

## The Tasmanian Peace Trust 2020 Lecture

*The place of gratitude in the search for a deeper peace*

Kerry Howells

*Grateful living brings in place of greed, sharing; in place of oppression, respect; in place of violence, peace. Who does not long for a world of sharing, mutual respect, and peace?*

- Brother David Steindl-Rast<sup>1</sup>

I wish to acknowledge the indigenous owners and custodians of this land, the Muwinina people. I express my gratitude to them for caring for and protecting this country, and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

I am delighted to give the Tasmanian Peace Trust 2020 lecture. I am delighted not just for the personal honour of this opportunity, but for the chance for gratitude itself to be acknowledged as crucial to peace, particularly at this time, in this year that will be known for all time as a great disrupter, and for so many a great disrupter to their peace, to life as they knew it. And yet it is also a time where we have seen gratitude come out of hiding, out of the closet where it was considered too religious, too new age, too embedded with a sense of indebtedness. We have seen it everywhere in the public outpourings of gratitude to our health workers, teachers, people who provide services and stack shelves, and many others.

It has also been a time where we have been forced to reflect on what we have taken for granted in the past, our jobs, our way of life, our material prosperity. When regret awakens us to what we have taken for granted, it seems that the most appropriate moral response in moving forward is that of gratitude. We express gratitude for what we have left remaining, and never take it for granted again.

I frame my talk today on the beautiful statement above. Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Catholic Benedictine monk, is noted for his active participation in interfaith dialogue and his work on the interaction between spirituality and science. You may know of his inspiring TED talks and books on gratitude.

Brother David says that where exploitation arises from greed, gratitude creates a sense of abundance; where oppression arises from the need to be above and put others below you, gratitude creates a sense of self-sufficiency, of mutual support and equal respect for all; where violence arises from fear that there will not be enough and of those who are different to ourselves, gratitude celebrates difference and generates the sense that there is more than enough for everyone.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to envisage a world where there is no greed, oppression and violence? Like Brother Steindl-Rast I am a strong believer that a grateful life is a powerful way to achieve this, a path to deeper peace.

My past twenty-five years of researching the role of gratitude in a range of different challenging contexts have convinced me that a deeper peace through the practice of gratitude is indeed possible. No matter what the context – high school and university students; teachers at all levels of education from early childhood to tertiary; pre-service teachers; indigenous educators; elite athletes and their coaches – a common theme arises across all of these groups. They report that they feel calmer, and more peaceful.<sup>2</sup>

What is it about gratitude that can bring about this effect?

On an individual level, gratitude helps us feel well, and when we are well, we are able to lead a more grateful life. We have more internal peace. Recent developments in consciousness research and cognitive neuroscience have led to thousands of clinical studies demonstrating that gratitude greatly enhances our physical, mental, social and spiritual wellbeing. For example, with regard to psychological health, several studies have shown that having a grateful disposition offers some protection against stress, trauma, depression and anxiety. Studies have also shown that gratitude leads to more refreshing sleep, improved heart health and immune system, as well as reducing a range of other physical symptoms. Gratitude improves mood and lowers fatigue and may protect against burnout.<sup>3</sup>

Research also shows us that gratitude has a fundamental part to play in building and maintaining our relationships<sup>4</sup>, while developing greater generosity, the ability to help others and a range of other proactive behaviours.<sup>5</sup> I feel that it is in the domain of improving relationships that gratitude has its biggest part to play as a path to deeper peace.

### **Gratitude awakens us to our sense of interconnectedness**

As a philosopher and self-appointed custodian of gratitude, I believe this is only possible if we embrace a notion of gratitude that moves beyond something that simply serves our own purpose – to make us feel happier, or more positive, for example. I see gratitude as a social movement that honours and protects our sense of interconnectedness.<sup>6</sup> Accompanying our initial emotional response of awe, or surprise or a sense of giftedness, is a motivating force to express this thanks in some way.

Gratitude can bring peace because it immediately awakens us to what we receive from each other and shines a light on our connectedness. This is why we feel more abundant, self-sufficient, and worry less, because our gratitude helps us to feel a connection with something beyond ourselves. It awakens us to our sense of giftedness. We connect with another, or others who made this moment, this opportunity come into being. When we thank someone we are really saying, I humbly recognise that without your gift, I would not have this... I would not be this... Gratitude gathers together and entwines giver, recipient and gift.<sup>7</sup>

Wonderfully, this can extend beyond our immediate connections with people we know personally to include a wide array of people who contribute to our world. For example, just reflecting on gratitude for the rice we are about to eat at mealtimes can expand our awareness of those who planted the rice in another country and then to those who harvested the rice and transported it. Thousands of people could have our thanks extended to them in this way.

This is aptly caught in sociologist George Simmel's stance that gratitude is the most important cohesive element for society, it is the "moral memory of mankind," the bridge connecting one human being with another. "If every grateful action, which lingers on from good turns received in the past, were suddenly eliminated, society (at least as we know it) would break apart."<sup>8</sup>

Such a sense of interconnectedness brings us a deeper peace because it moves us out of our individualism and separateness towards a recognition of our absolute dependence on others. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has argued that a sense of interconnectedness is required if we are to assume the "radical responsibility" for the other that is needed to make us act ethically and behave truly as a human being. I argue that the same radical responsibility is required if we are to save our planet. We will be more motivated to do so if we feel our interconnectedness with our environment through acknowledging what we receive from nature, and the need to give back by protecting her.

### **The art of gratitude**

We can spend our whole lifetime developing what I feel is the *art* of gratitude. For example, my research has shown that many are better at expressing gratitude than they are at receiving it. We might feel awkward as we are not used to receiving thanks from another, or it might feel inappropriate because we feel it's just our job, or that we are not doing something so that we can receive thanks. Yet, when another's gratitude is not met with suitable acknowledgment, it can make them less confident to express this again, and the whole cycle of giving and receiving can grind to a halt.

Another vital side to gratitude is the art of giving without wanting anything in return, giving just for the sake of giving, not so the other will respond in a certain way or will even return our gratitude. This doesn't mean however, that we don't notice and celebrate when we observe changes in others as a result of our gratitude. It's just that we don't practise our gratitude with this in mind. There will be some situations where our gratitude is immediately met by another's. Although it's wonderful when this happens and we can pause and take it in, it certainly isn't the only measure of the impact of gratitude.

Besides, our actions of gratitude may live on in ways that we may never know, or which we experience much later. In her book, *Teaching Outside the Box*, LouAnne Johnson captures this in her story of a person who ran a private detective agency and was asked about the most common reason people hire private detectives. We might think that it would be to investigate people who are having affairs, but no. After interviewing over 150 detectives in his agency,

the most common request was to gain help in finding a former teacher so that they could thank them!<sup>9</sup>

When we are exhausted or burnt out, it's easy to feel that we have nothing to give. It's hard at these times to feel that we have the energy to express gratitude, even though we would like to or feel we should. It's important at these moments to be open to what we receive from others, and from the world around us, and to feel okay just to be in receiving mode until our cup is replenished enough to be able to give back through our expressed gratitude. Here self-gratitude plays a vital part, as many are far better at expressing gratitude to others than to themselves. When you have self-gratitude, you have empathy and compassion for yourself and are nourished by opening yourself up to what you receive from others, not just what you give them. You have great appreciation for your inherent worth as a human being, and spend time acknowledging your good points and being grateful for these.

However, there is also a basic human need to also receive gratitude from others around us, as is highlighted by social anthropologist Margaret Visser, who teaches us many lessons about the art of gratitude. In her brilliant book, *Thanks: The rites and rituals of gratitude*, she explores the significance of the French word for gratitude: *reconnaissance*. The origin of this word is from the Old French *reconoistre*, to recognise. When we express gratitude by recognising the value or goodness in a person, by affirming how worthwhile they are by expressing our gratitude to them, we are enacting *reconnaissance*. Importantly, she argues that we can't give this *reconnaissance* to ourselves. It must be given to us by another.

Margaret Visser observes that across all cultures: “there is in human beings a powerful longing to be recognised”<sup>10</sup> and sees this need for recognition as a “fundamental struggle for identity, relationship, and belonging”<sup>11</sup>. If this need is not met, we don't flourish as human beings, and there is a very real threat to our own sense of worthiness. Because it's a fundamental human need, it's no wonder we are shocked and disoriented when we don't receive it.

The more we consciously look out for people in our communities who are not flourishing, and find ways to express *reconnaissance* to them, the more we are contributing to a peaceful world.

Importantly though, to bring about this *reconnaissance* we need to observe, listen, and come to know the other person well enough to be able to express our gratitude to them in ways that are meaningful to them. This can often be different to the way we like to receive gratitude. What has been most moving to me about the ways in which people have expressed gratitude in the pandemic is that they have been doing it with perfect strangers, and trying to tune in to what they need – even asking them.

Cultural differences also make such understanding crucial if we are to express gratitude meaningfully to the other. For example, in many Australian Indigenous languages there is no word for gratitude. Many see the need to say thanks all the time as unnecessary or as

“whitefella’s business”. Actually, gratitude is deeply ingrained in their culture, but in a completely different way to how Westerners experience it. Their gratitude is experienced and expressed through an appreciation and respect for relationships. This is completely opposite to the Western individualised position of felt gratitude. As captured by Moreton-Robinson’s description of Aboriginal ways of knowing:

*“...one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self; this is learnt through reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences, coexistence, cooperation and social memory”.*<sup>12</sup>

### **When we forget gratitude**

Just as Georg Simmel holds that gratitude is the moral memory of humankind, Jean Baptiste Massieu says that “Gratitude is the memory of the heart”. When we forget gratitude, we forget how to connect with another in a heartfelt way.

Quite often a significant cause of our lack of a deeper peace stems from the conflict we have with others. My research shows that the main reason why people feel calmer is because they have been able to restore their relationships through giving and receiving gratitude.

Just as we feel hurt when we are not appreciated, we can also feel a deep sense of discontentment when we don’t express our gratitude to another. Going back to the example of the private detective, it seems very likely that this is why people would spend so much effort trying to find their past teachers – because they needed to act on this sense of unrest about due thanks that have not yet been expressed.

As parents we can often suffer great heartache when our children neglect to express gratitude to us, or worse, when we experience resentment from them. For those who have experienced this situation, we know that it can perhaps be the greatest destabiliser of our peace.

As a child I had a very difficult relationship with my mother. It was only when I started researching gratitude with my students, and so many of them talked about the gratitude they had for their parents that I realised how little gratitude I had had for my mother. I decided to act on this by writing a gratitude letter to her. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I realised that our relationship was so fraught that I hadn’t ever truly thanked her for all that she had done for me. I started the letter by thanking her for my life, and then the floodgates opened to all the other things I was grateful for.

When I saw my mother a week or so after writing that letter, she hugged me and told me that she felt better than she had for a very long time. I felt the same. Our relationship continued to get stronger right up to her sudden death six months later.

Although gratitude helped in my mother’s case, there are some situations where it may be impossible, or even perhaps inappropriate, to contemplate gratitude. With any recommendation for practices of gratitude, we need to tread lightly and with common sense, and always make moves that feel authentic to us.

When I have shared the impact of my gratitude letter with other parents, some have reported a transformation similar to my own through writing one to their parents. Interestingly their relationships with their children also improved and they felt a greater sense of peace and wellbeing. Even if their parents were deceased, they found a gratitude letter to be very healing! This is the power of gratitude.

I would like to propose that, ideally, we would find ways of encouraging children to express gratitude to their parents. Again, this needs to take into account the situation, and also the developmental age of the child. However, my hypothesis is that if children neglect gratitude to their parents (as I did with my mother), or are expressing ingratitude, their own peace of mind is destabilised.

### **The illuminating power of gratitude**

When we forget gratitude, it's so easy for other states to creep in – such as entitlement, envy, selfishness, lack of empathy. But here I propose that it is resentment that is the main cause of our lack of peace on an individual, relational and whole of society level.

Resentment, known as the 'emotion of justice', is that deep emotional pain that has morphed from anger or disappointment into something that lingers on for years even, or that keeps us awake at night as we ruminate and worry, or that sends us into a panic when we hear the name of the person who has caused us pain. Philosopher Amelie Rorty describes resentment as "...feeding on the past, chewing over painful memories of humiliations, insults, injuries, regurgitating them until their very bitterness acquires a savoury taste".<sup>13</sup>

I am not proposing that gratitude is a cure for all our resentments, and certainly not that the underlying trauma of some of these can be just magically solved by thinking grateful thoughts. However, one of the most important roles gratitude can play is to illuminate where we have resentment: it's often the only thing that can bring resentment out of hiding before we can do something about it and address its negative impact on our lives.<sup>14</sup>

Philosopher Robert Roberts' analysis of the concepts of gratitude and resentment shows that they are mirror opposites of each other, completely opposite states or ways of being.<sup>15</sup> Each cancels the other out. This doesn't mean that we don't have both gratitude and resentment as part of who we are. We can't have functioning relationships without some gratitude, and most of us are rarely free of resentment of some kind. What it does mean is that if we are trying to be grateful to someone, we can't be resentful towards them at the same time.

While resentment isolates people from one another, gratitude brings them closer into relationship, as they think about what they have received and how they can give back. While resentment alienates, gratitude brings warmth, acceptance, joy and love to relationships. While resentment drains energy as we lament what has been taken away from us, gratitude energises and opens us up to not only what we give but also what we receive. While resentment destroys and decays relationships, gratitude builds and sustains relationships.

Where resentment makes us feel that we are powerless in choosing our state, gratitude entices and awakens us to this choice.

In a way, *both* gratitude and resentment arise out of a cycle of giver, recipient and gift. Gratitude acknowledges what you've received from another and motivates you to give back in some way. Resentment comes with a sense of injustice and entitlement, a feeling that you should have been given something but did not receive it, or that what you were given was hurtful, and caused a feeling of inferiority.

Both gratitude and resentment also have a 'binding' characteristic. As Robert Roberts suggests: "gratitude tends to bind us together in relationships of friendly reciprocity, whereas resentment tends to repel us from one another, or to bind us in relationships of bitter and hostile reciprocity".<sup>16</sup>

Each time we take the brave and courageous move to address our resentment, we take a very powerful step towards world peace, and here I believe gratitude has its most important role. It not only illuminates where we find it hard to have gratitude, it also gives us the resilience we need to be able to address resentment. Gratitude helps us to value people in our lives and remember the good in them, and so be motivated to work through the conflict. This would be a step-by-step process, making moves that are authentic to us, and with the appropriate kind of support.

Importantly, gratitude can also help us feel calmer because we are taking greater control of our response to situations that might otherwise lead to resentment. We are choosing our state. We realise that we can't change others, nor do we really have the right to think that this is our responsibility. But we can change ourselves. When we choose gratitude, we can feel calmer because of our sense of ownership over the choices we are making and renewed focus on what is achievable.

In fact, as soon as we start contemplating gratitude in a deep and authentic way, we are automatically called to reflect upon the choice we are making at the depth of our being, our inner attitude. As Margaret Visser says: "The word *gratitude* stands for the process – freely undertaken and therefore hard to pin down with definitions and generalised explanations – by which a person's attitude changes."<sup>17</sup> You might have experienced this yourself, where you read or hear the word 'gratitude', and it immediately stirs something in you, a powerful reminder that you can choose how you are responding. Gratitude, by its nature, awakens us to the fact that we have a choice in how we are going to respond.

Of course, there are a myriad of lenses we can take when viewing relationships. When we use the 'gratitude or resentment' lens, we have a greater capacity to get to the heart of what is helping a relationship to flourish and what is destroying it. We get to the heart of what can give us peace.

### **Protecting our gratitude**

From my experience, when the pandemic began there was a sense of both dread and hope. The hope was that this would wake the world up, and wake ourselves up, to what needs to change in our present lifestyle so that we can be more grateful, take less for granted, look after each other and our planet more carefully and with more kindness and compassion. However, many lament that now things seem to be less dangerous, there is a tendency to just want things to be as they were, without any changes on our part.

This pattern of forgetting and going back to the old, highlights just how vigilant we need to be in our steps towards personal change if we are going to generate a deeper peace, both in ourselves, our communities and our countries. This is especially the case in regards to living a more grateful life, because there is so much that threatens it – busyness, stress, entitlement, competition, and as we have just discussed, resentment. There are also things in our state of mind and everyday life that make gratitude difficult, like illness, adversity, loneliness and depression. Even Brother Steindl-Rast acknowledges that he needs to be constantly reminding himself to be grateful,

*“Grateful eyes look at whatever it be as if they had never seen it before and caress it as if they would never see it again. This is a most realistic attitude, for every moment is indeed unique. But of this, I need to remind myself again and again. This reminding myself is the dynamic element in mindfulness.”<sup>18</sup>*

It is helpful therefore to have a gratitude practice, an action that is achievable, and that we take up purposefully, mindfully, and with a clear intention.<sup>19</sup> This needs to be an action that is authentic to us, but just a little out of our comfort zone. When we see it as a *practice*, it becomes something that we aren’t going to get right all the time, and something that may take time. Just as in learning how to play a musical instrument, for instance, it’s not just a one-off action that has to be perfect the first time. Accompanying our gratitude practice is self-reflection. We focus on the higher part of ourselves, the development of our inner life, our commitment to better relationships where we remember the good, what we have received from another, our commitment to world peace.

One of the most powerful gratitude practices that many of my research participants report on is that of greetings, especially if they do this with a heartfelt smile. For example, although teachers may have been greeting their students and colleagues in the past, they now infuse their greetings with a heart of gratitude, with greater awareness of what they have received from them. They report that this transforms their relationships and brings about greater connection and engagement. They have calmer classrooms.

The beauty of this finding is that it reminds us that the path to deeper peace through gratitude is in small acts, done consistently and with a clear intention. It is important to move away from a paradigm that says that we need to address complex problems with complex solutions, especially when we miss the very simple practices that make people feel valued and respected.



Another area that requires our vigilance is in creating cultures where reconnaissance is the norm and where gratitude can thrive, and where we develop the art of giving and receiving gratitude. This is particularly powerful if we have a leadership role but also true if we are parents, teachers, or carers, all of whom are setting the tone and modelling this to others. To achieve this, it is also important to create a culture where resentment has no chance of surviving. Some powerful questions we can reflect upon regularly are: Have we unknowingly broken someone's expectations or made them feel inferior in some way – two of the major causes of resentment – and if so, how we can address this in some way?

### **Conclusion**

My sincere hope is that we allow this year of great disruption to open us up to its lessons in how to live a more grateful life. Let us be ever vigilant of remembering gratitude and its powerful call to take less for granted, to restore our relationships, and to recognise our own inherent beauty. Gratitude is indeed the path to creating a world of “sharing, mutual respect and peace”.

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## Notes and references

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- <sup>1</sup> Suttie, J. “Is gratitude the path to a better world? A conversation with Brother David Steindl-Rast” in Smith, J.A.; Newman, K.M.; Marsh, J.; Keltner, D. (2020). *The gratitude project: How the science of thankfulness can rewire our brains for resilience, optimism, and the greater good*. CA: New Harbinger Publications (p. 200).
- <sup>2</sup> Some examples of this research: Howells, K and Fitzallen, N, (2019) ‘Enhancement of gratitude in the context of elite athletes: outcomes and challenges’, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* pp. 1-37. ISSN 2159-6778; Howells, K. (2014) Exploring cultural diversity through the lens of the practice of gratitude in education. *International Journal of Diversity in Education*; Howells, K. (2014). An exploration of the role of gratitude in enhancing teacher-student relationships. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 42, 58-67
- <sup>3</sup> The Greater Good Science Centre, UC Berkley, is a wonderful site for details about these studies.
- <sup>4</sup> Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Froh, Bono & Emmons, 2010; Tsang, 2006; Bartlett, Condon, Cruz, Baumann & DeSteno, 2012.
- <sup>5</sup> Armenta, Fritz & Lyubomirsky, 2017
- <sup>6</sup> This notion of gratitude is explored in depth in Howells, K. (2012). *Gratitude in Education: A Radical View*. Rotterdam: Sense/Brill Publishers
- <sup>7</sup> Roberts, R. (2004). The blessings of gratitude: A conceptual analysis. In R. A. Emmons & M. E. McCullough (Eds.), *The psychology of gratitude* (pp. 58–79). Oxford: Oxford University Press. As Roberts highlights, the distinguishing characteristics of gratitude are: “givers, gifts, recipients, and the attitudes of giver and recipient towards one another” (2004, p. 65)
- <sup>8</sup> Simmel, G. (1996). Faithfulness and gratitude. In A. Komter (Ed.), *The gift: An interdisciplinary perspective*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. Simmel, 1996, p. 45.
- <sup>9</sup> Johnson, L. (2005) *Teaching Outside the Box: How to grab your students by their brains?* San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- <sup>10</sup> Visser, M. (2009). The gift of thanks: The roots and rituals of gratitude. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. p. 389
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 389
- <sup>12</sup> (cited in Martin, K.L. (2008). *Please knock before you enter: Aboriginal regulation of Outsiders and the implications for research and researchers*. Teneriffe, Brisbane p. 76).
- <sup>13</sup> Rorty, A. (2000), The dramas of resentment. p. 8
- <sup>14</sup> Outlined in forthcoming publication, Howells, K. (2021). *Gratitude and Resentment: Untangling difficult relationships*.
- <sup>15</sup> As philosopher Robert Roberts says, they are “mirror opposites of each the other” and “we can almost generate a list of the conditions of resentment by consulting the list for gratitude, substituting harms for benefits and offences for graces” (2004, p. 66).
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 67
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 174
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid p.199
- <sup>19</sup> See the notion of gratitude outlined more fully in Howells, K. (2018). Developing gratitude as a practice for teachers. In Jonathan Tudge & Lia Freitas (eds). *Developing gratitude in children and adolescents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 240-261; and Howells, K. (2012). *Gratitude in education: A radical view*.