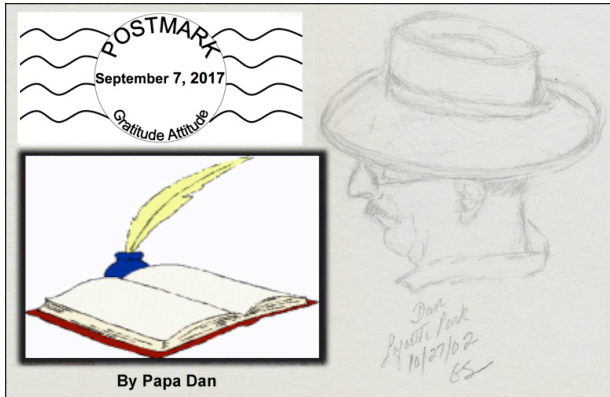


A Gratitude Attitude

By Dan Sapone



"Thank you, God, for this good life and forgive us if we do not love it enough."

— Garrison Keillor

"On the off chance that you won't live forever, maybe you should try to be happy now."

— "Network News" (HBO)

Let's admit it — Americans are having quite a lot of anxiety these days. We could list the reasons, but they are in the news every day; and it is not my intention to trouble you with all of that. I'm thinking that we may have something more useful to do today. I grew up in a generation that acquired the confidence, or at least the suspicion, that we, collectively, have what it takes to solve difficult problems and improve our lives and the lives of others. We have been taught to believe that we can make a lot of progress — in economics, technology, and society. I will speak for myself and say that I was taught to believe in that progress by my parents, teachers, and leaders. For me, that body of belief is summarized in the distinctly 21st-century assertion:

"Yes, we can."

But, today, we're not so sure. Such optimism is feeling more and more like hard work.

That "dampening" of our collective self-confidence seems to have happened in a relatively short time. I suppose that uncertainty leads me to look back on my education for an alternate strategy. Just thinking out loud here — I was taught that "despair" was a personal failure. So, "giving up" was not acceptable. I was also taught that lashing out in anger against things I don't like is not what reasonable, thinking, feeling humans should do. (I was taught that standard by observing what happened to the bully on the fifth-grade playground, when Sister Bernadette hauled him off to the principal's office when he got too pushy on the tetherball court.) Also, somewhere in my Jesuit education back in the early 1970s, I recall hearing the saying:

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

This is part of what is known as "[The Serenity Prayer](#)" written by an American theologian named Reinhold Niebuhr back in the 1930s and passed on to me in a lecture by a Jesuit professor, Father Tennant Wright, at Santa Clara University in 1971. It is typically offered as a prescription for happiness in "the next life" if we accept hardships and trust in God. My observation, however, — at the urging of that same professor — suggested to me that we have opportunities, and responsibilities, to make a difference in "this life" that should not be ignored.

So, what does it mean? Is there a way to bridge the gap between "Yes, We Can" and "Serenity?" Can that "bridge" have some effect on the current anxiety I mentioned?

The Physiology of Gratitude

Really?! Physiology? OK, so I stumbled on a chapter in a book called “The Gratitude Diaries,” by Janice Kaplan. At first glance, as I saw it on the library shelf, I expected it to be mostly about talking yourself out of feeling bad. But, as I looked into one chapter — you know how you grab a book off the shelf and open it to a random page to see what’s inside — I discovered something else. On page 179, I found some very mundane and familiar medical science associated with stuff like bacteria, the body’s immune response to bacteria, the functioning of neurotransmitters, and how white blood cells swarm to the site of an infection and attack the problem by “gobbling up bacteria.” In doing that, the white blood cells leave behind inflammation, which can become dangerous in itself. You knew that; BUT scientific studies aimed at understanding inflammation have uncovered some unexpected and intriguing connections.

So, here’s the really interesting part — turns out that the immune system doesn’t ONLY respond to “germs,” it may also respond to *emotions*. Kaplan reports that a couple of researchers at Johns Hopkins University and Georgetown’s National Institute of Mental Health observed that worry, anger, or fear activates those same white blood cells. Even though they don’t have anything specific to attack, they leave a trail of dangerous *systemic* inflammation.

→ Long-story-short — one conclusion from their studies: expressing gratitude could actually inhibit that *systemic* inflammation effect and prevent our immune systems from causing our bodies to react harmfully to fear and worry.

“A sad soul can kill you quicker, far quicker, than a germ.” — John Steinbeck

SO, the anxiety many of us are feeling about the bad news all around us can actually do *physiological* damage and inhibit our ability to cope with the world, to make good decisions, and to experience happiness. People are beginning to notice. Friends of mine tell me that they have been trying to avoid watching “the news” because they don’t like the way it makes them *feel*. Turns out that the intentional expression of gratitude for the goodness we see around us and the people who bring it to us — *in place of focusing on the troubling news* — can demonstrably counteract those very real effects on our health. The operative word for this effect is *healing*.

The Gift of a ‘Gratitude Attitude’

Let’s admit it — we have much to be grateful for. The very fact that today’s news is disappointing confirms that we have experienced better; we have been exposed to good people doing generous and kind things for us and for others, both locally and elsewhere. We have enjoyed periods of relative stability and we have survived hard times, both individually and collectively. While we have endured troublesome people (you know who they are), we have also enjoyed people who have lifted us up and brought us kindness when it was needed (and you know who they are). In fact, there have been times when WE have BEEN those people for others. Science tells us that there are positive *physiological* effects of intentional gratitude; AND we have seen that serving as an example of gratitude to others can make a difference for us all.

“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.”

— Albert Schweitzer

Heck, some of you have done that for me — and you know who you are — so, thank you.



Obligations?

So, if we acknowledge that focusing on “the bad news” can do real harm, does that knowledge carry with it obligations to each other — and to those who come after us?

If future generations are to remember us more with gratitude than sorrow, we must achieve more than just the miracles of technology. We must also leave them a glimpse of the world as it was created, not just as it looked when we got through with it.

— Lyndon B. Johnson

I have to acknowledge that *my generation* brought us to the “bad news” state we are in. Some might suggest that this conundrum — the apparent tension between “Yes, We Can” and “Serenity” — strains our impulse to *resist* the “bad news,” and by resisting, risk allowing that resistance to dominate our daily lives. Shouldn’t we resist? Isn’t that part of the “Yes, We Can” confidence we were taught to have?

Let me suggest that it is not a cop-out to say we must do both — simultaneously. I agree with the *urgency of resistance* — staying informed of the paths our nation is traveling, putting ourselves in a position to make a difference, contributing to organizations that can help those who are harmed by the “bad news,” and supporting those who want to push progress forward (yes, we call them “progressives”). At the same time, the science suggests that we must support each other by offering our “Gratitude Attitude” wherever we can. I must remind myself, in spite of my disappointment with “the bad news,” that I have a good home in a good community, a family full of successful and talented grown children and smart and curious grandchildren, and a wife who shares my gratitude and appreciates “us.” I have friends who demonstrate their gratitude for the goodness they have and for the time we spend together. I enjoy hearing their expressions of gratitude for their own good lives. I submit that we have an obligation to share our expressions of gratitude with the people in our lives — the people we know well and those we meet along the way. They need to hear our gratitude just as much as we need to hear theirs. OK, it may feel hard to do both things at once — to “resist” while also maintaining a “gratitude attitude.” But we must, because ...

“Yes, we can.”

