



THE VALUE OF
EXPERIENCING AND
EXPRESSING

GRATITUDE

By Vaughn
E. Worthen,
Ph.D.

Associate
Director,
Counseling and
Career Center,
Brigham Young
University

Sixteen-year-old Louisa Mellor Clark was the oldest living child of James and Mary Ann Mellor, who crossed the plains in the Martin handcart company. Louisa recorded the following incident in her journal:

“The first snowstorm left about two feet of snow on the ground, and we began to feel very nervous. We had to wade through more streams, and sometimes up to our waists, and when we got through our clothes would freeze on us until a great many gave up and many died, mostly old people. At last the snow got to be four and five feet deep and often we had to shovel a road before we could move. Thus our traveling was very slow and our provisions nearly gave out.

“My mother, still being weak, finally gave up and said she could go no further. The

company could not wait for her, so she bade my father goodbye and kissed each one of the children Godspeed. Then my mother sat down on a boulder and wept. I told my sister, Elizabeth, to take good care of the twins and the rest of the family, and that I would stay with mother. I went a few

expressing gratitude can help all of us—whatever our situation—lead fuller, richer lives.

What Is Gratitude?

Gratitude is a positive *experience* that comes from recognizing gifts or blessings and feeling

AND EXPRESSING GRATITUDE CAN HELP ALL OF US LEAD FULLER, RICHER LIVES

yards away and prayed with faith that God would help us, that He would protect us from wolves, and that He would let us reach camp. As I was going back to where my mother was sitting I found a pie in the road. I picked it up and gave it to mother to eat. After resting awhile we started on our journey, *thanking God for the blessings*. A few miles before we reached camp we met my father coming out to meet us. We arrived in camp at 10:00 p.m.

“Many times after that mother felt like giving up and quitting, but then she would remember how wonderful the Lord had been to spare her so many times, and offered a prayer of gratitude instead. So she went on her way rejoicing while walking the blood-stained path of snow.”¹

Mary Ann Mellor’s expressions of gratitude were not based simply on finding a life-sustaining pie but on the recognition that God cared about her and her family and provided for them. That recognition gave her a deep sense of God’s grace, and her gratitude became a daily expression of faith in Him.

Gratitude is receiving significant attention in the emerging field of positive psychology. As a licensed psychologist, I have extensively researched the use of gratitude interventions in promoting well-being. I find that introducing these interventions into counseling at appropriate times is helpful in treating depression, reducing anxiety, and introducing a more positive focus to troubled relationships. Experiencing and

thankful. It is also an *attitude*, a way of perceiving life, in which individuals are willing to receive and acknowledge the beneficial actions of others on their behalf. Those who consistently display such an attitude are said to have a grateful *disposition*. Gratitude is also a *habit* that can be cultivated, causing one to focus on the blessings of life. Finally, gratitude can be defined as a *coping response* to challenging or difficult circumstances.

Gratitude can have a profound effect on perspective, completely determining or altering the way we look at an experience. Two weeks after being called as a bishop, I underwent foot surgery. I spent the next year and a half on crutches before I completely recovered. When I became

To pioneer Mary Ann Mellor, a life-sustaining pie was more than an answer to prayer. It was the realization that God cared about her and her family, and gave her a sense of gratitude for His grace.





PRACTICING GRATITUDE CAN LEAD TO OPTIMISM, VITALITY, HAPPINESS, A SENSE

The long recuperation period following my surgery was at times discouraging, but I felt infused with energy when I took time to reflect on the blessings I had received.

discouraged by my disability and the demands on my time and energy, I often found comfort by reflecting on my blessings. I felt grateful for counselors who literally “carried the load”—my scriptures, bags, and other materials. I appreciated ward members who prayed for my recovery and sustained me by fulfilling their callings. I was grateful for priesthood blessings from my leaders, my counselors, and my father. I was thankful for my family’s support in both my calling and my employment. I felt great dependence on my Heavenly Father for help with all my challenges and experienced daily His grace and blessings.

Prophets Teach the Principle of Gratitude

Gratitude has been extolled as a virtue in nearly every culture throughout time. It is a core element of many religions and is central to Christianity. Both ancient and modern prophets have recognized and taught the importance of



THE NOBLEST OF VIRTUES

If ingratitude be numbered among the serious sins, then gratitude takes its place among the noblest of virtues.

“Despite the changes which come into our lives and with gratitude in our hearts, may we fill our days—as much as we can—with those things which matter most.”

President Thomas S. Monson, “Finding Joy in the Journey,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2008, 87.

gratitude. Scriptures counsel us to “give thanks” in everything (1 Thessalonians 5:18) and to arise daily with a heart “full of thanks unto God” (Alma 37:37). We are warned: “And in nothing doth man offend God, or against none is his wrath kindled, save those who confess not his hand in all things, and obey not his commandments” (D&C 59:21). Church leaders recognize and continually teach the importance of gratitude.

President Thomas S. Monson spoke of the power of gratitude when he stated, “We can lift ourselves, and others as well, when we refuse to remain in the realm of negative thought and

cultivate within our hearts an attitude of gratitude.”²

Elder Robert D. Hales of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has suggested that “in some quiet way, the expression and feelings of gratitude have a wonderful cleansing or healing nature. . . . Gratitude brings a peace that helps us overcome the pain of adversity and failure.”³ Truly, following the words of prophets to live with a sense of gratitude invites a spirit of happiness into our lives.

We Feel the Effects and Benefits of Gratitude

Current case studies and research show that cultivating and practicing gratitude can reduce symptoms in cases of mild to moderate depression and anxiety. Practicing gratitude can also lead to increases in optimism, vitality, happiness, a sense of well-being, and a greater satisfaction with life.⁴ Grateful people tend to generate more positive memories, reminding them of the good in their lives.⁵ Those with higher levels of gratitude are viewed as more empathetic and supportive, more forgiving, and more likely to assist others.⁶ Grateful people also report feeling less envious and more generous with their possessions. They thus enjoy better quality relationships.⁷

Gratitude also helps in coping with adversity. Those who practice it in times of adversity are

more likely to seek and find a “silver lining” in their experiences.⁸ Finally, those who try to feel greater levels of gratitude report fewer physical complaints, more time spent in physical exercise, and better sleep duration and quality.⁹

What Can We Do to Cultivate Gratitude in Ourselves and Others?

Even if we are not currently in the habit of feeling and showing gratitude, we can make it a way of life. Following are some ideas for recognizing blessings and expressing thanks.

●Keep a Gratitude Journal

Record daily or several times a week three to five blessings or “tender mercies” you have felt or experienced, such as good health, a positive relationship with someone, improvements, or lessons learned. Focus on describing the experiences, including recording your thoughts and emotions about them, rather than merely cataloguing them or analyzing them. Your purpose is to relive and savor those experiences, encouraging you to experience them more often.

●Make a Gratitude Visit

Think about someone who has been kind or has done something for you whom you have never properly thanked. Consider, for example, parents, grandparents, friends, teachers, coaches, and employers. Write that person a gratitude letter, being specific about the details of the kindness toward you and how it affected you. If possible, deliver it in person, sharing the contents and expressing your appreciation. Tell the person how and what you are doing now. This approach will not only enhance your own feelings of gratitude but it will also encourage the people you visit to continue in beneficial service to others, knowing that the service is gratefully received.

●Create a Gratitude Catalog

In addition to the journal described above,

Sharing with someone the specific details of how their kindness has affected you by sending a letter or making a visit lifts both the giver and receiver.



make a comprehensive list of all your blessings, many of which might also have appeared in your journal. After listing any of the obvious blessings that you may enjoy—such as health, family members, and the gospel—shift to “smaller” blessings, such as running water, electricity, flowers, and so forth. As part of this exercise, try to remember blessings that you didn’t previously recognize as blessings. For example, pain is a signal that something needs attention, perhaps in order to save a life. A hard experience can teach us patience and wisdom. A wrong committed by another toward us can teach us forgiveness.

OF WELL-BEING, A GREATER SATISFACTION WITH LIFE, MORE EMPATHY AND SUPPORT

●Eliminate Ungrateful Thoughts

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles wisely counseled, “No misfortune is so bad that whining about it won’t make it worse.”¹⁰ Identify and list your complaining and ungrateful thoughts, and replace them with grateful thoughts and problem-solving strategies. We are prone to be more grateful when we recall how others have contributed to our success and happiness and when we focus on positive action rather than passive complaining.

●Express Prayers of Gratitude

Regularly dedicate an entire prayer to your expressions of gratitude.¹¹ Be specific; go beyond the obvious. See how exhaustive you can be. Discover the truth in the lines “And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.”¹²

●Train Yourself to Use Gratitude Language

Make a habit of writing letters of appreciation. Say thank you frequently to your loved ones and also to cashiers, postal workers, and others who serve you in any capacity. As you interact with community and civil servants and workers, consider



your gratitude to the Lord by doing whatever you can to assist those less fortunate than you.

●Enjoy the Journey

As you set goals and strive to meet them, remind yourself of your progress even if you have not yet met them. For example, if your goal is to lose 25 pounds, celebrate the 10 you have lost by noting and reminding yourself of health improvements: lower blood pressure, greater energy, stronger muscles, more flexibility. If your goal is to complete reading the Book of Mormon this year, remind yourself of the many spiritual moments you experience, for example, as you read the magnificent sermon of King Benjamin.

●Learn the Art of Being Content

Paul declared, “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content” (Philippians 4:11). He further taught, “But godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6). It is tempting to complain and murmur when life is challenging and things don’t appear to be working out as we wish. We learn from Nephi in his great afflictions on his journey: “I did praise him all the day long; and I did not murmur against the Lord because of mine afflictions”

(1 Nephi 18:16). The people of Ammon “praised God even in the very act of perishing under the sword” (Alma 24:23). The act of thanking and praising has great power to help us endure and is one of the surest methods for increasing happiness. It

writing a letter of commendation to their supervisors, praising their work and expressing your appreciation.

●Recognize That Things Could Be Worse

Think of situations you are glad you don’t experience, such as famine, war, or debilitating illness. Think of circumstances you would not want to experience. Be grateful your life is not more difficult as you consciously work to improve it. Demonstrate

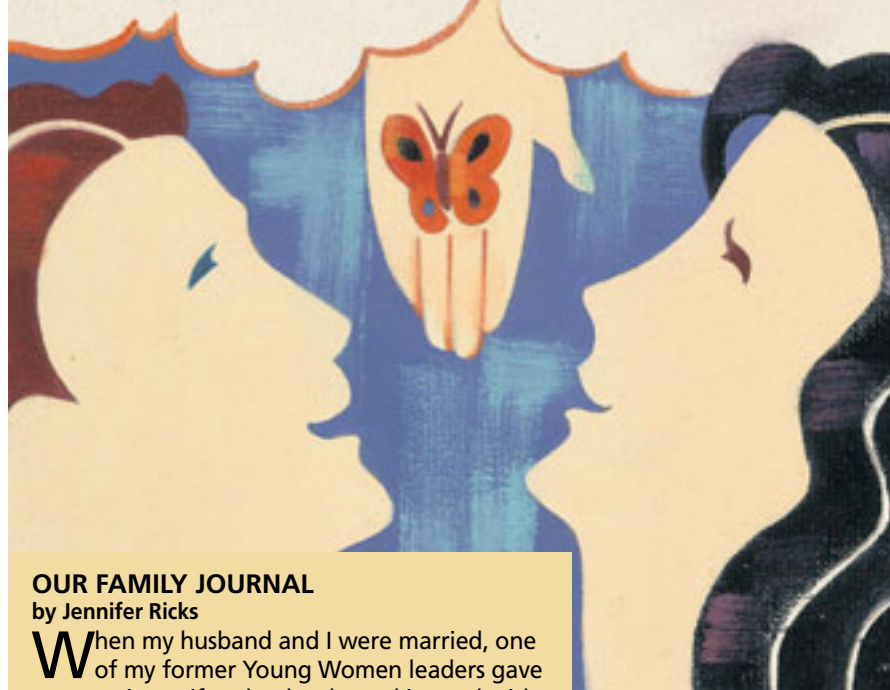
We tend to be more grateful when we focus on positive action, not on passive complaining.

THOSE WHO FEEL GREATER LEVELS OF GRATITUDE REPORT FEWER PHYSICAL COMPLAINTS.

is also a way to define our relationship with God, from whom all blessings flow.

God reminded the Israelites that He gave them “great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not, and houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not, when thou shalt have eaten and be full; then beware lest thou forget the Lord” (Deuteronomy 6:10–12). He has similarly blessed us. When we recognize His hand in all things we naturally desire to express thanks and praise. We realize that He knows more than we do, that He doesn’t relish our suffering, and that in the eternal balance we are still in His debt. If we consider our blessings, we come to realize that if we were blessed on the scale of our best efforts, we would enjoy far less than what we already enjoy.

Like Mary Ann Mellor, who gave thanks to God for preserving her life and sustaining her on her pioneer journey, we can recognize the blessings that a loving Heavenly Father so generously bestows on us. And as we acknowledge these gifts of grace, our expressions of gratitude can, like Mary Ann’s, become an expression of faith in Him. ■



OUR FAMILY JOURNAL

by Jennifer Ricks

When my husband and I were married, one of my former Young Women leaders gave us a precious gift: a leather-bound journal with gold-edged pages and an artistically textured cover. She also pasted our wedding announcement inside the front cover.

We loved the gift and decided to save it for a special purpose. That fall while we were watching President Henry B. Eyring’s conference talk, we knew why we had saved our special journal. We would record our daily blessings upon its beautiful pages as we found ways “to recognize and remember God’s kindness.” As we began to find the joy in each day, we “became ever more certain that our Heavenly Father hears and answers prayers” and felt more gratitude for His blessings. (See “O Remember, Remember,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 67.)

Too often we had been looking to the future for happiness. I’d be happy when we graduated from school, found a job, started a family, bought a house, and eventually retired in comfort. But when we instead focused on our daily blessings, we experienced greater joy in our marriage and life in general.

Our beautiful wedding gift is now a source of true inspiration for us. Our daily recollections of Heavenly Father’s blessings help us “preserve that memory for the day that I, and those that I love, will need to remember how much God loves us and how much we need Him” (69).

BETTER SLEEP

Through the thoughtful gift of a former youth leader, Brian and Jennifer Ricks found a way to regularly recognize the hand of the Lord in their lives.

NOTES

1. Kate B. Carter, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, (1975), 17:305, emphasis added.
2. Thomas S. Monson, “An Attitude of Gratitude,” *Liahona* and *Ensign*, Feb. 2000, 2.
3. Robert D. Hales, “Gratitude for the Goodness of God,” *Ensign*, May 1992, 65.
4. Michael E. McCullough, Robert A. Emmons, and JoAnn Tsang, “The Grateful Disposition: A Conceptual and Empirical Topography,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, (2002), 82, 114; 188–99.
5. Philip C. Watkins, Dean L. Grimm, and Russell L. Kolts, “Counting Your Blessings: Positive Memories among Grateful Persons,” *Current Psychology*, (2004), 23, 59.
6. McCullough, et al. 120, 124.
7. Kennon M. Sheldon and Sonja Lyubomirsky, “Achieving

8. Sustainable New Happiness: Prospects, Practices, and Prescriptions.” In A. Linley and S. Joseph (eds.), *Positive Psychology in Practice*, (2004), 135–37.
9. Glenn Affleck and Howard Tennen, “Construing Benefits from Adversity: Adaptational Significance and Dispositional Underpinnings,” *Journal of Personality*, (1996), 64, 909.
10. Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, “Counting Blessings versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, (2003), 84, 381, 386.
11. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Tongue of Angels,” *Liahona* and *Ensign*, May 2007, 18.
12. See Elder David A. Bednar, “Pray Always,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2008, 42.
13. “Count Your Blessings,” *Hymns*, no. 241.