

The Gratitude Visit

One of the most important topics in the field of Positive Psychology is the capacity for gratitude. Gratitude is the positive emotion that connects us to the humanity of others, allowing us to feel appreciation for those in our life — parents, friends, teachers, coaches, teammates, pastors, employers — who have been especially helpful and kind, and our desire to express our feelings to them. In acknowledging the importance of gratitude, Dr. Martin Seligman developed a powerful ritual called the Gratitude Visit. It's also a natural next step after making amends for past wrongs. The following is a summary:

1. Write a letter describing in concrete terms why you are grateful to a particular person. State specifically what they did for you and exactly how it affected your life. Share what is happening in your life now and how you remember what they did for you.
2. Contact this person and set-up a meeting (without sharing specifically why), read your letter to him or her, and then give them a special copy (special paper, framed or the like) of the letter. Then discuss how you both feel about each other, about the gratitude letter and about the future.

Gratitude Visit Example #1

Sherry was a 28 year-old secretary and part-time student. When she was 23, she had moved out of her parent's home, leaving behind her turbulent history with them, and attempting to create her own life. During her teen-age years, Sherry had often acted out and gotten into some trouble, abusing drugs and food, and acting out sexually becoming pregnant and ultimately having an abortion. Her parents had supported her throughout these chaotic years. In the five years since, Sherry's life had settled down to a pretty normal one, but her relationship to her parents had gradually deteriorated into minimal, superficial contact. Sherry has been in recovery for over four years.

Sherry agreed that she owed her parents a lot. She decided to use the Gratitude Visit as a way to thank her parents make amends and see if she could reconnect with them. This is her letter.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I don't know where to start. You have been there for me during the roughest times of my life. You cared about me even when I didn't seem to care about myself. I know that that was very difficult and that you spent too many hours upset, frustrated and worried.

Remember the time that I didn't come home all night. By 2am you had called my

friends' parents, the police and the hospitals. I wandered home around noon and the first thing you asked me was, "Are you okay?" Finding out that other than a hangover, I was okay, you appropriately disciplined me. I, of course, didn't want to understand and further acted out. You continued to love me by setting boundaries, encouraging and supporting me.

Remember Bill, my irresponsible boyfriend, who took me to my senior prom? You tried to get me to see that a future with him would be difficult at best. I knew that, but he was cute, popular and told me things that I wanted to hear. It wasn't until I got pregnant and he stopped talking to me, that I faced the truth. You supported me through this difficult time and my decision to have an abortion, with all of the emotional consequences. You always made me feel like I was a good person who made a mistake.

Thank you for being strong enough to reel me in and take control of my out-of-control life. What I learned was that you loved me too much to let me ruin my life, even if you had to go through it with me.

And then you finally let me go, let me find my own way. After awhile, I did, and I am building my version of the person you taught me to be. I miss having you be in my life in a real way. I hope that this letter will be a start to change that.

You were really good parents and I know that you did that best that you could. Thank you for all of your love and devotion.

Love,

Sherry

Gratitude Visit Example #2

Jerry was a 51-year-old man who worked as a middle manager for a major corporation. Over the years his career had become more demanding and he had responding by making it his highest priority, while his family became a lesser priority. In the previous couple of years his work and other obligations had grown to the point that his participation with his family was hit and miss; at times he didn't even know what was happening to his wife and children. He became estranged from his 24 and 26-year-old sons and separated from his wife of 28 years. This estrangement was causing Jerry much sadness, loneliness and anxiety about the future.

Jerry became committed to changing his priorities and creating a future that he wanted. He decided to start by writing five Gratitude Letters, one letter each to his wife, two sons, his brother and his mother. He spent several weeks writing the letters and presented them

over a period of about six weeks. He asked the first five presentees not to speak about the letter to other presentees until he had presented all of the letters. The following is the letter to his wife:

Dear Mary,

As I sit here alone, writing this letter, I am so aware of how much that you mean to me. You are a wonderful person and for so many years you have been there for me. It has taken this separation for the reality to sink in.

Remember our first Valentine's Day together? I wrote you that poem. Later you told me that that was when you started to fall in love with me. As I look back I wonder why I didn't continue to be romantic and vulnerable.

Thank you for giving birth and being the primary parent to our two wonderful sons. They are sons to be proud of. Remember the time that Jerry, Jr. almost died in that accident? We were both sleepless for days. You were so strong and steady. It seemed that you almost willed him to live. You were and are a great mother.

I am so sorry that I did not spend more time being with you and letting you know me. You have lived your life with dignity, pride and most of all, a loving heart. You kept asking me to come back to you. I know that my lack of response was painful and that you needed to literally separate for your emotional health.

I am proud of you and that you are my wife. You are a special person. If it is even a possibility that you will let me come back into your life, I will do whatever it takes to make that happen and to be a good husband. If for you our marriage is over, please be happy and well, and live your life to the fullest. And know that you will always be in my heart.

Longingly yours,

Jack

