



Episode 158: Exploring Gratitude (Transcript)

Ike Evans: Is it really the optimal time to also try to force in a staid message about thankfulness?

Bob Duke: Yeah. Well, it's sort of interesting when you have a set aside date when that's supposed to be the case. And Thanksgiving isn't the only one of those dates, right? I mean, we have Mother's Day and Father's Day and Veterans Day and all of those, I think, embedded in all of them as a premise that we're going to express gratitude to the people who we're celebrating.

Is it an optimal time to do that? I see Thanksgiving as more of a ritualized holiday. Like, we're being thankful for a lot of stuff, but not necessarily thankful to anyone in particular. But I think if someone were to ask me what's the optimal time to be grateful, I would say, well, when you're awake, there are so many things in life for many of us ' -- and it cues people to do that. But when I attend Thanksgiving ceremonies, which I do from time to time with people other than my own family, everybody's so busy just with the business of preparing a meal and doing it, which is lovely. I mean, there's nothing wrong with any of that.

What I don't hear as much of are personal interactions where there are expressions of gratitude. I think ritualized gratitude is a nice thing, but it's also, I think, that much more meaningful when one on one somebody talks to someone or communicates in some other way where they express their gratitude for things that have happened in the past or even things that are happening in the present.

IE: What has research found about the effects of gratitude on mental health or well being, kind of as a thing unto itself, versus. Well, of course you're grateful because your life is just objectively awesome.

BD: Well, let me preface it by saying this about just emotions in general.

We often think about our minds as something that's separate from the physicality of our brain, and that our brains are something sort of isolated, that our skulls carry around. We walk around the world. And one of the things that I emphasize a lot is how much our brain and our body and what we perceive and what we perceive consciously are all tightly interwoven. And I think when people think about what could be the reason that

feelings of gratitude could lead not only to general feelings of well being, but also greater physical health and physical well being as well. And it's because it's all connected. Our bodies and our minds are all of a piece.

And I think oftentimes people interpret our emotions as something that's sort of floating around in the ether somewhere. And really what our emotions are are our conscious recognition of states that our bodies are experiencing right now. I mean, if you think about it, there are a limited number of things that our body can respond to and ways to respond. So if I'm anticipating something lovely that's about to happen, my heart rate might accelerate a little bit, and my breathing might become a little shallow, and other kinds of things that my galvanic skin response might increase a little bit.

So there'll be things that happen to me that I'm anticipating something lovely. I might have the same physiological responses when I'm experiencing something that I find a little bit dreadful. But what makes those two things different is how I interpret them and how my brain interprets them consciously. So when you think about what research shows about what feelings of gratitude do, they really encapsulate a state of perception about our bodily state that lets people know that our bodies are in a pretty good condition in terms of stasis, in terms of how we feel.

And our attitudes and emotions are also responding to things in such a way that the positive aspects of physiology are present in our body. Now, this isn't to say that when someone's ill, they can't also experience feelings of gratitude, but I will say that all the things that people associate with positive emotions, gratitude, happiness, joyfulness, love, all those kinds of things are associated with physiological states that are physiologically positive and are not just something that's imagined in the mind, but it's also part of our physiology.

IE: When it comes to gratitude, if there's any sort of less individualizing frame for it that we can kind of consider or talk about, because it seems that the only thing I ever see is kind of these admonitions for individuals to just remember the things that they are grateful for. Is there a bigger picture here?

BD: We are a social species. I mean, the reason our species have thrived as it has is because of our ability to interact and cooperate and socialize with others. And I think one of the things that is a hallmark of expressing gratitude is personal interaction. I think when we imagine, what are the conditions of expressions of gratitude? Well, first of all, you probably feel pretty good about some components of your circumstances, and you're often interacting with another human being in a positive way. And those positive interactions are part of what leads to all of our thriving. Right. Because we're sort of feeling good about what we're saying ourselves, and we're feeling about how what we're saying, feeling good about how what we're saying is affecting the person we're speaking to. And I want to say one thing about that.

Gratitude as a conscious act, rather than something that just wells up within us.

Why is it important to have a young child, even though that didn't come from within them, to tell them to say thank you? Well, you think about what the response of that adult is like, oh, aren't you just the sweetest little girls to say thank you? And now there's this all positivity that goes back and forth between two people, because, first of all, the person expressing the gratitude is acknowledging that they have something or have gotten something or have experienced something as positive. And the feeling of the person who was part of that is now positive because you have these people smiling at you and saying some nice thing about what you just did for them. That's huge.

And I think even when we think about gratitude being prompted, I sometimes hear people say, well, that's not sincere. You're just telling somebody to do that, and they're doing it, but it doesn't matter. What matters is that you've started this interaction that includes positive verbalizations and positive expressions between Human beings. And that's all to the good. Right. And I think a lot of times when people imagine what they want those interactions to be like, the first thought is, I'm not saying this very well, but I'll come around this again. The first thought is you want things to sort of feel it from inside. And what I'm suggesting is that even before you feel it from inside, right. To actually begin behaving in that way actually now generates a feeling inside. So it's not like the feeling precedes the act. The actions can actually bring out the feeling.

Everything that we do, it has an intellectual component, it has a physiological component, it has a feeling emotional component, and it has behavior.

Which of those things can we control? Well, I can't really control my emotions. I can't will myself to be happy if I'm not feeling happy. And I can't really will my physiology really much either. I can't say, lower your heart rate or do whatever like that. And even sometimes I'm ruminating and I can't even will what I'm thinking, right? But I can take action and control my behavior. And what's interesting to me is that once you recognize that you're able to do that, the behaviors that you initiate has the potential to affect those other three things.

And you think, well, that's a very powerful thing to think about as a human being. To think that all these things, when I feel like I have all this stuff that's not in my control, I feel the way I feel, and I'm having these thoughts, and these thoughts are just coming to me. But to know that I can act. And one action that's possible is to actually express, either in writing or verbally, gratitude. And it does several things. First of all, in a sort of a primitive way, it crowds out negative thoughts, because if I'm busy writing about something or talking to somebody about something, that's positive that I've experienced. Well, now I'm obviating, thinking about and ruminating about things that are.

IE: For me, mental well-being involves getting some distance from whatever mood you're having in the moment.

BD: When we're weighed down by feelings of sadness or even grief and at a loss or something like that, I'm not suggesting that those feelings aren't legitimate and shouldn't be experienced to the fullest. Right. But when you think, okay, I've done that now and I've expressed my grief and felt my grief on myself, so now what am I going to do? Well, what's not probably a good strategy is wait until you feel like I want to go interact with somebody or call somebody or go out and have coffee with somebody and actually taking that action, initiating that action, or even if you're lucky enough to have a friend who knows you need to go out and get a cup of coffee or whatever, following through with that now has the benefit of potentially changing your mood and changing that feeling.

IE: Tell me about just things you are grateful for.

BD: Well, you just hit on two of them, are those lovely children which have been just a central part of our lives. And to be able to live in the same city as your grandchildren. And for a while, until my mother died a few years ago, she also lived in the city. So for them to know their great grandma and to have that many generations of family in one place was really just huge. The other thing is, I've been pretty lucky to be physically healthy through most of my life, and that's a really fortunate thing. I think that a lot of people don't get to experience.

And also, I have the best job in the world. I mean, I'm on a university faculty and people often ask me because I passed retirement age, and they say, well, when are you going to retire? When I can't do this anymore. I spend every day surrounded by bright, curious, interesting young people. I can't imagine a better gig than that. And so I think family is a deal. Health is a deal, your work life is a deal. And I don't quote Freud very often because he was wrong about a lot of things. But one thing he was right about is that a well lived life is really based on meaningful relationships and meaningful work. And if you have both of those, that's a pretty great thing.

Well, I should probably say one of the reasons that I feel so especially grateful for all of that is I realize how much of that has to do with luck. And that's another thing that we don't really think about.

I think a lot of people operate under the assumption that you get what you earn and if you work harder, you get better stuff and that kind of thing. Well, sometimes. But luck has so much to do with how our life experience unfolds. And I think it makes it that much more important to be grateful, not necessarily to anyone or anything, but for the things that we're fortunate enough to experience when they're positive.

IE: And that, I guess another thing I wonder about is how a pro-gratitude message kind of, and the friction between that and certain elements of U.S. culture, where as much as possible you're tracking your individual wins, those things that you can say that you did with little or no help or those things that you made happen, maybe even against whatever headwinds were going against you. And our movies celebrate that kind of a narrative, the heroic narrative.

BD: Our egos are helped by thinking we did more to get what we have than we actually did. To me, when you do think about the capriciousness of life experiences...to me that is a real incentive for even greater levels of gratitude. Because, once you sort of recognize that you're not the author of your own story entirely and that there are a lot of things that happen in your life to the good that you actually had very little to do with...it doesn't mean that what you did, that you had no part in this, it's just that there's a lot of luck involved. It makes me feel, to me personally, it makes me feel a special sense of gratitude, because I know how this could be entirely different with the flip of a coin.

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