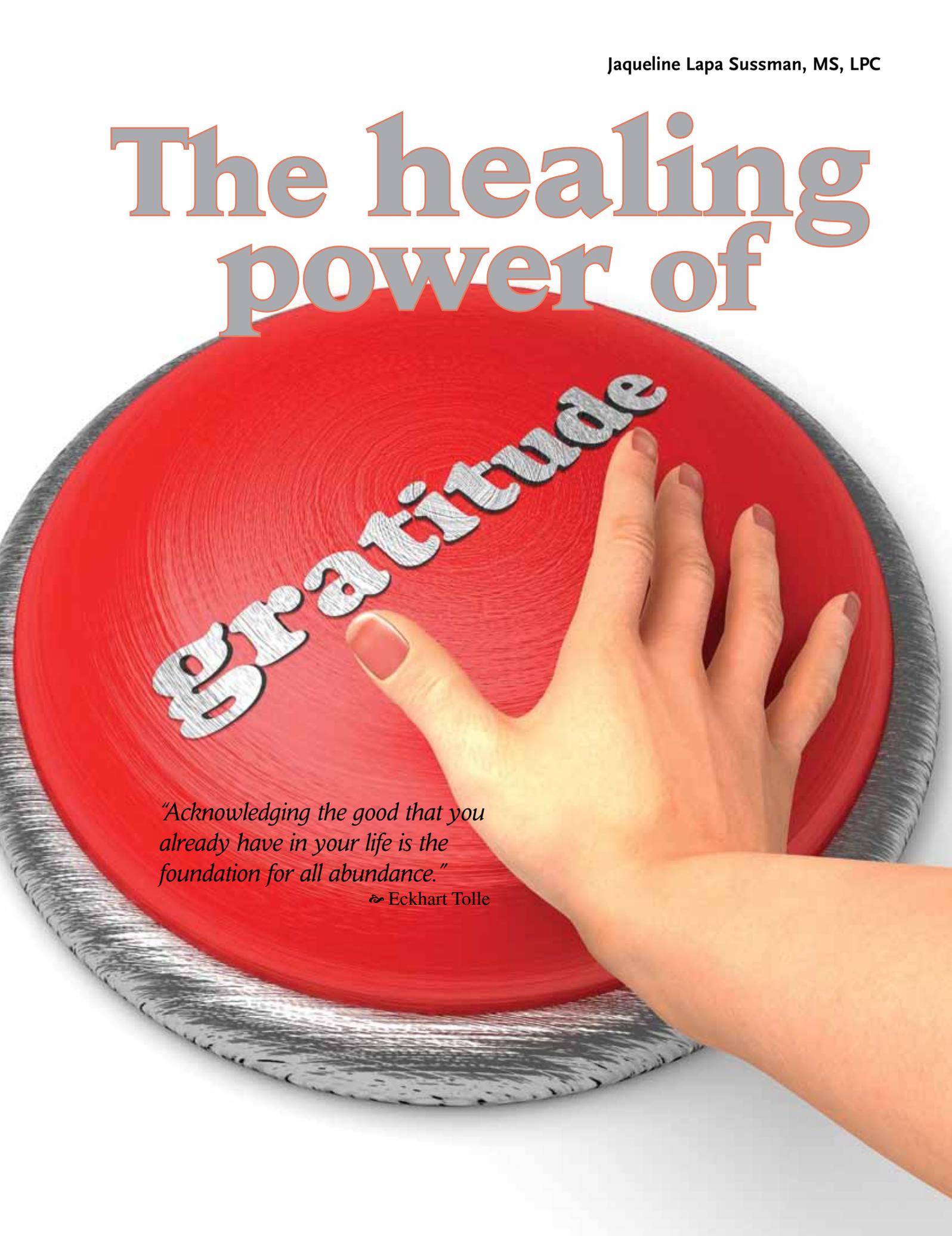


The healing power of

A hand with light-colored nail polish is resting on a red circular object with a wood-grain texture. The word "Gratitude" is written in a silver, metallic font across the center of the red circle. The background is white.

Gratitude

*"Acknowledging the good that you
already have in your life is the
foundation for all abundance."*

∞ Eckhart Tolle

Recently, I was reminded of the power of gratitude by a synchronistic series of events that occurred when I reconnected with my closest childhood friend. We had been out of touch for forty years, and when, through a fortuitous set of circumstances, we found each other again she flew out to visit me at my home in Connecticut.

Sitting in a train bound for Manhattan one day during her visit, we began to reminisce about our parents. My friend told me that her mother, now in her late 80's, had grown into a bitter and lonely woman. She described how her mother wrote in a journal every night about all the bad experiences she had throughout her life, and all the people who failed her.

I responded, "Your mother is meditating on negativity, and so it will grow. She needs to shift her perspective and practice gratitude instead."

I began to share with my friend how focusing on gratitude had opened my own heart and brought me a growing sense of joy. As I spoke, I happened to turn my head to look out the window of the moving train. There, to my left, just at that moment, we were passing an enormous billboard, which contained just a single word. The word, displayed in huge, bold letters, was "GRATITUDE."

I nudged my friend and pointed out the sign to her, and we both couldn't help feeling a little awestruck by the synchronicity of the moment.

Then, the next morning, while driving to an exercise class with my daughter, I shared with her the billboard story of the day before. Like all 20-year-olds, she was getting e-mails on her cell phone while listening. Suddenly, she interrupted me and said, "Mom, you won't believe this. Listen to what Courtney just e-mailed me."

She read, "In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich." My daughter and I just looked at each other and smiled in amazement.

Later that same day, seated in my home office, a psychotherapy patient surprised me when he said, "I have been reading about gratitude and thinking how I need to use more of it in helping me deal with my wife. Can you help me?"

Synchronicity is defined as the simultaneous occurrence of events that seem related. Were all these things, I wondered, just a coincidence, or was the universe trying to tell me something?

What I have learned about gratitude, from my own heart-centered practice of it, is that cultivating this state of mind can dramatically change one's life for the better. Often, it spontaneously elicits profound feelings of contentment, no matter what one's outer circumstances may be. Through the practice of gratitude we can go from the experience of suffering, or feelings of emptiness, or a sense of longing for something that seems unattainable, to the experience of deep fulfillment, irrespective of any outer circumstance.

Gratitude can be experienced in the best or worst of times. It can be experienced whether one is living in abundance or scarcity. This is because it is not what we have accumulated, or how much we have achieved in life, that matters. In my private practice I have worked with wealthy and highly success-

ful people who seem to have everything (family, great careers, opportunity, fame, position), and yet they feel empty, unsatisfied, or unhappy. I have also worked with those who have very little, but who are lit up with a palpable joy that seems to emanate from within. The secret of their happiness is that they are grateful for whatever they do have, no matter how small. For gratitude is rooted not in anything one can be, or have, but in a fullness of heart that suffuses one's being. People who experience gratitude emanate a light and positive energy that is infectious to others.

Gratitude is a powerful vehicle for attaining inner peace and contentment. Whenever I find myself caught in the ongoing chatter of my mind, or engulfed in an ocean of concern, I try to remind myself that I am perceiving life's situations from a narrow and negative point of view from which my body feels constricted, my emotions stuck, and the solutions to my dilemmas out of reach. At such times, if I stop, take a moment, and experience the gratitude I have for all things big and small, in an instant my perception shifts. My heart swells. Everything softens and opens. All things seem possible and I become very present. I become aware of what is all around me, such as the previously unnoticed blue skies, or the details of the way the light enters the room, or the singing of birds. It is like the parting of a dark cloud to admit a delicious bounty from within. Suddenly I feel good, and life seems blessed, rich and abundant.

What I am grateful for does not really matter. Sometimes I am grateful for my home, or my children, or the food I eat, or the friends I have, or the ability to help others in the work I do. At times, filled with this inexplicable happiness I find myself appreciating even the most mundane things. For example, once while driving in a car, consumed in thought, I suddenly noticed the new spring blades of grass emerging from the recently thawed earth. Upon seeing its freshness and vibrant color a joy overtook my being so intense that I burst into tears for the sheer beauty of it. I realized then that, in practicing gratitude, my capacity to experience pleasurable states of mind had grown. It felt as if I were touching a paradise existing within. Experiencing blissful states in the opening of the heart through gratitude can elicit an ecstatic love that fills one's body, one's being, with a sweetness and depth to which nothing in this world can compare.

Author and healer Tom Kenyon describes in his various books the importance of fostering positive states of mind, such as ecstasy, for physical health. He states, "The feeling of joy is felt through the heart center. The feeling of compassion is also felt through the heart center. However, the feeling of ecstasy is a cellular occurrence that permeates the entire body. When you are in ecstasy and bliss, the Ka (life energy as known in Chinese medicine as, the Chi or, in Vedic medicine as Prana) begins to vibrate at a very fast rate. The harmonics open in such a way as to stimulate the brain and central nervous system, especially, the neurotransmitters, which begin to stimulate the cells into a feeling of ecstasy and bliss. This then becomes a full body sensation and emanates throughout the body in every cell." He adds, "It moves through one's emotional and physical body activating a process of profound healing and balance." 



Rhonda Lenair

Associate Editor,
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SHE CAUSES ADDICTIONS TO VANISH

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Even modern science has noted the correlation of positive states of mind and physical health. The field of psychoneuroimmunology studies the correlation between stress, negative thoughts, emotions, trauma, and physical illness. Body and mind function as one continuous, interrelated flow of chemicals and electrical signals. Extensive research has demonstrated that the brain responds to negative or conflicting thoughts by releasing stress chemicals. These, in turn, negatively affect the body and its organs, creating a host of mental and physical symptoms. Conversely, positive and harmonious thoughts release healing chemical responses that cascade throughout one's body, its organs and systems. One is bathed in chemicals of happiness, pleasure and joy. The way to health, it would seem, is through cultivating love, gratitude and reverence for all life.

The patient I mentioned earlier, who wanted to improve his marriage, experienced a profound shift with his wife through practicing gratefulness. Frustrated in trying to get her attention and affection, which he felt she focused almost entirely on their children, he had expressed his anger by becoming increasingly critical, which only drove them further apart. In an effort to turn things around, instead of focusing on her shortcomings and what he was not getting, he began to think of all he liked about her. He appreciated how her sensitivity to their children's needs seemed to create security for them. He respected how much she genuinely cared about the clients in her law practice. He noticed the attention she gave her elderly parents, and what a loyal friend she was to others.

By focusing on what he was grateful for his positive regard for her grew, and thus he naturally began to shift his behavior towards her. When he arrived home, he approached her with a feeling of tenderness in his heart. He no longer hesitated at the door waiting to see if she would greet him warmly; instead, he would approach her with a hug or a kiss. He would ask how her day had gone and tried to remain fully present when she answered him. In turn, she began to look forward to

his coming home and, unsurprisingly, greeted him warmly.

Through cultivating gratefulness for her, the good feelings between them continued to grow. He had filled himself with love, and his effulgence had brought them closer together. In this manner, through gratitude, he discovered the power that making a shift within himself could bring about.

The point of relating this story is to demonstrate that when we cultivate and embody positive states of mind such as peace or, love, or gratitude, we naturally emanate that very energy, and in that manner we positively affect others.

Gratitude Exercise

As you go through the exercise below it is important to feel the emotions of gratitude in the heart as you picture the things you are grateful for. It is through the feelings evoked within by gratitude that the experience of fullness, joy, wellbeing, and deep benevolence towards ourselves and others can begin to grow.

1. Take a moment and think of the things in your life that you are grateful for.
2. Choose one thing and see that thing in your mind's eye. For example, see a family member you love, or object you care about, or work you do, or friends you have. Choose anything that you feel grateful for.
3. Notice what, precisely, you are grateful for as you see the image.
4. Feel the feelings of gratitude within as you see the image.
5. Notice where in your body you experience that feeling.
6. Let the feelings grow and get stronger.
7. Now choose another thing you are grateful for, and continue in that manner until you feel filled from within. ■



Psychotherapist Jaqueline Lapa Sussman has delivered lectures worldwide and has trained top-level government officials, health care providers, corporate CEO's, professional athletes and university faculties. She has been featured in numerous magazines and newspaper articles and is the author of "Images of Desire" and "Freedom From Failure."