



Growing through times of change

Week 7 - Practising gratitude



St Paul's
LUTHERAN CHURCH BOX HILL

Gratitude is an emotion. We're meant to feel it, not just think it. See if you can notice the difference.

Think of someone or something you are grateful for. Now think of it from your heart. Allow your heart to respond. Allow your heart to inform you of why you value this particular person or thing. Can you feel the difference? Can you feel the change in your body and your emotions?

The emotional experience of gratitude is more than a thought or memory. It involves an all-of-brain experience. We receive messages from our thoughts, emotions and body when we experience true gratitude.

Research on the heart has discovered that it has its own version of a brain, and that there is constant and complex dialogue between the brain in our head and the brain in our heart.

Our heart brain generates information about the changes in our Heart-Rhythms (Heart Rate Variability) and relays this information to our head brain. It tells us if our system is safe and secure and if we are loved and connected. It reflects our emotional wellbeing. Studies on heart rate variability have shown how a regular heart rhythm reflects our capacity to manage stress, access calm, regulate our emotions, handle social interactions, and communicate more effectively. It is an indicator of a healthy heart.

Gratitude has been found to be one of the key emotions to regulate and maintain harmonious heart-rhythms. When we experience gratitude our brain releases feel-good chemicals of serotonin and dopamine. We often experience this as a gentle, warm feeling in the area of the heart.

The feeling of genuine appreciation is one of the most tangible and accessible positive emotions for us to self-generate and sustain. If we intentionally try, most of us, most of the time can find something to be genuinely grateful for. By focusing on this with your heart brain you can regulate your heart-rhythm, reduce your emotional stress and improve your health.

When we are under major stress, feel overwhelmed or caught in the throes of anxiety or depression, it is difficult to find gratitude. At these times it requires us to choose where we focus our attention. It requires us to over-ride the practised messages that we are receiving from our thoughts, emotions and body and choose to focus our heart brain on someone or something that stirs our gratitude. There are things that can help with this such as reflecting with others, looking at photos, reading or listening to something that inspires or soothes, being in nature. We need to want to find gratitude - for its own sake but also because we know that *the process of being thankful is really good for us.*

Gratitude often accompanies other emotional experiences such as love, joy, relief, pleasure and delight. When we bring our awareness to these emotional experiences, we will also notice gratitude waiting to be acknowledged and felt.

As we practise the skill of gratitude, intentionally bring it to awareness and notice the opportunities to apply it, it becomes easier, more familiar and richly beneficial. We start to develop a 'gratitude' outlook where we not only apply it to ourselves, but we also generate a 'gratitude' mindset within our relationships and circumstances.

Gratitude becomes contagious. It generates a positive energy and attitude amongst those we interact with. Even when we are facing times of difficulty and challenge, if we can maintain a gratitude mindset, our thankfulness provides others with an opportunity to access their own heart brain and experience the benefits to their own wellbeing.

We have so much to be grateful for. It is a skill worth practising.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected that *"In ordinary life, we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich."*

