



# The Cost of Freedom

**Mark Tyrrell**

We've never been so free here in the West. We can travel to places previous generations didn't even know about, we can eat and drink what we like and we can be entertained 24/7. We are instantly connected to people everywhere. We live in dwellings with hitherto undreamed of amenities. Yet we've never been so depressed.

I saw a young 'other than thin' boy in the park recently. His generous granny handed him an ice cream (an unimagined luxury just a few generations ago!). The boy looked at it in disgust and flung it to the ground: "I told you I wanted chocolate on top!"

What is the cost of relying for gratification on receiving without effort, and perceiving what we get as something we should have had all along anyway, so not feeling particularly pleased or grateful for it?

## The lost art of gratitude

Have people in western industrialised countries forgotten how to be grateful? For Victor Frankl, imprisoned for years in concentration camps, surviving under constant threat of death, a day could be 'made right' by a split second glimpse of a sunset through prison bars. For Milton Erickson, 'imprisoned' by polio at seventeen and diagnosed as imminently terminal (his doctor forecast at one point that he would be dead by morning), being able to imagine the sunrise was enough to give him real meaning (although he was dissatisfied with the prognosis and proved his doctor wrong by living for another sixty two years).

## I want!

I did some hypnotic work for an elderly woman for high blood pressure. She said that any benefit would be wonderful and all she needed in life to feel happy was to appreciate three 'good' things a day - which may include witnessing kindness from another person, seeing a beautiful sky or even being amused or interested in 'anything at all' I have never heard a young person say anything like this.

## Depressed society

Rates of depression have risen by around 1000% in the last fifty five years and much of this seems to be to do with social changes. Being depressed, of course, isn't just a matter of not knowing how to appreciate what you have and instead focussing on what you don't have. However, a capacity for gratitude does seem to confer some protection from depression. And the so-called happiness researchers constantly re-iterate that happiness is not achieved through 'getting what you want'(or what you think you want), or having major positive life experiences, but rather through enjoying and appreciating lots of the small elements in life and being grateful for them.

### **But it's so un-cool**

Of course, gratitude isn't cool, and we've all been conditioned to feel we should expect to live a certain way, look a certain way and have certain things, and if we don't then we should be dissatisfied. Dissatisfaction is a great motivator and can move us to make efforts, but dissatisfaction without action or personal effort leads to bitterness and petulance - and yes, adults can be petulant.

### **Because I'm worth it?**

It's a shame if we feel that we should have certain material things but don't feel equally strongly that we should have certain immaterial qualities such as fortitude, perseverance, courage, decency –all those old fashioned words whose meaning appears to have been lost. Turning to outside stimulation to bring us fulfilment is a non-starter. Satisfaction is a by-product of developing inner capacities. What about "I can make myself worth it!" rather than "I am worth it!" Worth what? And what kind of worth is there that comes about without effort, determination and vision, just through buying something?

### **Now I sound like a conspiracy theorist**

There has been an active trend in our media to promote dissatisfaction (and therefore ingratitude) in order to maintain the order of a materialistic society which depends on consumers consuming. Paradoxically, however, the more you are satisfied by the small shades of meaning in life rather than just the big primary colours of existence, the more, in a sense, you do have.

From Buddha to Cicero, many philosophers have celebrated gratitude and the world's great religions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and others, have all at various times promulgated the idea that being grateful encourages reciprocal kindness, and individual and collective wellbeing.

### **Benefits of gratitude**

Two research psychologists, Dr Michael McCollough and Dr Robert Emmons, compiled a scientific report on the effects of gratitude on mental health and well being. The study required seven hundred people in three different groups to keep daily diaries. The first group kept a simple diary of events that occurred during the day, a second group recorded their unpleasant experiences of the day, and the third group made a daily list of things they were grateful for from that day. This last group were to literally 'count their blessings'.

The results of the study showed that gratitude exercises resulted in increased alertness, enthusiasm, optimism and energy. The gratitude group experienced less depression, exercised more regularly and made more progress towards personal goals. According to these research findings, people who feel gratitude are more likely to feel loved and respected than the non-grateful. They also showed greater immune function and less physical illness!

Of course, it's all relative. You will feel more grateful to have a friend to talk to if you've been cast away on a desert island for years than if you'd only seen them yesterday. You'll appreciate a good meal much more if you've had to go without than when you are surrounded by more than you can ever eat.

We don't need more and more things, we need to know how to enjoy what we have. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't strive for things in life, but we should understand that putting in effort, overcoming lack, and enjoying the small along with the large benefits is what makes us happier and more contented.

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