Untangling you

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Resentment	Gratitude
Dictionary definition: 'The bitter indignation of being treated unfairly.'	*Dictionary definition:* 'The quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness.'
Resentment is explored here more deeply as: 'A lingering emotion in response to a shock and sense of injustice caused through broken expectations or a sense of being made to feel inferior. More clearly understood in terms of its conceptual opposite: gratitude.'	*Gratitude is explored here more deeply as:* 'A sincere and meaningful practice in which one acknowledges what one has received and gives back in ways that are not necessarily reciprocal. More clearly understood in terms of its conceptual opposite: resentment.'
Resentment is distinct from: Anger, disappointment, disillusionment and envy	*Gratitude is distinct from:* Positivity, optimism, praise and kindness
Resentment thrives in cultures of: Competition, stress, self-centredness, entitlement, isolationism, judgment and perfectionism	*Gratitude thrives in cultures of:* Cooperation, calmness, other-centredness, appreciation, interconnectedness, acceptance and humility

Chapter 1

Why gratitude?

He who has a why can endure any how...
– Friedrich Nietzsche

I'm often asked in gratitude workshops why we would even bother to think about being grateful to our 'enemies'. Why should we try to be friends with everyone, or to love every one of our workmates? Life just doesn't work like that. Besides, that's just being phony, right? Surely it makes more sense just to keep in our inner circle those we naturally gravitate to and feel comfortable with, and stay away from those we resent?

I'm not arguing here that all relationships in our lives should have the same level of closeness or that we should attempt the impossible task of loving all people equally. What I am saying is that, whether we like it or not, we are always in relationship with others, and relationships in our lives really matter. We intuitively know this because of how much we suffer when they are not working – as I discovered with my mother. No matter how much we try to protect ourselves by pushing people away, if we are in a relationship

that is unresolved or carries a lot of resentment, then deep in our subconscious it is very likely to be eating away at us.

This was the case for Sarah, who had recently moved into a flat to share with her friend Dave. Sarah and Dave had become very good mates at school and were part of a large friendship group who went everywhere together – camping, clubbing, eating out, and so on. The differences between them in terms of values and habits only surfaced when they moved into the flat. Sarah – quite a neat, sensitive and careful person – was the opposite to Dave. An art student, he was protective of his 'free spirit' and need for lots of flexibility to express his creativity. In the past this had been something Sarah loved about him, but living with it was quite a different story. Dave would rebel against any routine as he tried to avoid committing to doing anything at a particular time. To keep Sarah happy, he said yes to the roster Sarah tried to introduce to keep the house clean and in order, but was half-hearted both in his agreement and in doing the tasks.

Things were coming to a head when Sarah struggled with the rubbish bins three weeks in a row, a task Dave had next to his name on their supposedly agreed-upon roster. When she was at the shops buying toilet paper for the fifth time in as many weeks, she was furious. She found herself getting upset in the shower one morning because of the mould in the corner that Dave had promised he would get rid of weeks ago. This was exacerbated by the fact that he had been late with his share of the rent twice. Sarah felt used and disrespected. What frustrated her most was that Dave seemed to be oblivious to the pain he was causing her. Over time, Sarah felt herself becoming cold, indifferent and withdrawn. She was also very sad that, for her, their friendship had soured.

Dave was completely oblivious to all this. A big-picture person who didn't notice or care much about details, he just didn't think these things were such a big deal. For him, what was important was that they were sharing a flat, eating together and having conversations about what had happened that day. Dave thought that Sarah's stress was just because she was studying hard for her university exams.

Sarah, on the other hand, was having trouble sleeping, going over all the details of what Dave didn't do that he had said he would do, and fretting about how to bring it up with him so that it didn't damage the relationship or cause him to think less of her. She was paranoid that if she upset Dave, the news of their conflict would spread to their friendship group. As they all adored Dave, she feared they would take his side and see her as too pedantic, a clean freak, or controlling.

Eventually Sarah tried to bring up her grievances with Dave, but she was too nervous and tongue-tied to do so successfully. She was anxious that her carefully prepared speech would go wrong. After a few more weeks of barely tolerating the situation, she decided it was time to move out so that she could regain her peace of mind and get on with her studies.

Was there another way through the conflict that didn't involve Sarah having to give up her flat, and her friendship with Dave and possibly with their wider group?

Finding your 'why'

Sarah's father had started to implement gratitude as a practice with his work team after attending one of my workshops, a few months before Sarah came to him in tears about her dilemma. As he started to rave about how much his gratitude had helped him feel more positive

in his workplace, enthusiastically telling Sarah how it might help her situation with Dave, Sarah looked at him with horror. Gratitude? Are you kidding? Hadn't he heard a word she had said about how disrespected and furious she felt? How could he possibly think that she could just put all this aside and be grateful to Dave?

Sarah was absolutely right. As mentioned, it never works to try to replace resentment with gratitude. What she needed in that moment was for her pain to be acknowledged. She also needed a strong reason to even contemplate gratitude as a way forward. Any comment from a third party in that moment needed to speak to Sarah's world, to make sense in the context of what *she* was dealing with. It wasn't enough that gratitude had worked in another's world – in this case, her father's.

It's certainly easier to see the relevance of gratitude in situations where it's natural or relatively easy to be spontaneously thankful. Gratitude helps you feel enlivened when you are taking in a beautiful sunrise. It helps you to have a more restful sleep if you write down what you are grateful for at the end of your day. A lot of contemporary research is showing us that gratitude enhances our physical and emotional wellbeing. However, finding the sense in looking for gratitude when you feel another person has hurt you can be very tough. Society wouldn't blame you for not even trying, or for walking away and banishing that relationship completely from your life – as Sarah was about to do.

Finding reasons to even bother to do things differently is a crucial first step in the move from resentment towards gratitude. Your personal 'why' may well be quite different from another person's. It will be influenced by your values, faith, gender, race or personality.

What is crucial is that you find reasons that strongly resonate with you. That's the beauty of gratitude. We all come to it from different angles and for different reasons.

One of the many pluses for dealing with the resentment I had towards my mother was that I then felt I would have some integrity with my students when inviting them to practise gratitude. When I looked more deeply, I found my 'why' was related to a wider sense of integrity in regard to how gratitude in difficult relationships contributes to a better world. This reason for why gratitude is important still drives me today, and indeed is the main reason for writing this book. It's also why I am motivated to keep working on moving from resentment towards gratitude in my own life.

Gratitude helps us feel more connected to others

A big motivation for Sarah to work on her conflict with Dave was that she didn't want to lose her connection with him and her wider friendship group. Gratitude by its very nature invites us to take a bigger perspective where we are not only thinking about ourselves but about our connectedness with others. Gratitude has a strong awakening power that helps us to realise our interdependence, and to see the value of another person and what we've received from them. We connect with another – or others – who made this moment, who were part of bringing this opportunity into being. When we thank someone, we are really saying, 'I humbly recognise that without your gift, I would not have this... I would not be this...' Gratitude gathers together and entwines giver, receiver and gift.[1]

In fact, numerous research studies have demonstrated the powerful role gratitude has in building and maintaining relationships.[2, 3, 4, 5, 6]

This is aptly caught in sociologist Georg Simmel's stance that gratitude is the most important cohesive element for society. He calls it 'the moral memory of mankind,' the bridge connecting one human being with another, and says, 'If every grateful action, which lingers on from good turns received in the past, were suddenly eliminated, society (at least as we know it) would break apart.'[7]

We experience a certain unrest, perhaps at a deep subconscious level, when we neglect to express our gratitude to someone who has given us something. In the case of my mother, while my resentment towards her ate up my gratitude for many years, there was still a gnawing feeling that I should be grateful to her, even though I couldn't because I felt so hurt.

When you think about it, there's always something we can find that another has given us. It can be impersonal, like the person who sold us the nice bananas we are eating, or those who grew them or transported them to the shops. Then, at the other end of the spectrum, there is the gratitude we feel towards the people we are closest to.

The etymology of the word 'relationship' shows us that historically it meant 'connection, correspondence' as well as 'act of telling', from Anglo-French: *relacioun*; and from Latin: *relationem* – 'a bringing back, restoring, a report, a proposition'. Gratitude has an amazing power to help us to connect with others. The words 'thank you', when uttered sincerely, contain a particular kind of 'correspondence'. When we receive thanks from another, we are often motivated to return this gratitude to that person or give it to someone else. In healthy relationships, this giving-and-receiving cycle is circulating much of the time. When we recognise another through genuine or deep gratitude – without wanting anything in return – we are touching a

part of the connection that cannot be touched in any other way. We acknowledge the worth and value of that person, and they are able to see more of this in themselves. We help them flourish and we help the relationship flourish.

Gratitude helps us remember the good

Sarah's sense of reconnection with Dave was forged during her next conversation with her father. Fortunately, Sarah's father started to understand how difficult it was for her to see the relevance of gratitude in this situation with Dave. Sarah's expectations of how wonderful it would be to be flatmates with Dave had not been met, and she now found it very hard to see anything good in him. After listening attentively, Sarah's father expressed his disappointment that the friendship had deteriorated to such an extent. He talked about all the great times that she and Dave had had together – the school camping trips, the parties – and all of the good qualities he could see in Dave. As Sarah listened, she recognised that the hardships of the past six months had made her forget. The memory of the good times had been eaten up by her resentment. Her father's words didn't take away from her very real frustration about the unfair division of tasks in their household, but they helped her find a broader context for it.

When we look at the scientific research, it's perfectly understandable why this happened for Sarah and would likely happen for most of us. In his 'amplification theory of gratitude', renowned gratitude researcher Phillip Watkins cites the work of Roy Baumeister and his colleagues who showed that, evolutionarily speaking, no matter how much we want to focus on the good, 'bad is stronger than good'.[8] This doesn't mean that bad people are stronger

than good people, but rather that 'generally speaking, bad events, bad comments, bad interactions, bad thoughts, and bad memories have a more powerful psychological impact on us than do good events.'[9]

However, the amplification theory shows that more than any other emotion, gratitude has the power to make the good stronger than the bad. When we are grateful, Watkins argues, we amplify our awareness of beneficial and positive events, of the memories of these events, and of the good in others.[10] It follows, then, that the more we practise gratitude, the weaker the hold of the bad thoughts and memories will be, and the greater our capacity to see a bigger picture that includes both the bad and the good.

Again, amplifying the good by calling to mind things to be grateful for isn't about replacing bad thoughts or feelings with good ones. As you will read in the following chapters, in the case of strong resentment – and particularly that which is harboured for a long time – there are steps that need to be taken before we can even begin to be grateful. In helping us to remember what we have received in the past, gratitude can often be the starting point in helping us to forgive. It takes courage and humility, but gratitude helps to orientate us towards the good in the other person, and therefore to see beyond what we consider to be the bad.

Gratitude also provides a strong protective power, so that it's less likely for the bad to take hold, or for negative feelings arising in a particular moment to morph into long-term resentment. If Sarah had been consciously practising gratitude towards Dave, she most probably would have been able to perceive Dave's actions differently. Sarah might have focused more on all the meals he had cooked, the takeaways he had bought, the lively conversations after a dull day of

studying. All of this had been nullified by her resentment and only being able to see what Dave *hadn't* done.

Through her father's reminder of all Dave's good points, Sarah was able to amplify the good she saw in Dave. This gradually gave her a new perspective; she wasn't so consumed by her resentment and now had some hope for a way forward. By focusing more on what she was grateful for in her relationship with Dave, she was able to remember how their friendship had enriched her; how he had stood up for her when others were giving her a hard time; how he had actually contributed to looking after the flat in his own way.

Gratitude helps us to feel calm

Part of Sarah's dilemma with Dave had been that her resentment made her feel like an unreasonable, controlling and overly emotional person, and it stopped her from communicating calmly and rationally. This really unsettled her, and she couldn't focus on her studies. However, when she found her way back to a sense of gratitude for Dave, she felt calmer.

In my research, which has involved numerous case studies in a range of different contexts, a prominent and recurring theme is that people feel calmer when they consciously practise gratitude.[11, 12] According to the participants' own responses, gratitude has helped them gain a clearer perspective, grown their sense of interconnectedness, and helped them solve a conflict they felt stuck in. So, another 'why' for gratitude is that it can help us stay calm.

What is it about gratitude that brings us into a calmer state? How can becoming more open to what we receive from others and the

world around us, and expressing this gratitude in action, give us the tranquillity that most of us are seeking?

As we will explore in the following section, gratitude helps us feel well, and when we are well, we are able to lead a more grateful life. We have more internal peace.

Gratitude gives us a sense of abundance. We turn our attention to what we already have rather than striving for more, or comparing ourselves with others, or wishing things were otherwise. We feel that we have more than enough. We are more than enough.

Gratitude brings us more fully into the present moment and frees us from worry about the past or from fretting about the future. In a way that's self-reinforcing, the joy that the present moment gives us when we are in a state of gratitude has a generative power.

Moreover, there is a certain unrest we feel at a deep, subconscious level if we don't express gratitude to those to whom we know we should be grateful. We might be too busy or distracted and not immediately act on what we know, at the core of our being, we should be doing – the thanks that should be said or expressed. Then time passes and we may feel it's too late. This can cause ongoing discontent.

Gratitude can also help us feel calmer because, by practising it consciously, we are taking greater control of our response to situations that arise, including in times of adversity. We are claiming more of a choice in how we act and show up in the world. We realise that we can't change others and come to see that this is not our responsibility. However, we can change ourselves. As you will discover in the following chapters, when we move from resentment towards gratitude, we can feel calmer, because we feel more ownership over the choices we are making and can have a renewed focus on what is achievable.

Gratitude helps us to stay well

We also saw in Sarah's case that her resentment was causing her to feel stressed and to have trouble sleeping. Another motivation to practise gratitude in difficult relationships is that when we are grateful, we feel better mentally, emotionally and physically. The exact opposite is the case when we feel resentful. We can learn a lot about our health by seeing how these two states manifest in our lives.

A poignant experience of this for me has been in my collaboration with an oncology professor to investigate the relevance of gratitude in enhancing the quality of end-of-life care for cancer patients. This professor initiated our research project because he'd noticed the difference an attitude of gratitude had made to his patients in contrast to an attitude of resentment.

Generally speaking, many patients – young and old – are resentful about how their dignity and sense of worth in the world is suddenly crushed by the indignity of an incurable disease. They're resentful about needing to depend on others. They're resentful about the pity they often unwittingly receive from those who care for them. They're resentful that they're dying, or at risk of dying, when those around them are well. They're resentful about medical bureaucracy and the countless forms they need to fill in. Then there's also self-resentment. Most patients don't like the resentment that their illness brings to the surface, but they feel powerless to do anything about it.

This professor observed that with his cancer patients, their resentment seemed to be a significant factor in the way they responded to treatment. In contrast, patients with the same disease, and of the same age and background, seemed better able to manage their extensive treatments when they had a grateful attitude. A number of clinical studies in other medical fields corroborate this observation.[13, 14, 15]

Clearly, the oncology professor is not saying that gratitude has the capacity to cure cancer, but he feels strongly that it's an important factor in giving cancer patients the best possible quality of life, whatever course the disease takes.

Recent developments in consciousness research and cognitive neuroscience have led to numerous clinical studies demonstrating that gratitude greatly enhances our wellbeing. For example, with regard to psychological health, several studies have shown that having a grateful disposition offers some protection against depression and anxiety as well as stress and trauma.[16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21] Research has also indicated that gratitude can lead to more refreshing sleep, improved heart health and immune system functioning, and reduces a range of other physical symptoms; it also improves mood and lowers fatigue, and may protect against burnout.[22] A recent study suggests that expressing gratitude can motivate people to put more effort into a range of positive behaviours such as exercising, building relationships, helping others and other proactive behaviours that lead to self-improvement.[23]

Gratitude also helps us to be more resilient. We need resilience in order to withstand the effects of our resentment, and to build fortitude so that it can take less of a hold. Research shows that gratitude promotes positive reappraisal and healthy coping.[24, 25] It also broadens and builds social and cognitive resources.[26]

Although research on the health implications of resentment is still in its infancy, and not nearly as prolific as that on gratitude, some evidence shows that resentment has the opposite effect on our well-being. As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote:

> 'Nothing burns one up faster than the effects of resentment. [...]
> No reaction could be more disadvantageous for the exhausted;

> such effects involve a rapid consumption of nervous energy, a pathological increase of harmful excretions – for example the gall bladder into the stomach.'[27]

In one of the few books covering resentment research – *On resentment: Past and present* – various contributors describe the negative effects of resentment as including anxiety, depression and embitterment. One of the authors, Pilar León-Sanz, historian of medicine and medical ethics, summarises the psychosomatic impacts of resentment as detailed in more than 270 articles that were published in the field of psychosomatic medicine during the period from 1939 to 1960. She concluded that these studies showed that resentment could be implicated in the development of ulcers, gastric disorders, heartburn, cardio-respiratory symptoms, cardiac disease, intolerance to exercise, headache, backache, joint pain, insomnia and stress.[28]

Research on unforgiveness and rumination shows a close correlation with resentment.[29] For example, neuroscientist Emiliano Ricciardi and his colleagues have provided a summary of the impact of the erosion of health that arises from these factors. This includes impoverished sleep, alteration of cardiovascular activity, stimulation of stress-related hormones and, over time, the development of clinical conditions including depression.[30] In other studies, maintaining unforgiveness is associated with stress that accelerates the ageing process and leads to a variety of diseases.[31] Likewise, rumination (medically defined as obsessive thinking about an idea, situation or choice[32]) has been found to have a negative impact on healthy coping and to be a contributing factor in chronic illnesses such as heart disease and cancer.[33]

Indeed, it's common to find the physical impact of resentment expressed in our everyday language, such as when we complain about

someone being a 'pain in the neck', or that we feel hurt by another 'in the pit of our stomach', or that someone makes our head hurt, or has 'hardened our heart' or left us feeling 'broken-hearted'.

Our 'why' should never be to change another

Coming back to the situation with Sarah and Dave, Sarah's newfound gratitude for Dave led her to the decision not to move out. In the weeks that followed, she noticed that she felt less stressed, was sleeping better and could concentrate more on her studies.

But you might well be asking here whether Dave changed his behaviour or not. It's true that he would most likely have needed to make some changes for the household dynamic to evolve to a more equitable sharing of tasks. Some of the stories you will read in other chapters have resolutions whereby when one person practises gratitude, there is an immediate grateful response from the other person – as was the case with my mother. This is wonderful when it happens, but it is not always the outcome. My choice in covering only one side of the story in relation to Sarah is very deliberate. My firm belief is that gratitude is necessarily non-reciprocal. Even with my mother, if I had wanted something from her when writing a letter of gratitude – wanting her to become more loving towards me or for her to change in some way, for instance – my gratitude would have been conditional and therefore much less powerful. I was very moved by my mother's response to the letter and the harmony that ensued. This amplified my feeling of gratitude. However, such outcomes were accompanied by feelings of surprise: I certainly wasn't expecting them.

In other words, we don't practise gratitude so that someone else will respond in a certain way, or so that we can change them or make

them feel grateful towards us. This should never be our reason. If we use another person's gratitude as a yardstick for the success or impact of our own gratitude, we are more often than not going to be disappointed, and this can become a seed of further resentment because they aren't acting as we hoped they would.

Besides, our actions of gratitude may also live on in ways that we may never know, or which we only find out about much later. In her book *Teaching Outside the Box*, LouAnne Johnson captures this in her story of a person who ran a private detective agency and was asked about the most common reason people hire private detectives. We might think that it would be to investigate people who are having affairs, but no. After interviewing over 150 detectives in his agency, the most common request was for help to find a former teacher so that they could thank them![34]

For Sarah to develop her gratitude, she needed to move past how it might affect Dave or change his behaviour. Instead, her focus for why she was practising needed to be to change *herself*: to keep her friendship, to help her to become kinder and have greater integrity, to amplify the good she perceived in Dave and her own life, and to become more skilled in relationships and dealing with situations of conflict.

However, although Sarah had discovered her reasons for why she needed to start untangling the difficulties she was experiencing with Dave, this didn't mean that all of the differences and the conflict between her and Dave just completely disappeared. Indeed, even though there'd been some untangling, and Sarah's gratitude for Dave was partially restored, her newfound gratitude was performing one of its most important roles: to illuminate where it is absent. If they were

to keep on sharing their flat – and indeed, from Sarah's perspective, if their friendship were to be more robust and honest – there were many things that needed to be said, discussed and hopefully agreed on.

The situation we have been exploring in this chapter is fairly straightforward, and it may be easy to envisage how gratitude can be revived enough to be able to let go of resentment. What is less straightforward are the things that undermine this – those murky, uncomfortable and often hidden feelings that make gratitude seem totally inaccessible, despite knowing that it's important.

As the following chapter explores, the first step in finding our way forward in these instances is to recognise resentment. By identifying the underlying characteristics of resentment, we are able to have a clearer sense of what it looks, feels and sounds like, and therefore to be in a position to do something about it.

Characteristics of deep gratitude

- Builds and maintains relationships
- Starts with a feeling of delight, appreciation, awe or surprise
- Deepens when expressed through action
- Needs to be acted on and practised, not just thought about or felt
- Generates more gratitude
- Grows deeper over time
- Cultivates a sense of interconnectedness and interdependence
- Involves a dynamic of giving *and* receiving
- Does not expect anything in return or any change in another
- Amplifies our awareness of the good in others
- Helps us to see where we have resentment
- Influences us and the world in ways we may never realise