

GRATITUDE

On October 3, 1863, our country was in the middle stages of a horrific civil war. Unlike today's Iraq war, which touches families selectively, in that time, almost every family experienced the devastating loss of a young and vital life. A hundred and fifty years ago, people weren't talking about the costs of war in some theoretical sense - that crushing weight was shared universally throughout the entire society.

And yet it was on that date, amidst this cultural trauma, which today we can scarcely imagine, that Abraham Lincoln issued of all things a "Thanksgiving Proclamation." He noted that, despite "a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theater of military conflict." He went on to observe that the economy was still robust and the country was growing "notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and battlefield," and that "the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom."

Perhaps most remarkable about this proclamation is that it came from the pen of a man who was frequently crushed by depression during most of his adult life. But then, Lincoln seemed to understand so much on a basic intuitive level - he's not on the five dollar bill for nothing, after all. He saw that relief from despair may be obtained through gratitude.

Turning to our own special plight, while we lawyers certainly cannot indulge in the conceit that our experiences mirror those at Antietam or Falujah, many of us are challenged to our core on a daily basis by the demands of the work that we do and the environment we create. Martin Seligman, Ph.D., professor of psychology at University of Pennsylvania and past-president of the A.P.A. , has something to tell us about the causes of our professional unhappiness and the way out of it.

In his recent book, *Authentic Happiness* (despite the rather "sweet" title this is a powerful and rigorously researched work), Seligman first describes a number of the qualities of thought which are endemic to the practice of law that seem to make us prone to pessimism and unhappiness. These observations are consistent with a wide array of research conducted over the years at U.W., Johns Hopkins and under the auspices of the A.B.A. These have been touched upon in past columns and I won't belabor them here. If you are interested, I do recommend you to the "Work and Personal Satisfaction" chapter in Seligman's book for a particularly trenchant discussion of the challenges faced by attorneys. For the moment, let's take as a given that lawyers experience a depressing downward pressure on their mood and life-outlook from their education, training and practice. Now for a way out.

Gratitude is not a habit of mind for lawyers - nor is it a habit of conduct. Yet, Seligman's research has revealed, quite clearly, that a deep sense of personal well-being comes with attendance to gratitude. This is a two-step process. The first is simple realization of those circumstances and people for which we are deeply grateful. It is suggested from various sources, both spiritual and secular, that we would be well-served by taking a set time out of our routine to acknowledge to ourselves what and who we are grateful for - and not only the object, but the reason.

For example, I am blessed to have my eleven year old daughter in my life....because when I get home from dealing with the toxicity of conflict for a living, she's there with our beautiful golden retriever and she is so beautifully open, intelligent and fresh. I am invariably transported to a finer place and as I sit here right now and look at her picture on my desk, I feel myself relax.

We so often take our health and physical well-being for granted. I remember a moment five years ago when I was on a ladder, arranging some boxes in the attic of our home when the ladder slipped out from under me and I fell flat on my back from ceiling height. I should by all rights have been seriously injured - but all I got was a bruise on my arm. I don't know what force protected me that morning - perhaps it was God almighty; maybe it was dumb luck - but there's not a week that goes by that I'm not grateful for my health and moments of good fortune such as that.

As I write this, my beautiful Beverly is soon to be leaving for a two week trip to Italy with her best pal. I'm looking forward to being Mr. Mom for a while and having alone time with our girl, but I'm going to miss the warmth and sweetness of my baby's loving company.

While all of these thoughts tend to lighten the load on a daily basis, there is one more powerful step which brings the power of gratitude home. That is the expression of gratitude.

I went through a period when I was lazy and didn't express my gratitude to my life's partner. Over time a hard-to-pinpoint coolness developed in our home. I actually was very aware that in my preoccupation with work and striving that I was failing in the fundamental task of expressing my gratitude for the love in my life. When I finally "snapped out of it" and began to attend to these gifts, I swear it felt like the windows were thrown open to a stuffy room and warmth began to fill our home. This warmth not only filled our environment, the actual practice of experiencing and expressing gratitude felt healing for me, internally. Recently, the incessant stresses of this professional calling are less wearing. Renewal is easier.

So here's a suggestion. In three weeks, those of you who are fortunate to be sitting around a table on Thanksgiving with people who have touched you, express your gratitude - openly and unabashedly. What the heck. If you can't get away with that kind of behavior on Thanksgiving, when can you? Let each person who touches you know that you are grateful for their gifts. Describe those gifts, simply and clearly. See how it makes you feel. My bet is that you'll think you just gave yourself an enormous holiday gift.

1 American Psychological Association