

## This Is Your Brain on Gratitude

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11 and John 6:25-35

Back when the War on Drugs was front page news, there ran a memorable Public Service Ad, where a guy stood in front of a stove with an egg in his hand, saying “This is your brain.” Then he drops the egg into a hot skillet on the stove. The camera zooms in on the egg sizzling in the pan, as the man’s voiceover says “This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?” And the answer was, “No. No questions.” Because the point was crystal clear that drugs are bad for brains.

Recent studies indicate that there are things we can put into our brain that are good for brains. One of those positive brain supplements is gratitude. A particular study utilized scans of participants’ brains while they were feeling grateful, to better understand how exactly gratitude affects the brain. They expected to see enhanced activity in the part of the brain that responds to receiving a reward. And they did. What they did not expect, but discovered through the scans, was that gratitude also triggered activity in areas of the brain associated with interpersonal bonding, morality and empathy.

In other words, gratitude is more than personally feeling good because we have received something that brings us pleasure. It is also a complex *social* emotion involving a sense of connection and identification with the *giver* of the gift. Even, a sense of generosity or wanting to return the favor or pay it forward in some other way.

This, then, is your brain on gratitude.

Something else that science has shown us about our brains and gratitude is that intentional, tangible acts of thanksgiving, such as keeping a gratitude journal, sending Thank You cards, or remembering things for which you are grateful when you pray...actually triggers a positive physical reaction in the brain. One conclusion that comes out of this is that you can train your brain to be thankful by intentionally practicing gratitude, the way you train your muscles by regularly exercising them.

This deeper understanding of our own brains came about through medical technology only recently available to us. But it seems that it is a wisdom that people have possessed for ages and ages. The Jewish Festival of Ingathering (that we just read about in Deuteronomy) was essentially an elaborate and sacred gratitude task intended to strengthen our thankfulness muscle. It was a ritualized way of performing an act of thankfulness for a good harvest by bringing a tithe of the first fruits of the harvest to a priest as an offering to God.

The necessity for a ritual like this grew out of a concern that people would forget to be thankful for their blessings, and forget to be thankful for the source of those blessings. The years of wandering in the desert without a land of their own was a time of severe food insecurity for the

Israelites. Which made it a time of extreme dependence on God for their survival. The fear was that once they came into a land of their own, which God would give them, and once they became more self-sufficient and less God dependent, they would forget to be thankful. The worry was not so much about the bad manners of forgetting to be grateful for what they had received, as it was about the danger of neglecting the relationship they had with the Giver of the gifts.

You might have noticed that in the passage from Deuteronomy the constant repetition of God's name in connection with the things they had reason to be grateful for. Everything-from their liberation from slavery in Egypt to their being brought to a "land of milk and honey," to the crops the land now produced for them-came with a reminder that these were gifts from "the Lord, Your God."

The first fruits offering was a reminder that the *whole* harvest was a gift from God. But it was also a reminder that all the blessings they enjoyed could be traced back to their relationship to God. So, the ritual was not only a token of appreciation for the gift of crops to sustain them for another year. It was also a reinforcement of their relationship to God, the giver. And it reminded them to express that gratitude by paying it forward in the sharing of what the land produced, with others, including the aliens that lived in their land.

One day, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus miraculously fed a crowd of thousands with just a few loaves and fishes, in a way that was reminiscent of how God had fed the Israelites in the desert with manna from heaven. John's Gospel didn't call what he did a miracle, though. John used the word "sign" to describe it.

While Jesus was partly motivated by the crowd's physical need for nourishment, the significance of his feeding them in such a dramatic fashion was intended to be a sign for them to recognize that he was the Son of Man-the long awaited Messiah-and to believe in him. He pointed out that their motive for coming after him was to get another free meal, but not out of belief in what the miracle should have told them about who he was. In other words, they were grateful for the gift they received from him, but their gratitude did not extend to the giver of that gift. Their brains had lit up with gratitude for the reward of being fed, but not in the place of bonding with Jesus. So, he warned them not to settle for food that comes with an expiration date; and miss out on the food that endures for eternal life. When they begged him to give them this heavenly bread he replied, "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*"

This week we will be celebrating our own national ritual of gratitude as we remember *our* ancestors, who traveled a perilous journey of their own. Not a trek across deserts, but an ocean crossing. After suffering deprivation and loss, they celebrated the first bountiful harvest in the New World.

About the original Thanksgiving Feast, Pilgrim Governor William Bradford wrote these words:

*And afterwards the Lord sent them such seasonable showers, with interchange of fair warm weather as, through His blessing, caused a fruitful and liberal harvest, to their no small comfort and rejoicing. For which mercy, in time convenient, they also set apart a day of thanksgiving... By this time harvest was come, and instead of famine now God gave them plenty ... for which they blessed God.*

The first Thanksgiving was a celebratory act of gratitude for the tangible blessings of a plentiful harvest, along with the sense of comfort and rejoicing that came with it. But it was also a sense of thankfulness for God who had provided those blessings. And out of that sense of blessing, they found the generosity in their hearts to pay forward what God had generously provided them by sharing with the indigenous neighbors.

Thanksgiving continues to be a ritualized way of pausing to acknowledge the many blessings we receive. Many of us, when we sit down to a Thanksgiving meal this week, may pause to observe some sort of ceremonial moment of gratitude. Some will say grace before eating, thanking God for that which is on their table. Others might go around the table, taking turns expressing something for which they are personally thankful.

Whatever we do on *Thanksgiving* Day, may it be a warm-up exercise as we commit ourselves to habits of intentionally practiced gratitude *every* day, for everyday gifts, to grow in intimacy with the Giver, and to pay forward our blessings as we become blessings to others.

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