



Cultivating Gratitude: Time to Say Good-bye

by JUDY BERANGER

I will be retiring from my position as Employee Assistance Coordinator on January 31, 2020. Each day of my 11 years with the EAP Program brought something new for which to feel grateful. In the March/April 2019 issue of *The Bulletin*, I shared my thoughts about gratitude as part of healing and growing through loss. In this – my last article – I want to expand on this topic as I pay tribute to all the teachers, administrators, guidance counsellors, psychologists, social workers, school board and department staff, and colleagues at the NLTA that I have worked with along the way. Thanks for your support, friendship and to many who were exemplars of what it is to serve faithfully and with humility. I will always remember our laughter, our joys and our struggles.

Our culture, especially through media and advertising, often suggests what is missing in our lives. It implies that we will automatically become happier if we have more money, more possessions, more power, and bodies like models and athletes. The media urges us to lose weight, to count pounds, calories, and steps. Unfortunately, minimal time is spent encouraging us to acknowledge all that is good in our lives. William Ward says that, “feeling gratitude and not expressing it, is like wrapping a present and not giving it!” As we know from experience and ancient moral principles and wisdom, happiness does not come from acquiring more, but rather from finding deep appreciation for life and for people. When we deliberately take the time to recognize all there is to cherish, we are uplifted by the powerful force of gratitude and appreciation for all things, from having good energy and optimal health to seeing our students succeed. Our relationships with our colleagues strengthen, and our ability to demonstrate compassion and high ethical standards is heightened.

Nourish to Flourish

We are challenged from time to time with very difficult circumstances and struggles where our only realistic option will be to choose how we respond. As humans, we are all susceptible to the cognitive error that our emotions are caused solely by external

events and behaviours of others, leaving us with no control over our resulting emotions. The reality is that it is not what others say or do that causes our feelings, but rather how we choose to talk to ourselves inside about what the other person says or does. When we accept that we cannot change what others do or say, we can focus more on being proactive in our own thoughts and behaviours.

As a society, we have always instinctively known the importance of relationship connectivity in enhancing quality of life. Over the past century, and particularly over the past 30 years, this belief has been strongly supported by evidence-based research. Optimal wellness – being healthy, thriving, having good quality of life, along with a longer life span – is strongly linked to connectivity with others. Endless studies support this, including the respected Harvard 75-year longitudinal study and reams of thought-provoking articles and books. To flourish we don't need numerous relationships, but we need to nourish strong relationships where we feel trusted and valued. The literature suggests these are the people with whom we can share our nearest and dearest matters, who we can call at any time, knowing they would be there for us. It is common to have that someone within the family and it is good practice to have at least one other such person outside our immediate family.

The expression of gratitude is a key ingredient in the development of relationship connectivity. Practicing gratitude can nourish our relationships. Teachers often comment on how grateful they are for their families, friends, colleagues and circle of influence. Some find they are the ones who are expected to be the contact person for connecting, organizing general get togethers and even speaking up when things need to be addressed. Some say this gets tiring and they stop initiating. Others step up and keep focused on staying confident, strong and away from painful, self defeating behaviours. They choose to do and to influence what they can, seeing it as an essential part of active gratitude. In other words, being a champion for the greater good.

The language of gratitude is a language of belong-

ing. Authors Daniel and Tanya Amen say that, "... appreciation is gratitude expressed outwardly by building bridges of positive energy between yourself and others." Gratitude is an internal state, both a fleeting emotion and a stable trait—you can be a grateful person or experience a thankful moment. Gratitude can be cultivated and involves a warm sense of appreciation for somebody or something. It is a sense of goodwill that you can feel in your heart. Neuroscience research reports that essential and positive changes are created in our brains when we express gratitude.

Edwin Robinson explains gratitude as two types: the sudden kind we feel for what we take; the larger kind we feel for what we give. Research by the John Templeton Foundation found a large gap between the gratitude people report feeling and their actual expression of gratitude. According to the study, 90 percent said they felt grateful, yet only half of them reported expressing appreciation on a regular basis themselves. For the most part, I believe schools are exceptions to this, as most teachers and administrators are skilled at showing appreciation and gratitude, making it a daily habit.

Sonja Lyubomirsky, researcher and author of *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*, says that "Gratitude is an antidote to negative emotions, a neutralizer of envy, hostility, worry, and irritation. It is savoring; it is not taking things for granted; it is present-oriented." Her research recommends gratitude as both a pathway to experiencing more positive emotions and a motivator for self-improvement.

Author Tamara Lechner explains that an active practice of being grateful can increase neuron density and lead to greater emotional intelligence. Practicing gratitude strengthens the brain's neural circuits for gratitude, making it easier to focus on these feelings. When you focus on the good in your life, your brain becomes better at discovering similar things. For example, if you consciously notice the beauty in nature, you will be more likely to look for it, deepening your awareness and appreciation. Neuroscience and positive psychology research confirm that both dopamine and serotonin production are increased when experiencing and expressing gratitude. Dopamine and serotonin are important chemical messengers/neurotransmitters. They help regulate many bodily functions. They have roles in sleep and memory, as well as metabolism and emotional well-being.

Cultivating gratitude in your life is a best practice. Activities are unique to each person and suggested strategies include keeping a gratitude journal, writ-

ing a note or sending an appreciation email or small gift, acknowledging people, naming things you are grateful for throughout a day or week, and planning mini celebrations. Informal meetings can be opportunities for gratitude. Let participants know in advance that there will be an opportunity to share a good news update. A one-sentence reflection can promote connection and good energy flow as people share a recent accomplishment or good news story. Be creative; we all need practice working on our "thanking" skills and our "being thanked" skills.

Having taught in senior high for a decade and having worked directly with teachers and administrators for more than another decade, I have consistently found most teachers and administrators to be patient, accepting, appreciative, kind, creative, enthusiastic and respectful. Compassion for students is high. Atticus Finch, a character from the Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, said it beautifully, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." Teachers understand this. They model empathy and compassion and what it means to be a champion. It is a way of thinking, a mindset, a process for continuous learning, a commitment to connecting, knowing we are always becoming.

I am so appreciative to have had daily opportunities to witness how we are able to treasure the experience of capturing hearts and minds along the way. Thank-you for the notes of appreciation, encouragement, sharing of resources, and time – but mostly for your sincerity and trust. If I had to sum up my treasured time with you in one word, it would be gratitude.

I believe that we are each unique and irreplaceable. There is only ever one of each of us. We will bring our gifts and spirit and when we leave others will follow with their unique contributions. We are neither better nor less than anybody else but depending on our passion, knowledge and commitment for what we do, the best or least of ourselves will be determined. We are all working on finding the best "me" possible. It is hard work but exciting and never-ending. I am forever thankful for your stimulating company and the enormous collection of shared experiences indelibly printed on my mind and heart.

We all have the capacity to change and grow, to move beyond complacency and make a difference. The answer/secret is to focus on this present moment with gratitude. I leave as optimistic as when I started. My work with you all has been an honour, and has kept me inspired and committed to continuous growth and learning. I am more because I was here and for that cherished gift, I am truly grateful.