

## REFLECTIONS ABOUT GRATITUDE

*“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

We have all had moments of feeling grateful, blessed and fortunate. It’s easy to conjure up these positive feelings when we are healthy, when it’s a beautiful, warm, sunny day and when we are doing something we utterly love. It’s especially easy to do when things are going our way.

But what about feeling truly thankful when things are not going the way we want them to or when we are in pain? What about when we feel hopeless and helpless, or when we have been sick for a long time?

Gratitude at those moments may seem impossible. The mere suggestion of it in the midst of some situations may feel irritating or infuriating. For someone to suggest that we could—or should—feel grateful in the face of our own adversity seems disrespectful.

When we are sick, our attention naturally goes toward what is difficult, painful or uncomfortable. Some of us default to old habits, like anger, depression, anxiety or withdrawal. Maybe these coping mechanisms served us well at some point in time. They may have even protected us but in the present, when we need strength and

healing, they are no longer useful. What we may need now is calm and inner peace.

As we become conscious of our own mortality and of life’s impermanence, we may try to find our way to feeling grateful—and appreciating *even* this time. Pema Chodron, a Buddhist teacher and author, reminds us to keep our heart and mind open and to welcome whatever comes into the circle of our life.<sup>2</sup> That kind of welcome includes all of our feelings whether they are happiness, sadness, anger, jealousy or whatever is present in us. It means deeply befriending our own self.

Consider the idea of “taking in the good,” a phrase used by author Rick Hanson.<sup>3</sup> In the midst of pain and anguish, you can choose to turn your attention toward what is right, however small a gesture, detail, or fleeting moment that might be. By lingering for 10 to 30 seconds on whatever blessings are in your life, you can expand your capacity to handle difficulties and find inner peace. Perhaps a nurse or friend gently washed or massaged you, or someone brought flowers, or a meal was especially good, or the light came through the window at a lovely slant, illuminating the dust motes.

By remembering the good and holding it next to what is difficult, you can readily see how other people are responsible for the gifts of your life. When you feel entitled or take for granted whatever you have, it’s not possible to see how other people enhance your life by their presence.

Consider for a moment where you are living, how you arrived there, who is taking care of you and what medications bring you comfort. Consider also smaller gifts like clean water that comes with