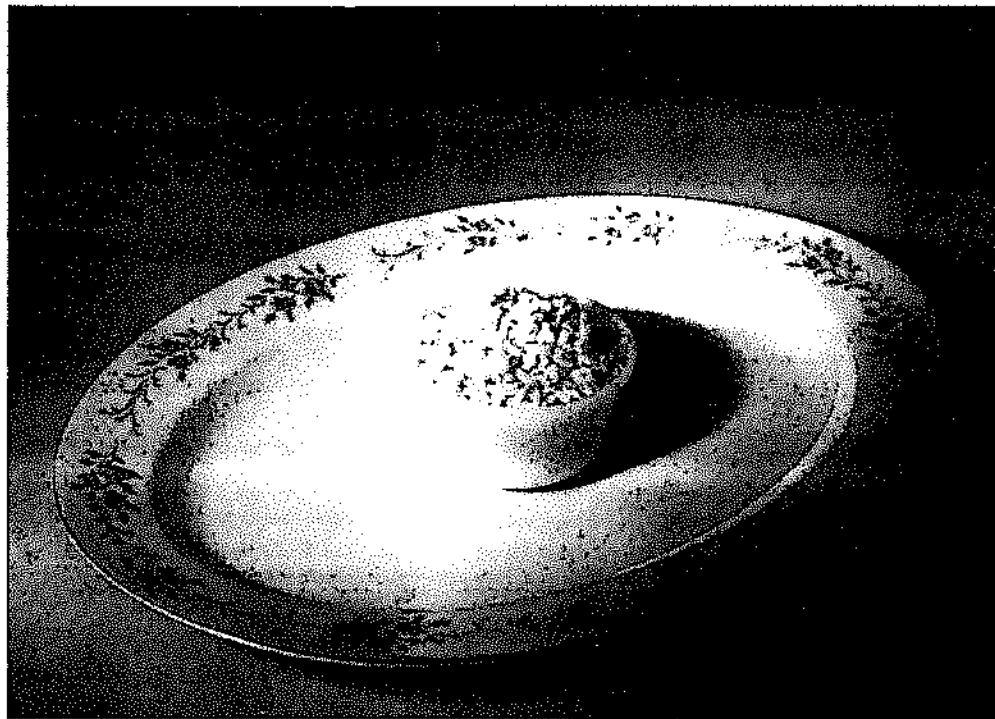


AN ATTITUDE OF

Gratitude

BY DAVID G. MYERS



What enables people to feel satisfied, blessed, and deeply thankful? Does an attitude of gratitude come from getting what we want? From enjoying favorable circumstances? From being young, beautiful, and rich?

As I explain in my book *The Pursuit of Happiness*, many people think that being well-off would boost their sense of well-being. American Council on Education surveys reveal that more than seven in ten students—nearly double the

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proportion in 1970—begin college agreeing that it is “very important” that they become “very well-off financially.”

Though many adults are skeptical that money can *buy* happiness, they agree that a *little* more money would make for a little more happiness.

And why not? Wouldn't a hot tub and a forty-inch TV screen make life a little more fun? Wouldn't you welcome a retirement free from financial worry? Wouldn't you really rather have a Buick or a BMW?

Knowing that money is one way we keep score in the game of life, wouldn't you rather be a winner?

Not That Simple. For those who embrace such materialism, though, the facts are sobering:

- People in rich countries are *not* notably happier than people in not-so-rich countries. During the 1980s, the West Germans had double the incomes of the Irish. Yet year after year, the Irish reported more satisfaction with their lives.

- People with higher incomes—even those surveyed among *Forbes'* one hundred wealthiest Americans—are only slightly happier than working-class folk. Even those who've won a state lottery, once they've adapted to their new wealth, settle back to their characteristic level of happiness (or unhappiness).

- With the doubling of real (inflation-adjusted) incomes over the past thirty-five years, we now have double what money buys. We have microwave ovens, color TVs, videocassette recorders, answering machines, and \$12 billion a year worth of brand-name athletic shoes. So, with more than a little more affluence, are we indeed happier? More thankful?

We are not. In 1957, 35 percent of Americans told the National Opinion Research Center they were “very happy.” In 1991, only 31 percent said the same. Meanwhile, depression rates have soared. Teen suicide has tripled. And the social fabric of Western culture (as reflected in the stability of relationships, the well-being of children, and rates of crime and violence) is fraying.

Money Won't Do It. Wealth is like health. Its utter absence breeds misery. Yet having it is no guarantee of happiness. Satisfaction is less a matter of getting what we want than wanting what we have.

Gratitude has less to do with circumstance than with attitude.

No wonder people who have the most aren't always the most satisfied. No wonder a recent Gallup Poll found that the average American estimates 21 percent of other Americans to be rich, but virtually none—fewer than one-half of 1 percent—perceive *themselves* as rich.

No wonder another Gallup poll found that people with incomes of more than \$100,000 give away only 2.9 percent of their income, much less than the 5.5 percent contribution rate by those with incomes under \$10,000.

No wonder the percent we give away has not increased, despite the multiplication of our family affluence since the 1930s.

No wonder Texas Ranger outfielder Pete Incaviglia could feel relatively poor: "People think we make \$3 million or \$4 million a year. They don't realize that most of us only make \$500,000."

No wonder the writer of Ecclesiastes was so right to say, "The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain" (5:10, NRSV).

What Can We Do? So how can we develop an attitude of gratitude? Forsaking the false god of materialism, how can we follow the apostle Paul's admonition to not "conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of [our] mind" (Rom. 12:2)? Here are some suggestions:

- We can *experience reminders of our blessings*. Contrasts define many of our pleasures. Tiredness makes the bed feel heavenly. Loneliness makes a friendship cherished. Lenten bowls of rice make the roast chicken tastier. People who have felt the pain of loss, who have known serious illness, who have felt hunger know better how to count their many

blessings, to name them one by one.

- We can *choose our comparisons intentionally*. Vacationing amid the luxuries of Rancho Mirage, California, outside Palm Springs, my parents write of feeling relatively poor. We receive their letter in Scotland, where, though living with somewhat less, our comparison with the even less affluent Scots sensitizes us to our relative wealth. Our gratitude depends on the lives we compare our own with. As the psychologist Abraham Maslow noted, "All you have to do is to go to a hospital and hear all the simple blessings that people never before realized *were* blessings—being able to urinate, to sleep on your side, to be able to swallow, to scratch an itch, etc."

In this Thanksgiving season, how liberating it is to realize that gratitude, satisfaction, and joy cannot be purchased. Knowing that liberates us from pointless spending on stockpiles of unplayed compact discs, on luxury cars, on seagoing cruisers. It liberates us from envying the lifestyles of the rich and famous. It liberates our generosity. And it liberates us to invest ourselves in developing those traits, attitudes, relationships, and spiritual resources that *do* enhance our well-being.

Happy Believers. Among the ingredients of satisfaction is an active faith. "Joy is the serious business of heaven," said C.S. Lewis.

New research on faith and well-being seems to agree. Actively religious people are much less likely to become delinquent, to abuse drugs and alcohol, to divorce, or to commit suicide. They're even physically healthier, due perhaps to less smoking and drinking.

In Europe and North America, religiously active people are also happier. In one Gallup survey, highly spiritual



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people (those who agree, for example, that "My religious faith is the most important influence in my life") were twice as likely as those lowest in spiritual commitment to declare themselves "very happy." In study after study, elderly people, too, express more satisfaction with their lives if religiously active.

Other studies suggest that faith acts as a buffer in a crisis. Those who've recently suffered divorce, unemployment, bereavement, or disability report greater well-being if they have a strong religious faith. Compared to religiously inactive widows, widows who worship regularly report more joy in their lives. Mothers of children with disabilities are less vulnerable to depression if sustained by a religious faith. Even in the midst of tragedy and sorrow, people of faith can feel gratitude.

Faith doesn't promise immunity from suffering. But it does enable a strengthened walk through valleys of darkness. For many people, a religious faith places them within a network of social support—the local church. Their faith helps them define life's meaning and purpose. It enables feelings of ultimate acceptance.

Religious faith motivates a focus beyond self (reflected in Gallup's report that those who go to church weekly give twice as much and volunteer twice as much as those who do not). And it offers a timeless spiritual perspective on the great enemy, death, and all life's other woes.

So it was that a grieving Martin Rinkart could in 1636 sit down after burying his wife and hundreds of his friends, all dead with the plague, and write the great hymn "Now Thank We All Our God."

Such psychological benefits don't bear on the truth of any religious claim. But they have nudged more than a few people to take the leap of faith and to develop an attitude of gratitude. ☺