

When I needed a gratitude intervention

"Write down one thing you are thankful for," said my friend. "Just one."

by [Diana Butler Bass](#) in the [March 28, 2018](#) issue



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My first job out of graduate school was at a small Christian college in Santa Barbara, California. It was not a happy experience. Although my credentials and qualifications were strong, the community expected a certain kind of conformity in regard to doctrine and personal piety that discomforted me. For four years, and in the midst of getting divorced, I struggled with the conflicting expectations of who they wanted me to be and who I was—and with a hostile tenure committee.

After a lengthy process of evaluation, the president called me to his office.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I'm going to have to let you go."

"Why?" I asked.

“Your work is wonderful. You are an excellent teacher,” he assured me. “But you just don’t fit here.”

He looked at me somewhat sadly and then continued with a kind of patriarchal assurance: “You just don’t fit. This wouldn’t be a good place for you. One day you will thank me for this.”

Thank him? I wanted to throttle him. In less than two months, I would be without a job and a paycheck, with few prospects for work in a weak academic job market. Being grateful to the person who put me in this position was the last thing in my mind.

A week later, I was telling a friend about the exchange at that final meeting: “Can you imagine the nerve of him? That one day I’ll *thank* him? What kind of nonsense is that?”

I expected my friend to rush to my defense. Instead, he leaned back in his chair and quietly said, “You know, he’s right.”

“*What?*”

“Years ago,” he continued, “I lost a job. It was painful, and I was angry. It didn’t seem a favor. But, eventually, it was the event that made me understand that I was an alcoholic. And that led me to get sober. Eventually, I understood that it was what I needed for my life to change. Not that it was easy.”

I looked at him. “I’m not an alcoholic. That’s not the problem here.”

“I get that,” he said. “But we all need to look at ourselves more honestly. To figure out who we are and where we are really heading. To correct course. Sometimes that only happens in circumstances like this. One day, I bet you will thank him.”

“Did you? Thank the guy that fired you?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I did. But not at first. Mostly I wanted to throw him off a cliff. And yes. I did thank him. Years later. After I learned gratitude.”

“You can learn gratitude?” I asked. “Isn’t it just a feeling? How do you do that?”

“Tell me one thing you are thankful for. Just one.”

I struggled. I could think of about a hundred things that frightened and worried me. Finally, I blurted out: "For my friend Julie."

"And that's the beginning," he replied. "Think of one thing each day. Do that. Just one. Write it down in a journal."

And so I began. For three years, I kept a daily journal. At the beginning, most of the journal was complaint. But I followed my friend's advice and remembered to write down one blessing each day, no matter what. It was not easy. As the months unfolded, however, the balance began to shift. Sometimes, there were two or three things, and then more. There were days of outright surprise and joy, appreciation for simple pleasures, for the kindness of others, for the richness of life. One entry stands out for me:

I went out with J and told her about two things, about winning the dissertation prize and about that meeting where none of my colleagues would speak to me. She said, "You know, Diana, I've never seen anything like your life. People hand you a bouquet of roses in one hand and a bag of manure in the other."

Funny enough, I hadn't really noticed that. I was so excited about the roses that I had barely thought twice about the cruelty. Maybe it does make a difference to pay more attention to the flowers than the crap.

I wrote about the painful events related to losing my first job and the end of my first marriage. But I also wrote about good things: beautiful California days, meals with friends, music at a favorite jazz club, sitting at the beach, writing poetry, receiving professional praise and recognition. As the months unfolded, the tone changed from mostly desperation to mostly delight. A larger narrative emerged: what had begun as a difficult personal crisis wound up being a time of profound happiness, deepened courage, and new self-awareness.

When my friend suggested writing down what I was thankful for, he was describing an activity now known as a gratitude intervention. Psychologists and medical professionals recommend keeping a gratitude journal to heart patients as evidence mounts that writing about blessings (instead of challenges) reduces stress and improves moods. Indeed, keeping a gratitude journal is one of the most often

recommended ways for people to learn gratefulness, and several popular books attest to its power.

I did not self-consciously keep a gratitude journal. But the journal writing itself became a cue to notice the good things in my life. As the pages added up, day after day, I started seeing my life and the world differently.

I had to look beyond challenges to find the larger grace of great things that sometimes seems to hide just out of view. I was learning new perspectives, orienting my life toward new horizons, and finding out that gratitude could guide me as I moved ahead. Maya Angelou's wisdom became real: "If you must look back, do so forgivingly. If you must look forward, do so prayerfully. However, the wisest thing you can do is be present in the present . . . gratefully." Seeing with soft eyes opens a wider vision of present circumstances, lessens fear and anxiety, and alerts us to new possibilities for our lives.

When reflecting on gratitude and time, it is not hard to see how we can be thankful for what has happened in the past and what is occurring in our lives now. But the future? How does gratitude relate to that? David DeSteno, a professor at Northeastern University, makes this case:

When life's got you down, gratitude can seem like a chore. Sure, you'll go through the motions and say the right things. . . . But you might not truly feel grateful in your heart. It can be like saying "I'm happy for you" to someone who just got the job you wanted. The words and the feelings often don't match.

This disconnect is unfortunate, though. It comes from a somewhat misguided view that gratitude is all about looking backward—back to what has already been. But in reality, that's not how gratitude truly works. At a psychological level, gratitude isn't about passive reflection, it's about building resilience. It's not about being thankful for things that have already occurred and, thus, can't be changed; it's about ensuring the benefits of what comes next. It's about making sure that tomorrow, and the day after, you will have something to be grateful for.

When psychologists speak of resilience, they are referring to our capacity to grow into our best selves—to be healthy, creative, emotionally balanced, and mature

people. Positive emotions, like gratitude, strengthen resiliency in both physical health and psychological health. According to one researcher, positive emotions “not only make people feel good in the present, but they also increase the likelihood that people will function well and feel good in the future” and cause an “upward spiral” of well-being. Gratitude now anticipates increased positive emotions in the future.

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But gratitude now and in the future also arises from practice. And practice takes time. There is the well-known saying about practice—that to become an expert at something, you need to devote 10,000 hours to doing it. Gratitude is not a practice that can be counted in hours. In order for it to become a habit, it asks that we attend to seeing time more fully: engaging the past more graciously, living more appreciatively now, and building thanks into the foundation of our future.

Attending to our lives with hindsight, wide sight, and foresight moves gratefulness from an emotion to an ethic. Thus, gratitude may feel good—and those good feelings do good things for us—but as an ethical disposition, gratitude is a strong basis for creating a good life. The habit of gratefulness helps us thrive.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Practicing gratitude.” It was excerpted from Diana Butler Bass's new book [Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks](#), just published by HarperOne.