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The Structure of Gratitude

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I'm sometimes grumpier when I stay at a nice hotel. I have certain expectations about the service that's going to be provided. I get impatient if I have to crawl around looking for a power outlet, if the shower controls are unfathomable, if the place considers itself too fancy to put a coffee machine in each room. I'm sometimes happier at a budget motel, where my expectations are lower, and where a functioning iron is a bonus and the waffle maker in the breakfast area is a treat.

This little phenomenon shows how powerfully expectations structure our moods and emotions, none more so than the beautiful emotion of gratitude.

Gratitude happens when some kindness exceeds expectations, when it is undeserved. Gratitude is a sort of laughter of the heart that comes about after some surprising kindness.

Most people feel grateful some of the time — after someone saves you from a mistake or brings you food during an illness. But some people seem grateful dispositionally. They seem thankful practically all of the time.

These people may have big ambitions, but they have preserved small anticipations. As most people get on in life and earn more status, they often get used to more respect and nicer treatment. But people with dispositional gratitude take nothing for granted. They take a beginner's thrill at a word of praise, at another's good performance or at each sunny day. These people are present-minded and hyperresponsive.

This kind of dispositional gratitude is worth dissecting because it induces a mentality that stands in counterbalance to the mainstream threads of our culture.

We live in a capitalist meritocracy. This meritocracy encourages people to be self-sufficient — masters of their own fate. But people with dispositional gratitude are hyperaware of their continual dependence on others. They treasure the way they have been fashioned by parents, friends and ancestors who were in some ways their superiors. They're glad the ideal of individual autonomy is an illusion because if they were relying on themselves they'd be much worse off.

The basic logic of the capitalist meritocracy is that you get what you pay for, that you earn what you deserve. But people with dispositional gratitude are continually struck by the fact that they are given far more than they pay for — and are much richer than they deserve. Their families, schools and summer camps put far more into them than they give back. There's a lot of surplus goodness in daily life that can't be explained by the logic of equal exchange.

Capitalism encourages us to see human beings as self-interested, utility-maximizing creatures. But people with grateful dispositions are attuned to the gift economy where people are motivated by sympathy as well as self-interest. In the gift economy intention matters. We're grateful to people who tried to do us favors even when those favors didn't work out. In the gift economy imaginative empathy matters. We're grateful because some people showed they care about us more than we thought they did. We're grateful when others

took an imaginative leap and put themselves in our mind, even with no benefit to themselves.

Gratitude is also a form of social glue. In the capitalist economy, debt is to be repaid to the lender. But a debt of gratitude is repaid forward, to another person who also doesn't deserve it. In this way each gift ripples outward and yokes circles of people in bonds of affection. It reminds us that a society isn't just a contract based on mutual benefit, but an organic connection based on natural sympathy — connections that are nurtured not by self-interest but by loyalty and service.

If you think that human nature is good and powerful, then you go around frustrated because the perfect society has not yet been achieved. But if you go through life believing that our reason is not that great, our individual skills are not that impressive, and our goodness is severely mottled, then you're sort of amazed life has managed to be as sweet as it is. You're grateful for all the institutions our ancestors gave us, like the Constitution and our customs, which shape us to be better than we'd otherwise be. Appreciation becomes the first political virtue and the need to perfect the gifts of others is the first political task.

We live in a capitalist meritocracy that encourages individualism and utilitarianism, ambition and pride. But this society would fall apart if not for another economy, one in which gifts surpass expectations, in which insufficiency is acknowledged and dependence celebrated.

Gratitude is the ability to see and appreciate this other almost magical economy. G. K. Chesterton wrote that “thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.”

People with grateful dispositions see their efforts grandly but not themselves. Life doesn't surpass their dreams but it nicely surpasses their expectations.