

GETTING TO GRATITUDE



When life deals you a harsh blow, feelings of gratitude can go right down the drain. They're usually replaced with anger. That's okay. For a little while. If you go on too long being angry though, it becomes counterproductive. Self-defeating even.

Anger is fuel that, when used well, can propel you forward. It can help you get things done. As long as you are in control of it you can choose to channel it into productive endeavors. Whatever positive activity that happens to be, it will ultimately transform your anger and help heal the hurt that caused it. That's known as a healthy outlet.

But anger will embed itself if it's allowed to linger too long, and at a certain point, it will turn back on you and start eating you alive. You become consumed with anger. You become anger personified. Maybe you rage every chance you get. Maybe you don't say a word. Silence can be just as fierce an expression of anger as the world's loudest shouting match. Either way, it now has control of you.

As anger is doing this subtle U-turn, gratitude is leaving the drain and heading right on out to the sewer. It's far, far away from your mind and even farther away from your heart. This leaves you bereft because the heart is gratitude's home, and when it is gone it is missed.

There are those who are so spiritually evolved that, should a life-changing adversity befall them, they would be able to skip anger and go straight to acceptance. I wasn't one of them. I was furious, and I stayed that way for more years than I care to count.

The world I perceived through the filter of my anger was full of ignorance and injustice. It was everywhere. The way I saw it, I could either fight it or be flattened by it.

So I fought. Constantly. My life began to feel like one big fight. I began to feel as though I had been fighting forever. Anger was wearing me down.

I struggled through that time looking for ways to pull myself back up again. It wasn't easy. (Where are those quick fixes when you need them anyway?) Then one night in a moment of quiet at the end of my day I did something other than trying (yet again) to figure out how to maneuver myself through everything that was wrong in my life.

Thanks to a sudden gift of inspiration, I decided to try a completely new tactic. I asked myself a simple question. "Okay," I said, "what good things happened

today?" With those six words came my discovery of the healing power of gratitude.

My only rule was that everything counted. A smile from a store clerk counted. A beautiful ray of sun shining through the trees counted. Much to my surprise, I easily came up with nine good things that had graced my day, not including the daily comforts I had long ago begun to take for granted.

That made me take notice. I thought about the fact that I would have stayed oblivious to all those wonderful happenings in my day had I not decided to consciously shift my attention from what was bad to what was good. The only thing blocking me from what was good and right in my life was my perspective. When I went to sleep that night, I felt better.

I repeated this little ritual night after night and never failed to find that at least five or six uplifting moments had occurred during the day. I began to have deeper appreciation for my friends and family. I began to notice the beauty of nature much more. I noticed the kindness of strangers and saw it everywhere. I looked around my home and hugged my kitty and appreciated the safety and comfort I was so fortunate to have. I began to be thankful.

I started to take time to reflect on my day before going to bed and record each good thing in a gratitude journal. That simple ritual and the exercise of doing it are what lifted me out of the "wrongness" I had become mired in. It helped restore me. My energy returned, as did my joy.

Renewal and learning to see the world from a perspective of gratitude led me to make another conscious decision. I decided I didn't want to fight anymore. I thought I had been fighting against life in order to combat the injustice that permeated it. I was wrong.

What I was really doing was trying to cope with unresolved issues I had not yet come to terms with. I hadn't accepted some of the changes adversity had brought. The fight was going on inside me between me and myself. It wasn't going on "out there" between me and the world.

After a life-changing adversity, loss looms large. A reaction of anger is human, and perfectly understandable. But if you get stuck in anger, you get stuck in victimization, and from that vantage point life will always be unjust because it will have forever done you wrong.

I'll tell you something I learned the hard way. Life isn't ever going to fight you. Life is going to just keep on being life, freely offering itself to you. What you choose to see in it, what you choose to take from it and what you choose to give back to it is entirely up to you.

Somehow you have to find your way through all the issues of loss, injustice, control and meaning that are stirred up by an experience of adversity. I don't have a magic formula for you to follow. Many times it turns out to be the dark days that finally show you the light in your life.

All I can tell you is keep putting out the effort. Seek the answers you need. Go where your intuition leads you. Stay open to the miraculous.

And nurture gratitude.

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