

Grounded In Gratitude

By Katherine Scherer and Eileen Bodoh, the Official Guides to Gratitude

Among my memories of growing up is a clear black and white picture of a Korean mother squatting next to her small son surrounded by barren, devastated countryside. The caption underneath reads, "Where will their food come from now?" Printed by our Sunday "Journal" during the Korean War, the picture made me feel sad that these people didn't have any food and lucky that I was born in America and did not have to worry about food. In fact, it never occurred to me to even think about where my food came from. It was a blessing I took for granted.

Life seemed simpler back then. As children, we played all day, worry free, at the vacant corner lot. Men listened to the ball game on their front porch after a hard day at work, the smells of dinner wafting from the kitchen. Neighbors said hello to each other as they passed by on their early evening walk. Television had just been introduced, and my family along with most people, did not have it; we listened to music and loved to sing and dance.

Today, rushing seems to be the norm, and life is much more complicated. In many areas, children cannot go outside to play even in front of their own home without fear of being abducted or shot. Many parents sit in front of the TV after work, eating the fast food dinner they bought on the way home after picking the children up from day care. Obesity is a national crisis, and though we live longer, our quality of life is not necessarily better. Daily, the local and national news reports are full of tragedy, crime and murder.

Those of us who remember simpler times long for those days and wonder if they are gone forever. Unable to turn back time, we wonder if there is a way to make our lives and the lives of our loved ones happier and simpler. Can we slow down and eliminate some of the stress? Is there a magic formula, something quick and easy? "Remember, I don't have much time."

If you are speeding through life, chances are you are whining and complaining and missing out on the blessings that are right in front of you, just like I was. Imagine that a tiny shift in your perception could move you into a state of joy, that something could change your thinking and make your life work again. Living in gratitude and counting your blessings is that something. Each moment counts when we are grateful for it.

Everything begins with a thought. Thoughts are mental whispers that give direction to our lives. They set the tone for our day. Think about it. When you first wake up in the morning are you thinking happy thoughts, inspiring thoughts, uplifting and healthy thoughts? Before you even open your eyes, are you seeing the world partly sunny instead of partly cloudy? Or, are you, like so many others, feeling tired and grumpy because you're already focusing on unpleasantness before your feet even touch the floor?

If you would like to snap out of your bad mood and start the day on a more positive note while you are still warm and cozy under the covers, think of five things that you are grateful for in the very first moment after you wake. If you have difficulty coming up with something, hold your breath for a minute or two and become aware of the gift of your breath. Or, imagine yourself being newly blinded or having lost the ability to smell. What if you had been in an auto accident the day before that had left you paralyzed from the neck

down and this was your first day of awakening to it? What if you were that Korean woman or her son that had been born in a country torn apart by war? Can you see how much you have to be grateful for even before you get out of bed?

But there's more to it than that. Before long you will realize that everything is connected to everything else. Take for example a beautiful flower. Without its stem and leaves and root system growing in the earth, loving the sun and the water, it just wouldn't be. It is the same with us. We have a mind and a body, food to eat, clothes on our back, a home to live in, a place to work, furniture to sit on, money to buy things, and friends and family to share our blessings with. The list of things we have to be grateful for is endless.

Counting our blessings is such a simple concept that most of us underestimate the importance of it. Instead of focusing on all the good in our lives, our lopsided perceptions have us moaning and complaining about things we can't do anything about. Taxes, the weather, the raise we didn't get. The "American way" that many of us so often find fault with. But what if, just what if, you had been that Korean woman or her son, who I still remember every so often? Where do you think you would be today? How much would you have to be grateful for? Is it possible that their experience of gratitude would be more sincere because they had less and appreciated it more?

When I first began to focus my attention on gratitude, I was amazed at life's new meaning for me. I felt I was seeing and hearing things for the very first time. The early morning song bird was singing just for me. The flowering crab apple trees in spring were like Fourth of July firecrackers that I could enjoy all day long. I even welcomed the gray clouds that brought the rain our parched garden needed. But my newfound love for the abundance of nature could not compare to the newfound love I felt in my heart for my family and friends. By seeing their good in a new light and expressing my gratitude for them, each relationship has become more comfortable, more loving, and we are having more fun together. Remember the words of Abraham Lincoln: "A person is just about as happy as he makes up his mind to be.: And by choosing gratitude you will be happier. You will begin to notice your good just by paying closer attention to it. In my opinion, it's crazy to live without gratitude.

And finally, the real secret of gratitude is this: the more you are grateful for, the more you will have to be grateful for. Life is a gift--be grateful for each present moment.