expectation

When I turn the switch on my bedside lamp I assume the light will go on as it (almost) always does. Once I've come to expect something, it doesn't usually get my attention. My attention isn't really grabbed until my expectation isn't met (the light bulb doesn't work). So my attention tends to gravitate away from what I expect and towards what I don't expect.

Entitlement

The more I think I've earned something or deserve something, the less likely I am to feel grateful for it. As long as I think I'm entitled to something I won't consider it a gift. But when I am humbled by my own mistakes or limitations, I am more likely to receive what I am given with gratitude and a true sense of appreciation for the giver as well as the gift.

To experience a sense of heartfelt gratitude we most overcome these three obstacles. Self-reflection provides a path for doing so. It allows us to pause to appreciate what is being given to us rather than focus on what we don't have. It allows us to consider the countless objects and human beings that made it possible for me to get to work or turn on my computer. Through self-reflection, we can come to see everything we have, and are, as gifts. And through self-reflection we begin to train our attention to notice what we haven't noticed.

It is rare to meet a person whose life is full of gratitude. Many people don't truly appreciate what they have until it is gone. And having lost the opportunity to be grateful, they simply find another reason to be disappointed.

If you wish to cultivate gratitude you must develop a practice. Without practice, there is no development of skill - only an idea. You cannot become a grateful person just by thinking that you want to be grateful. Sometimes we are engaged in a practice, but we don't think of it as a practice. For example— complaining.

Complaining is a wonderful practice if you wish to cultivate disappointment, resentment and self-pity. Have you ever tried this practice? It is quite effective. Each time you complain you get better at complaining. It is like learning to play an instrument.

Most of us are better at the practice of complaining than at the practice of self-reflection. We have developed a habit of attention – to notice the troubles others cause us. And we have developed a habit of speech -- to complain to others about these troubles. But to cultivate gratitude, we need to develop a new habit of attention – to notice the concrete ways in which the world supports us each day. And we can then develop a new habit of speech – expressing our gratitude to others.

So start your practice today. Notice. Reflect. Express. Hey, what's that sound? Oh, it's the alarm on my watch reminding me I have an appointment. What a nice feature. It frees up my mind to attend to other things. Thanks, watch. And thanks to my wife Linda who gave it to me. And thanks to all the people who made it. And thank goodness my finger works well enough to shut it off. Time to move on.

This article was reprinted with permission from the ToDo Institute and originally appeared in the [Thirty Thousand Days: A Journal for Purposeful Living](#), a publication of the ToDo Institute. The ToDo Institute is a non-profit educational center that promotes Japanese methods of mental health focusing on gratitude, purpose and attention. For further information visit their website at www.todoinstitute.org, or email todo@together.net

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For Shobi, this is a great everyday practice for staying in present time, but it also a matter of keeping my head *screwed* on securely when I clown. If I'm full of hopelessness, self doubt and complaints, it is hard for me to sustain being spontaneous, alert and in the moment – so I can connect, be aware and respond to others in the spirit of service.* In other words, it contracts my heart so the flow of the Universe through me has a narrower path of access to my *Inner Director*. Of course if the Universe really wants to get my attention , I will get *hit over the head*- it happens to all of us - I think we call it an accident.

With gratitude and attention I am talking about being the humble servant of the Universe going out on rounds -- be it in a hospital, responding to a tragedy or just going shopping. And attention to intention is an important skill to learn in any healing profession including hospital/caring clowning. The practice of *Attention* is staying in the present moment and developing a secure road for your unconditional love to travel. If you have been working as a clown in a hospital for a while, you are well aware of this. Stage performers know this. When your mind/emotional self wanders away from the present moment, you lose your audience.

Attention like gratitude is a muscle: the more you use it and keep it fit, the better it works for you. When your attitude is negative, it is your gratitude muscle that surely needs attention. I know this from experience. This is something that I will work on the rest of my life as Shobhana and as Shobi Dobi.

* Please read "Exploring Our Intention in Service" by Frank Ostaseski, www.hospitalclown.com/WorkshopHandouts.htm.