

# The Life Coach

Francine Campone

## Gratitude

*Turning on the light in unexpected places*

**THANKSGIVING DAY IS UPON US ONCE AGAIN** and across the country Americans will be giving thanks for the blessings in their lives. Some people will give thanks for being spared by violent weather, ill health and a host of other tribulations. Most will give thanks for families, friends, life's basic necessities and other materials goods. Many will reflect on the blessings of faith, meaningful work, opportunities to touch others. There's considerable evidence that people who make time to acknowledge and express gratitude for their lives are happier than those who take things for granted or focus on what they don't have. So the attitude of gratitude which anchors this national holiday is good for all of us. In fact, it's so good for us, that I propose we make a deliberate effort to continue the practice of gratitude throughout the year. To keep it fresh, however, I suggest that this practice maintain a focus on some less often appreciated aspects of life. Here are my first four suggestions; I invite readers invent their own- the more unexpected the better.

1. Give thanks for the bills waiting to be paid. Consider, when we pay our debts, what we are being given an opportunity to do. Begin with a reflection on what your payment has gotten you. The mortgage or rent means there's a roof over your head and it's a roof of your own choosing. Other payments mean you have a new car or truck, clothes to keep out the winter cold. One bill in this month's stack reminds me that I was able to give my husband exactly the birthday dinner he wanted; another is for the sweater that I find myself wearing almost every day because I feel happy when I wear it. Maybe the bill is evidence that you're confident enough in your financial future to have taken a vacation. Maybe that vacation carries with it fine memories of good meals, laughter with close friends, the opportunity to have caught up on reading. Writing out the check serves as a touchstone for keeping the rewards fresh in the memory storehouse. When I pay a medical bill, I am reminded that some pain has been alleviated or some damage to my body has been mended. I think, by contrast, about the stories in the newspapers about people in this country and in other countries who cannot afford or who don't have access to quality health care

## The Life Coach

### Gratitude

- and I feel gratitude in writing out the check for the care that is available right here. Buying anything on a basis other than straight cash is an act of faith and an act of optimism. When the bills come due, they are reminders that we have chosen to be optimistic about our futures and are working to keep integrity with our commitments.
2. Appreciate the ability to forget. Yes, it can be annoying and sometimes a little embarrassing to forget an appointment or forget someone's name. The ability to forget, though, is a great gift that is often overlooked when we are giving thanks. Were it not for the ability to forget, our minds would be so overloaded with trivia and bits and snatches of unmoored information that we'd be entirely unable to focus on anything in the present. The burden of memories would be overwhelming. Remembering every disconnect, injury and misunderstanding we've ever had with the important people in our lives would cripple any possibility of maintaining loving and forgiving relationships. That the memory of unhappy incidents fades (unless we make a deliberate effort to keep them fresh) is a gift of freedom. As a bonus, we can maintain the lessons and insights gained from difficult experiences without having to maintain a sharp edge on the memory of the details (who said what to whom). This particular gift also comes in handy when information that I can retrieve from memory becomes outdated and must be replaced with new learning (think about software updates).
  3. Next time someone disagrees with you, say (with polite sincerity) "thank you." We live in a culture of contention, what linguist Deborah Tannen calls the "argument culture." Interestingly, there's also a growing body of research on the process of innovation which suggests that real breakthrough thinking comes about exactly when people with very different perspectives, backgrounds, training and experiences are able to come together to listen to, thoughtfully consider and try to build more complex multi-faceted ideas out of this diversity. From this framework, someone expressing a very different point of view is offering an opportunity for us to understand more about the subject at hand. Some of the world's best and most innovative thinkers deliberately seek different points of view and disagreements to help polish and refine their own ideas. In fact, a secondary benefit of this gift may be a reaffirmation of our own beliefs with a richer and deeper understanding

## The Life Coach

### Gratitude

of why we believe what we do and how our own view fits into the context of the larger world.

4. Give thanks for deadlines. In a world driven by “faster”, it’s sometimes challenging to get up the internal drive to move a project to completion. There’s so much that’s competing for our attention. Deadlines provide a helpful hint about what needs to be moved to the top of the list. Granted, deadlines can provoke some anxiety. While it may seem counterintuitive, it’s just that anxiety that stimulates action in people who are prone to over-analyze and over-complicate tasks, who defer doing until they’re sure the first try will be close to perfect. When clients with this tendency want to set aside hours for a fairly uncomplicated task, I challenge them to take half the time and to see what results. Often, it’s better than expected, proving they have underestimated their own capabilities and overestimated the challenges. When that’s not the result, deadlines offer an opportunity to see the gaps between where we are and where we want to be in doing what we do. Those gaps are the stuff of which goals and dreams for achievement are built.

So this year, do give thanks for the people and food that nourish and enrich our lives. And give thanks for those quirky pokes that life offers, the never-ending gifts that prompt reflection, learning and growth.

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