

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Gratitude and forgiveness fundamental to living well



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*"Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer.*

*"And let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good."*

These words from Maya Angelou open a recent book by church historian and author Diana Butler Bass, "Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks." She makes it clear that she is not talking about sending thank you notes, or that "painful Thanksgiving dinner exercise in which no one eats until everyone at the table says something they are thankful for. ... It feels more like a turkey hostage situation than a spiritual exercise in grace." She does admit, however, that she is thankful when it ends.

She goes on to explain the Western tradition of making gratitude a kind of "commodity of exchange — a transaction of debt and duty." You receive something — a birthday, Christmas or Bar Mitzvah gift — but also receive the duty to respond with a thank-you note or some expression of gratitude to the benefactor.

Instead, she offers an alternate structure where we acknowledge the gifts all around us every day. She writes, "The universe is a gift. Air, light, soil and water are gifts. Friendship, love, sex and family are gifts. We live on a gifted planet. Everything we need is here, with us. We freely respond to these gifts by choosing a life of mutual care."

## Gratitude and forgiveness are fundamental to living a life with meaning.

Gratitude is from the Greek word *gratia*, as is the word *grace*. It suggests indiscriminate generosity, "gifts given without being earned and with no expectation of return." She calls it a kind of defiance in the face of evil. "Gratitude undoes evil by tunneling under its foundations of anger, resentment and greed."

Bass also cites results from science, sociology and psychology. She sees gratitude as a way to integrate science and faith in new ways to "reveal healing dimensions of human experience."

Science, especially the field of psychology, has in recent decades turned to the study of the positive characteristics that lead to human flourishing and contribute to a well-lived and fulfilling life.

The turn away from primarily studying maladaptive behavior is often attributed to a talk given by Martin Seligman in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1998. The positive psychology movement has resulted in scores of books and hundreds of scientific studies and articles. It seeks to understand and assess positive emotion and ways of human engagement that contribute to the sense of well-being. It studies the relationships with friends and family and other social connections that promote meaning, or the sense of being a part of something bigger than oneself.

Another recent book, "The Science of Virtue" by Mark McMinn, looks at the numerous

studies of such virtues as wisdom, forgiveness, humility and hope. Quoting the psychologist Everett Worthington, he writes, "The essence of most virtues is that they self-limit the rights or privileges of the self on behalf of the welfare of others." McMinn also invites us to see science and faith as good conversation partners rather than foes.

The studies on forgiveness have grown to yield more than 100 scientific articles each year. They show positive connections between forgiveness and such health benefits as lower blood pressure, heart rate and muscle tension. Forgiveness also reduces levels of pain, anger and psychological distress as well as decreased relapse rates for persons with problems of substance abuse. The decision to forgive releases the emotions of bitterness and anger that contribute to these unhealthy conditions. It is also a component in moving from being a victim of past hurts and taking action to promote a more positive future outcome.

Huston Smith is a well-known author and expert on philosophy and world religions. Smith's book "The World's Religions" sold millions of copies, is used widely as a college textbook, and has been translated into 12 languages. In his final book, "And Live Rejoicing," Smith identifies gratitude and empathy as the "two categorical, unconditional virtues."

McMinn also writes of gratitude and the

scientific studies that point to its benefits. He sees gratitude as calling us to a humility that recognizes "that we cannot and need not be self-sufficient." The studies of gratitude show its relationship to sleeping better, exercising more and even visiting the doctor less often. Dozens of studies have made this connection between gratitude and mental as well as physical health. It is associated with life satisfaction and decreased risk of depression and anxiety disorders. Gratitude journaling is a recommended practice that contributes to many of these positive results.

In all of the world's religions, gratitude is emphasized and even an obligation. The Jewish Morning Prayer gives thanks for being alive another day. Christians are entreated to "give thanks in all circumstances." The Qur'an reminds us that our very life is a gift, and the month of fasting and prayer during Ramadan is to remind one to be thankful in all things. For Hindus, Buddhists and other Eastern religions, gratitude is emphasized not as an obligation but as a response to the many gifts we all receive each day.

Whether we understand it through the science that studies the virtues, or realize it as a part of our religious beliefs, gratitude and forgiveness are fundamental to living a life with meaning.

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