

Radical Gratitude

And Other Life Lessons Learned in Siberia



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Lesson One: Radical Gratitude



*'Poverty taught me that all
was not well under the sun;
but the sun taught me that poverty
was not everything.'*

–Albert Camus

It was the winter of 1940 and Vladislav Paluchowski had been hungry for weeks. A great, burning hunger ate up his insides. Lack of sustenance made him see strange things, like visions of flesh evaporating from his bones, rising into thin air, travelling up through shafts of sunlight. He knew the hunger brought the visions, but oddly enough, the images comforted him.

Outside, the real sun had long since surrendered its few hours of daylight, setting to a light grey cast: Siberia in winter. The wind raced across the frozen plain and moaned through the hut the family had been fortunate enough to find and inhabit, back when the old man was still strong, still the head of the family, before the hunger consumed him.

This morning, using several precious pats of dried cow dung, his wife made a fire and moved his straw bed closer, but it didn't matter. The only warmth the old man felt anymore came from the great, white-hot fire in his belly and the burning fire of his spirit.

When food and water were presented to him for the thirteenth time in as many days, the old man used the last of his energy to turn his head away. In his mind he grabbed his belt and cinched it tighter against a stomach that had long since ceased to rumble, only creaking occasionally now, like an old door, rusty on its hinges. As the man's strength ebbed, he felt his body sink deeper into the straw and envisioned the future his grandchildren would have, the future that his death would help ensure.

In tough times Vladislav had always turned inward, towards a greater strength—strength of faith, of wisdom, and of sacrifice. He had long before calculated how much food the five of them would need in order to survive the winter and he knew there wouldn't be enough to sustain them all. The time had come. To save the others—his wife, his daughter, his two grandsons—he would give up his already meagre portions.

The women—eyes long since drained of tears and

exhausted from worry and work and lack of food themselves—no longer had the energy to object. The two young boys knew to respect the wishes of adults and so said nothing. But they watched. This old man wasn't just a husband and father. He wasn't just a grandfather. He was a force of nature. To starve was his dying wish, and he would not be denied.

To Vladislav, it was a simple question of fact: who would be most useful to the children? He had protected them as best he could, through banishment from their Polish homeland, through the long, dirty train ride that he thought would surely kill them, through moving their scant belongings into this small mud hut, and now his last remaining duty was to save the children. All of those other jobs had been taxing. All had been difficult. By contrast, his current job was simple.

His job was to die.



When times get difficult, I often think of that old man out there on the steppe, making his final, fatal decision. That decision would touch and change every one of the people for whom he made the ultimate sacrifice. I think

of how the decision must have been difficult for him, and yet, also, in a strange way, so very clear. That man's life and especially his death have been a great inspiration to me. Of the five people who lived in that mud hut, and the four who survived to leave the steppe, I am the only remaining member still alive.

You see, that man was my grandfather, and the child he died to save was me.

Perhaps because of my grandfather's early sacrifice, witnessed at the impressionable age of five, I have always had trouble with the 'me first' approach of our modern world. Helping the self is only the first part of the equation. It is not what ultimately sustains an individual. As Winston Churchill famously said, 'We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give.'

Thankfully, most of us will never be called upon to make as great a sacrifice as my grandfather made, but we *can* make smaller, daily sacrifices. We can learn to put others first in ways that create joy and enhance our lives. By sharing my Siberian experiences with you (and drawing on four decades as a practising psychotherapist), I hope—in writing this book—to inspire you to nurture one of your greatest human attributes: the ability to understand and help others.

Ironically, one of the best ways to cultivate a desire to help others is to practise being *purposefully grateful* ourselves. Spending even a little time each day focusing on the things we have to be grateful for improves all aspects of our lives. And it's so simple!

Actively cultivating gratefulness is not something most of us spend much time on. We are more prone to focusing on our *wants* than on our *haves*. But this is not the only way to approach the world. We could easily wake up every morning thinking, 'I have breath! I have life! I have shelter! I am here!' These are grand things to celebrate and should not be taken for granted.

And yet we do.

The alarm sounds and we roll over and climb out of bed and begin to trudge through another day. But think, for a moment, about a day in which we wake and remember what we *already* have, the blessings that we have already been given, the things that we have already earned, the love that we have already found. Imagine a morning when we wake up and celebrate the *now*.

Remember this: *if you are in a position to take things for granted, you are already blessed beyond your needs.*

In today's world where consumerism is king, we are bombarded by advertisements designed with the sole

intent of creating a sense of dissatisfaction and longing—in short, to make us want the elusive *more*. This general sense of dissatisfaction keeps us from seeing the abundant good that already surrounds us. It keeps us trapped in the illusion that we could be satisfied if we only had just a little bit more. But the trouble with satisfaction is that it is a constantly receding horizon. There is always the *more*, the *bigger*, and the *better* located just beyond our reach.

To practise gratitude, we must tune out these negative messages and look for the miracle in every day. We must tell ourselves stories that remind us that each day—each moment—is a precious gift. And that gift is what we have now, today, not something we need to look for in a far distant future.

There is a Sanskrit proverb that says, ‘Yesterday is but a dream, tomorrow is only a vision. But today, well lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness, and every tomorrow a vision of hope. Look well, therefore, to this day, for it is life, the very life of life.’

If we can live in gratefulness today, the regrets of the past and the worries of the future disappear. By *practising* gratefulness, we move out of the self, we slow down and appreciate the present. And the more we practise

gratefulness, the more grateful we become. Like wearing a pair of glasses whose lenses continually sharpen, we find more and more things to be grateful for. When you wear your gratitude glasses every day, they become a part of who you are—a habit of being.

And ‘Gratitude,’ said Cicero, ‘is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.’ It is through recognition of our own gratitude that we desire to reach out to others.

First, have a grateful spirit.

I am grateful not only to my grandfather, for his sacrifice, but even for the awful experiences of our time in Siberia. Why? Because of the gifts that those horrifying experiences have given me, the understanding that they imparted. I am a better person for having suffered.

As a concept, I call this ‘radical gratitude.’ It is the idea that we can learn to feel grateful, even for the terrible things that happen to us in our lives. More simply put, it is a version of the old adage, ‘that which does not kill us makes us stronger.’ Assuming you want to be stronger, you can find a sense of gratitude, even in suffering.

Although we would like to know a world without pain, without suffering, we will not. The very act of being born is a painful separation—our very first. Life

then proceeds as a series of lessons, some of which will inevitably be painful: *the stove is hot, the blade is sharp, people disappoint us*. But beyond the pain, lies understanding: *don't touch the stove, wield the knife with care, learn who to trust*.

This pain is how we learn and grow as humans. Kahlil Gibran wrote, 'Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding. Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain.' Once we accept the message that pain is a necessary part of life, we open the door to radical gratitude.

Radical gratitude is the first of my lessons from Siberia not because I learned it first—I didn't, it took years to get there—but because the grace that radical gratitude provides is what has made all the other lessons possible. In the words of Edgar Allan Poe, 'Never to suffer would never to have been blessed.'

Of course we do not look forward to the difficult times in our lives. We do not welcome suffering. But radical gratitude is not experienced in the midst of suffering; it is only recognisable in hindsight. Once we look back at the difficult times, appreciate how far we have come and admire where we are today, only then are we open to the

healing that radical gratitude offers.

Helen Keller, blind and deaf from infancy, surely understood suffering. She also overcame it, learning to sign, read and write. And I am thankful that she did, for she has left behind a great legacy of wisdom. ‘Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet,’ she wrote. ‘Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.’ She also famously said, ‘Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.’

Once we understand the value of suffering, and that its annealing fire has the power to strengthen us, we learn to accept the difficulties life throws our way, and we learn to see past the trying times to a promise of greater strength and understanding. Hope lies in the lessons that our struggles impart. And they can transform us.



In his final days, Vladislav’s hunger became greater than any hunger he had ever known. The occasional missed meal paled in comparison. This hunger soared past that of being sent to bed without supper as a child. It was all

consuming. But he never felt hopeless. Despite his dire circumstances, he was full of hope. It was hope that had made him refuse all food—hope for the future, hope for his grandchildren.

As the tiny fire in the grate burned down, the spark in the old man's eyes glowed brighter. A sense of calm filled the room, but the old man was not yet fully at peace. He had one thing more he needed to say. In that dim, cold room, his white hair shone and his eyes burned. He lifted his head from the straw and whispered, '*Pochowajcie mnie nagim.*'

The family gathered closer, the better to hear over the noise of the wind. They held his hands; his skin was cool and papery thin. They touched his face. It had been days since he had spoken and they knew these words might be his last. They also knew that when the old man spoke, he spoke of important things. He did not waste words.

'What is it, Grandfather?' The older child, only five years old, stepped forward to assume his new place in the family, sensing his beloved *Dziadek's* approaching death.

Again the old man said, '*Pochowajcie mnie nagim.*' This time he spoke loudly enough so that all could hear:

‘Bury me naked.’ The family looked to one another in confusion. Had they heard correctly? This thing he was asking of them felt like the ultimate act of disrespect. He had been an important man in Poland. He had been respected and admired. They could not understand why he would request such a demeaning end to his life.

As his wife began to shake her head in refusal, the old man continued. ‘These clothes. Sell them.’ His voice was barely a whisper. ‘Sell them. And eat.’



I may have been only a small child when we granted my grandfather’s selfless dying wish, but I will never forget the sacrifices he made. I am grateful to have had this chance at life, this chance that he helped to give me. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you, Dziadek.

I talk about suffering in this book not to focus on the negative, but to increase *awareness*. It is very important that we not forget that suffering exists. We need not dwell on it, but as Albert Schweitzer counselled, ‘Think occasionally of the suffering of which you spare yourself the sight.’ Remembering that we all suffer helps to keep us human. It helps to keep us grateful.

There is one simple source of gratefulness that we can all tap into: the contributions of those who have come before us. No matter where we are in our lives, we owe a debt of gratitude to pioneering people who paved the way, ancestors who gave us life, reformists who insisted on a better form of government, inventors who have improved the quality of life, scientists who worked to cure disease—in short, people whose contributions have made our lives easier, better, or even possible. These people do not ask us to be grateful, but we should be. And the best way to express our gratitude to those who have gone before us is to pay it forward. We can express our gratitude by working to make the world a better place in the same way that others have made it a better place for us. As the saying goes, we must plant trees under whose shade we do not intend to sit.

There is a wonderful book by Gregg Krech, titled *Naikan: Gratitude, Grace, and the Japanese Art of Self-Reflection*, which teaches a Japanese way of practising gratitude. Krech instructs individuals and groups to learn to develop a natural sense of gratitude for ‘all the blessings bestowed on us by others, blessings that were always there but went unnoticed.’ He suggests we take a moment to consider the (approximately) 10,000 times

our mothers or some other caregiver changed our nappies when we were babies. We did nothing to deserve this—it was simply done for us because we needed it to be done. We were fed three meals each day by someone who cared enough to see that we did not go hungry. Someone first worked to earn money, then took that money to the store, shopped for food, carried it home, cooked it for us, served us, and cleaned up after us only to begin the entire process again. In short, we were provided for. We were cared for. Most likely, we were also loved.

It is important in this exercise not to qualify the care: whether or not you were cared for perfectly is not the issue. That you were cared for at all, is. When we take the time to realise how much others have done for us, how interconnected we all are, how dependent we are on others for our very survival, then our own attitude originates with gratitude, with a desire to give back.

Another key aspect of experiencing gratitude is learning to see that what we have *right now* is enough. It is easy to be grateful for the gifts that astound, that take our breath away. It is more difficult when the gifts are average, or even routine—as the gift of a parent going off to work each day to earn money, or preparing a meal for all to eat.

It is important that we remember to take note of the things in our lives that are quite simply *good enough*. This is where grace lies. There is a quote from the Buddha's teachings that perfectly expresses this notion: 'Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us all be thankful.'

Many people believe that they are what they have become over the years and that they cannot change their attitudes. Having seen hundreds of people change in significant ways over the course of my professional lifetime, I disagree. I have seen people who were angry or fearful become, with time and effort, calm and content. I have witnessed people who were dissatisfied and restless learn to live their lives with conscious gratitude and cultivate happiness. The key element in each of these cases was *intention*.

I learned the importance of intention from a wise Native American. He taught me that in order to change, one's intention has to be very specific and clearly stated every day. Intending to 'do better' or 'be a good person' is not specific enough, and can be daunting even to consider. But stating, 'My intention is to be patient today,' or 'My

intention is to be nonjudgmental' is easier because it is concrete and specific. By stating the goal simply, we make it attainable.

When we reaffirm our specific intention every day, it becomes integrated into our being and then is manifested in our behaviour. Simply telling yourself, 'Today, I intend to be grateful,' will help you be open to small acts of kindness and actively seek occasions to express your gratitude to others. To become more grateful, we must learn to take nothing for granted. It is often the people who have experienced the greatest suffering in the world who are also the most grateful. This is because they have learned that what they have is not a given—they take nothing for granted. They are grateful for what they have today and every day.

'To educate yourself for the feeling of gratitude, means to take nothing for granted,' said Albert Schweitzer. 'Nothing that is done for you is a matter of course. Everything originates in a will for the good, which is directed at you. Train yourself never to put off the word or action for the expression of gratitude.' Once we learn to actively seek reasons to be grateful, we suddenly find them everywhere. And when we learn to focus *intention* on our own gratitude, gratitude becomes

a way of life and our efforts to help others become natural and spontaneous.

Once you have learned to access the healing power of radical gratitude, you will find that the fullness of life greets you at every turn. What we have, we suddenly realise, is enough—more than enough. The sticky problem turns unexpectedly into a solution, the loss reveals itself to be a gain, the failure simply success in another realm. Once we learn to accept the transformation that radical gratitude bestows, all of life's possibilities open to us.

Radical gratitude allows us to make sense of and accept the past, to embrace and find peace in the present, and it creates a vision of hope for the future. Studies have shown that grateful people are happier people—more helpful, more forgiving, and less depressed. By simply taking an attitude of gratitude towards the world, ourselves, and others, we can actually cultivate our own happiness and sense of well-being.

Remembering the many things in our lives for which we *can* be grateful (yes, even the painful experiences), and spending a bit of time and energy each day on practising gratitude, helps to make gratefulness a way of life. And the ability to focus on the good, to feel grateful,

to practise gratefulness, is within each one of us. When we consciously choose to acknowledge and share our gratitude, we see how quickly gratitude grows and spreads to others. We begin to understand—once gratitude opens the door—that we are all connected.