

# BE

( Thankful )

There's a lot  
to be grateful  
for on page  
56.



## Giving Thanks

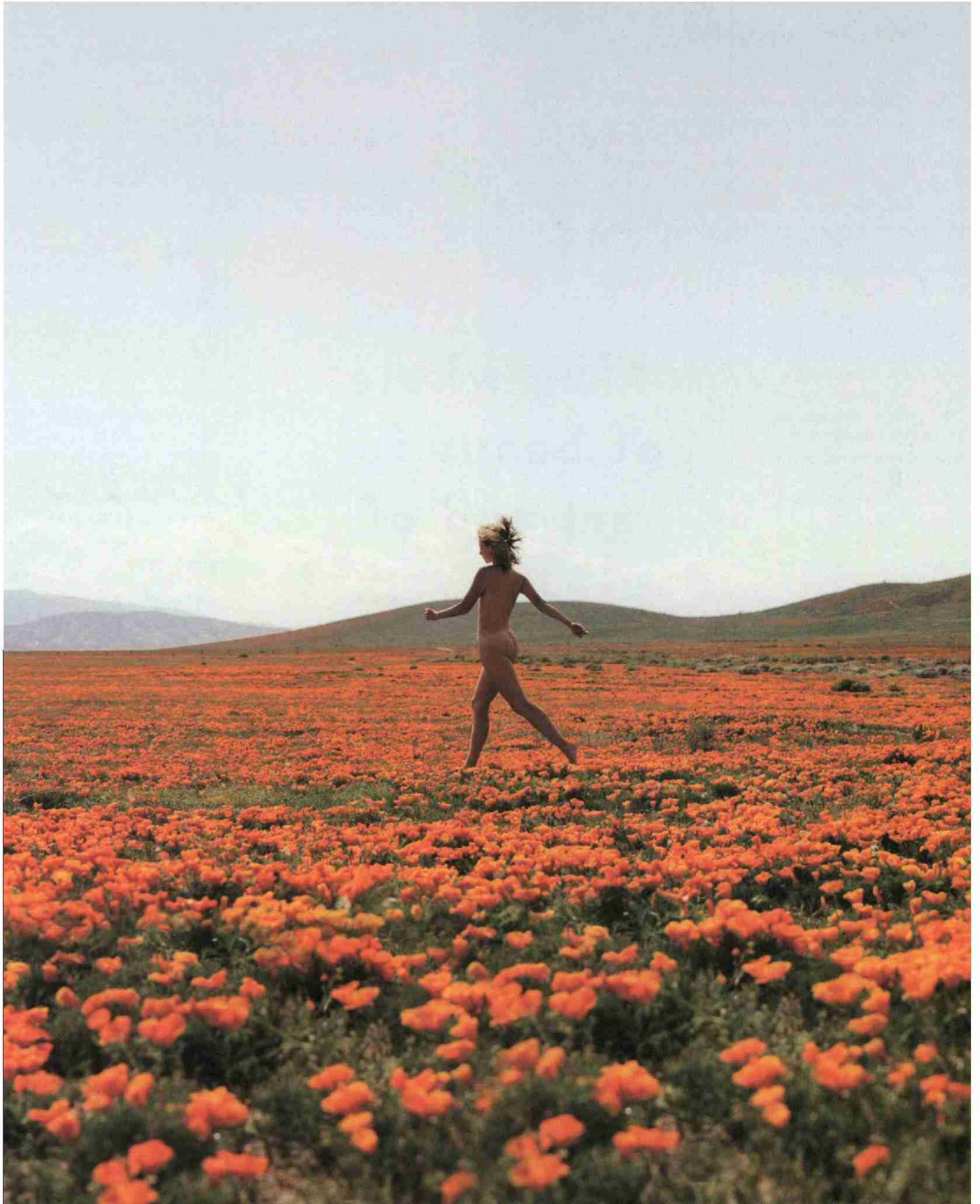
To some, gratitude is a vague idea; to others, it is a goal. But to anyone who has felt its indelible rewards, gratitude is a gift.

There's the joy you get from laughing really hard. There's the kind that comes when your father squeezes your hand goodbye at the altar. The moment your daughter sails away without training wheels for the first time. A first paycheck, a powerful thunderstorm, the conspiracy of a surprise party... There is no end to the list of things that give us a profound—or superficial, for that matter—sense of happiness.

Of course, these moments are impossible to sustain. It's when we remember them, when we feel them, when we notice that these gifts are immortalized in our minds, that the real gift presents itself. It is the fundamental joy of being grateful—for things big and vast or small and trivial. It is the simple art of seeing that there is abundance in the world and we are all a part of it.

It is with that in mind that we present goop magazine's first exploration of gratitude: what it means, where it comes from, how we can maintain it in the face of adversity and mean people. In reporting these stories, we found that gratitude—unlike so much in the human emotional spectrum—is accessible. It's always there, waiting to be called on, begging to bestow its gifts on anyone who can feel it.

The world will turn hard and painful, we will experience loss and grief and a multitude of setbacks, but gratitude will be there, too. It will be there to buoy us. It's an invisible net underneath every one of us, woven with benevolence and joy, woven with the message: The universe provides. And for that, we are grateful.





## Write to Happiness

By Sarah Blaney

*In hopes of finding gratitude, joy, and maybe even peace, one (very cynical) woman buys some new stationery.*

I have always believed that everyone is born with a happiness “set point,” and I long ago came to terms with the fact that my emotional metabolism is somewhere in the range of medium-low.

Okay, “simmer.” So it was with an internal eye roll that I agreed to try to adjust that set point and increase my perceived baseline of happiness. I’m not exactly sure when gratitude first became the sort of action that could be referred to as a “practice”—like violin or conjugating verbs in Danish. It’s certainly not a new phenomenon, since even my son’s teacher has his second-grade class make lists of things they are thankful for, and on the occasion of my most recent birthday, I received not one but two leather-bound “gratitude journals.” I do, however, know why the gratitude industrial complex is enormously popular: People say it works. Decades of psychological studies have shown that a daily routine of listing out the things in your life that you treasure, profound or mundane, can make a measurable impact on your happiness. But here’s the thing about gratitude: It’s not much of a defense mechanism. For someone who has spent four decades organizing her emotional life around the principle of “hope for the best, prepare for the worst,” the idea of writing a daily list of things I’m grateful for is challenging at best, terrifying at worst. When I’ve tried it, the exercise has gone something like this (subtitles courtesy of my insubordinate doomsday prepper of a brain):

Things I’m Grateful For:

The nice weather today (Downpours forecast for tomorrow)

My health (Not that you’ve exercised in three weeks)

My kids (Hardly the most creative answer, but it’s the truth. This one is gets a pass.)

My kids’ health (Do you really want to call attention to that? Of all the things to jinx?!)

Organic strawberries from the farmers’ market (You’re officially part of the 1 percent. Congratulations.)

“The whole  
of beautiful  
art and of  
great art...  
their common  
essence is  
gratitude.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Cynicism is in my DNA right next to green eyes and brown hair. And because in addition to being a cynic,

I’m a bit of a masochist, I have tried this exercise quite a few times over the years. Every time, it has seemed completely logical to me on an intellectual level (making a conscious choice to acknowledge what’s going right in your life shifts the emphasis away from what’s not). But it’s utterly impossible in practice. The items on my list were too trite or too frivolous, or both.

Then I learned about gratitude letters. Dr. Martin Seligman, the director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, who is often considered the father of positive psychology, featured gratitude letters in a 2005 study that measured the effects of various actions on subjects’ well-being. Volunteers had to write a letter to someone detailing how the person had enriched his or her life. The subjects who wrote the letter showed a greater increase in happiness after just one week than those who did any of the other exercises. Same

basic premise as a gratitude list, except this variation seemed: somewhat daunting (because I knew I’d want each letter to be an exquisitely wrought prose poem that would change the receiver’s life; I am a writer, after all). But it was also intriguing. In Seligman’s original experiment, the subjects wrote one letter a week for a month and delivered each letter in person. My version would be one letter a day for a week sent by mail. I bought expensive, letter-size stationery that could in no way be mistaken for mere thank-you cards, and I got to work.

The first letter took more than two hours, even though





it was the easiest to tackle. I have a mother-in-law so kind, generous, and nonintrusive that my husband has (rightly) always referred to her as his dowry. This cheerful, selfless babysitter-on-demand is almost certainly the reason our twin infants actually made it to their second birthday without being put up for adoption. But before I picked up my special gratitude-letter pen (yep, bought one of those, too), I realized what I hadn't ever spelled out in any detail is how much I enjoy the person she is, in addition to the things she does. I thanked her for being a good listener, a great advice-giver, and the rare person who knows which role to play at any given time. I thanked her for being slow to anger and quick to forgive. It poured out of me. My brain did notice an atrocious amount of word repetition and one glaring grammar mistake but otherwise had no comment. I put it in the mail.

The second letter was to an old mentor who actually would notice egregious word repetition. It felt a bit awkward to write someone out of the blue after almost twenty years, but when I got stuck, I thought of how he would be so pleased to know how he had shaped my career. And the thought made me...happy. I wrote the third letter in thirty minutes. I didn't dread any of it.

As an experiment, I sent my fourth letter to an acquaintance in town to thank her for a pattern of being unusually considerate (especially for suburban New Jersey), just to see if lower stakes made me more or less critical of how I expressed my gratitude. Answer: not really. Apparently the father of positive psychology wasn't just gilding the gratitude lily with the paper and the envelopes. Four letters in, and I was feeling joy—the unshakable, deeply rooted kind. The kind that feels real.

Something about flipping the focus of the practice—away from me and onto the vast spectrum of generous, enriching ways other people do what they do—made all the difference. In the end, my seven letters took eleven days, only one was hand-delivered, and I chickened out of writing to a whole subset of people with whom I have relationships that are complicated, or sad, or maybe even doomed. But that doesn't mean I won't ever write to them.

Maybe I'll even make a list.

“I urge you  
to please notice  
when you are  
happy, and exclaim  
or murmur or  
think at some  
point, ‘If this isn’t  
nice, I don’t  
know what is.’”

—Kurt Vonnegut

**E**verybody knows one. A coworker who can level you with a mean look. An acquaintance who can damn with faint praise. Someone who sucks confidence out of your body like a Dementor.

“The adage ‘misery loves company’ was coined for a reason,” says Allison White, a Los Angeles-based life coach. “Negative people’s dark energy loves to feed off others.” We asked White how to avoid getting sucked in.

### 1. LOVING DETACHMENT.

Stay conscious of the idea that someone else’s negativity isn’t personal. Despite how it can feel (if you let it), your mother’s criticism and your coworker’s passive-aggressive comments are about them, their discontent, their fears. It’s easy to get defensive or angry, but only if you take these things personally. The key to the loving detachment tool is to disconnect—without anger or judgment. Visualize yourself inside a bubble. You can clearly see and interact with negative people around you, but they cannot penetrate your energetic space. Do this enough and it can be very liberating.

### 2. ACTIVE LOVE.

I learned this from psychiatrist Phil Stutz: When someone comes at you with darkness, flood them with light. Our ability to generate love for someone who has none strengthens our ability to generate it for ourselves. See your heart fill with light until your chest feels as if it’s ready to burst. Then let the light pour onto the negative person. Active love requires that you go

into a state of outflow, that you transmute your anger into love for this person. If you use it regularly, you’ll be amazed at how healing it is.

### 3. EMBODIED COMPASSION.

This is simple but powerful: See the person upsetting you as sick in bed. If someone on the street insulted you, it might elicit anger. If that same person said the same thing but they were bedridden and trembling with a fever, you’d find it much easier to cut them some slack. It’s hard, but habitually negative people need our compassion even more than positive people do.

## Rules of Engagement

**W**ho wouldn't want to be happier, be less afraid, and improve the quality of their life? According to Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston and the author of *Dare to Lead*, it comes down to four very simple words.

**goop:** You've talked a lot about a surprising revelation in your research: that practicing gratitude is the key to joy. Why do you think this is?

**Brown:** Before the research, I'd assumed that joyful people were grateful people. But after interviewing thousands of people about their experiences of joy and gratitude, three patterns emerged:

1. Without exception, every person I interviewed who described living a joyful life or described themselves as joyful actively practiced gratitude and attributed their joyfulness to that practice.
2. Both joy and gratitude were described as spiritual practices that were bound to a belief in human interconnectedness and a power greater than us.
3. The difference between happiness and joy can be equated to the difference between a human emotion connected to circumstances and one that has a spiritual way of engaging with the world.

**goop:** What does practicing gratitude mean in practical terms?

**Brown:** Our attitude doesn't always translate to action. I think the best way to think about practicing gratitude is: Are you doing something that is tangible and observable? In my family, we go around the table and take turns sharing one thing we're grateful for that day. On birthdays, everyone shares one gratitude for the birthday person. At work, we put people's names on large posters and ask everyone to write one gratitude on a sticky under each name. I also keep a journal and write down three things I'm grateful for almost every day. It's more than just thinking of things we're grateful for—it's verbalizing them.

**goop:** How has this affected your own life?

**Brown:** Joy is the most vulnerable of all human emotions—and that's saying something given that I also study shame and fear. It's almost terrifying to allow ourselves to lean into the feeling of joy, because we're afraid we'll be sucker punched by pain or disappointment. So what many of us do—myself included—is try to outsmart vulnerability so we don't get sucker punched by pain. If I'm standing over my kids when they're sleeping, I go from deep joy to sheer terror in five seconds and start getting visions of something terrible happening. When I was watching Ellen get into the car with her prom date, I couldn't push the image of a car crash out of my mind. I know it sounds crazy, but I've also studied this for over a decade, and if it's crazy, there are a whole bunch of us who are. About 90 percent

of us, and 95 percent of parents, experience some degree of "foreboding joy."

Of course, no amount of planning can stop pain. We can, however, squander the very joy we need to bring into our lives so that when hard things happen, we don't have a reservoir of strength to tap into.

Men and women who have the capacity to lean fully into joy share one variable in common: They practice gratitude. Vulnerability is real, and we have a physiological response to it—a quiver. Some of us use that quiver as a warning sign to start dress-rehearsing tragedy, while others use it as a reminder to practice gratitude. Now, in those deeply joyful moments when I feel the quiver, I literally say, "I'm so grateful for..." And sometimes I say it over and over. It's changed my life.

## What's on Your Mind?

Practicing gratitude doesn't just feel good—it has quantifiable medical benefits. Alex Korb, PhD, a neuroscientist and the author of *The Upward Spiral: Using Neuroscience to Reverse the Course of Depression, One Small Change at a Time*, explains why.

➤ Gratitude leads to significant reductions in stress, anxiety, and depression, and practicing gratitude has been proven to reduce pain and benefit the immune system. "There's even a study of college students that shows practicing gratitude before bed improves the quality of sleep and reduces worry," says Korb.

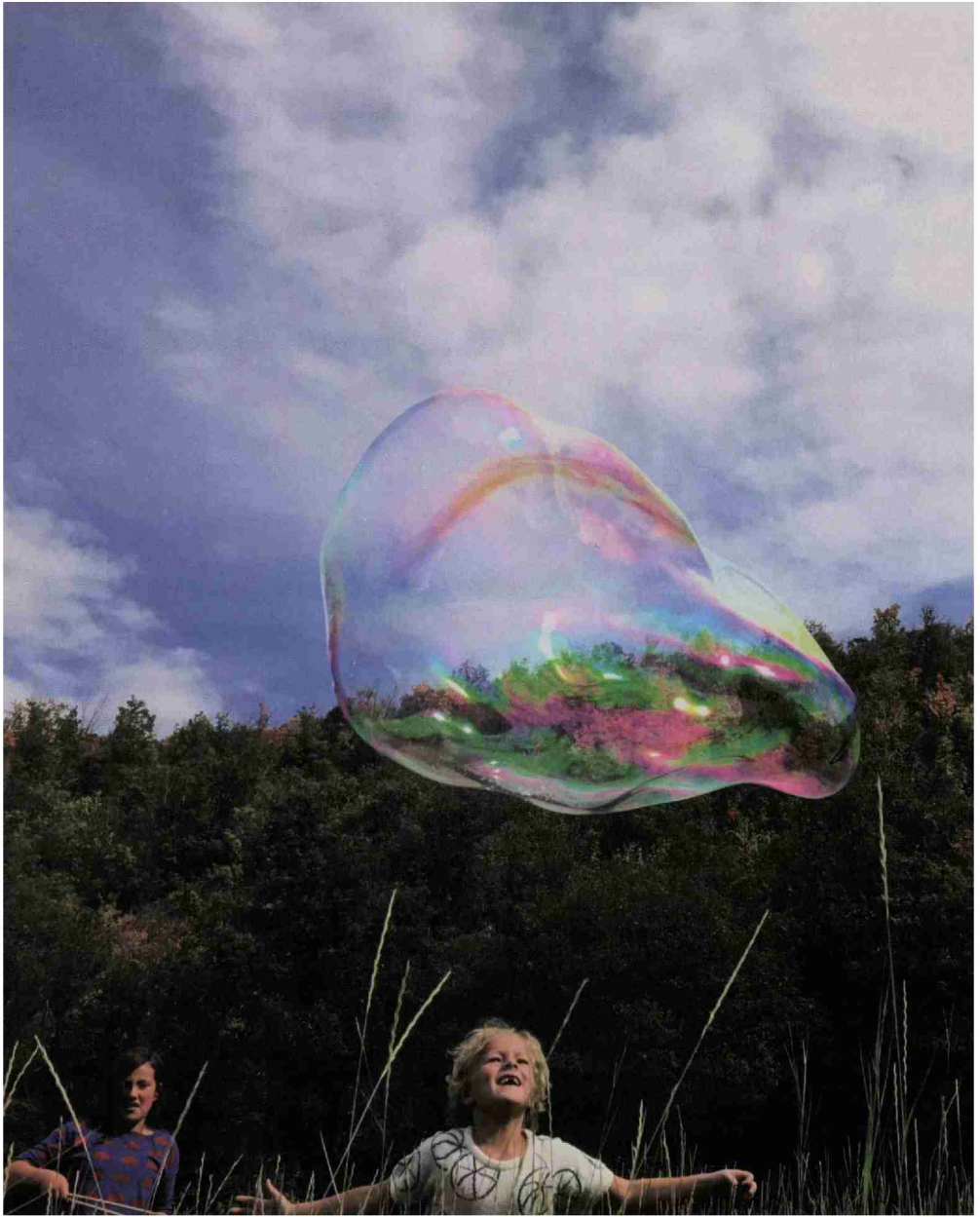
➤ The billions of neurons in your brain are organized into discrete circuits that contribute to mood. "By making small changes in your actions and thoughts, you can change the chemistry of these brain circuits," says Korb. "As you repeat this over and over, your brain goes through neuroplasticity—it reshapes itself."

➤ Your brain's circuits are involved in general processes like attention and filtering information, figuring out what is relevant and what is irrelevant. "By practicing gratitude, you are basically training that circuit to pay more attention to the positive aspects of reality—you are making them more relevant," says Korb. "The 'gratitude circuit' will

start to automatically guide your attention toward those more positive aspects of reality and less toward the negative ones."

➤ Practicing gratitude also stimulates the region of the brain stem that produces dopamine, which is the primary reward neurotransmitter, and "dopamine is what makes it enjoyable to find five dollars or have sex or eat chocolate," says Korb.





## Going Home for the Holidays?

**T**hat idea alone will elicit either genuine cheer, slow-growing dread, or any of the myriad emotions in between. For insight into the complicated, fraught world of family dynamics, we sat down with holistic psychotherapist Marcy Cole, PhD, and psychiatrist Robin Berman, MD.

**goop:** Do family issues come up more at the end of the year?

**Cole:** We assume going home is going to be the way it's always been. Maybe you're the baby and everyone still treats you like child. Maybe there's dread around dad's drinking, or a sibling rivalry, or any other charged stuff. All this stuff comes up.

**Berman:** When you go home, no matter how old you are, you can slip back into childhood roles.

**goop:** How can you avoid that?

**Cole:** Hold off on assumptions. We're ever-evolving beings—if you're continuing to grow, perhaps your mom is, too.

**Berman:** When you go back home, you get perspective on who you've become. Take a moment to stop, take a breath. Observe the dynamic: Proceed differently than you would have before. If your family stays in the same roles but you evolve, things will shift. When you do it differently, you are forming new neuropathways, a new dynamic.

**Cole:** If you want your mother to be more loving, extend more love to her. And try giving her that love without expectation. You can feel more at peace knowing that you are loving authentically.

**goop:** How do you do that?

**Berman:** It requires self-care and self-compassion. Within every grown woman is a little girl. Remind yourself: I'm an adult now. How scary for that little girl, to have been in that situation without the perspective I have now. When you're dealing with someone who's wounded, just think, Wow, their road must've been so much harder than mine.

**Cole:** Have empathy for their pain. At the end of the day, everyone just wants to be seen, heard, loved, and valued.

**Berman:** Listening and being present are great ways to defuse big emotions. It's not going to be a Norman Rockwell painting, but within the mess, there are moments of grace.

**Cole:** Amen, sister.

“Every day,  
think as you wake  
up: Today I am  
fortunate to have  
woken up. I am  
alive. I have a  
precious human  
life. I am not going  
to waste it.”

—The Dalai Lama

▼

THANK YOU  
AND GOOD  
NIGHT

Bedtime reading  
with your kids lends  
itself to the theme  
of these books:  
There is much to  
be grateful for.

1 —

***The Thankful Book***  
by Todd Parr

The illustrations, the primary-color palette, and the relatable, kid-speak language keep fleeting attention spans actively engaged.

2 —

***The Gift of Nothing***  
by Patrick McDonnell

The idea that showing gratitude doesn't require anything tangible is a bit of a thinker—save some time for discussion before lights-out.

3 —

***The Giving Tree***  
by Shel Silverstein

An iconic, achingly beautiful tale of unconditional love and selflessness. You can't make it to the end without getting teary.

4 —

***Bear Says Thanks***  
by Karma Wilson

When we gave this installment of the Bear series to our reviewers, one seven-year-old was so enamored of the illustrations and rhymes, he refused to give it back.

5 —

***There Is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me***  
by Alice Walker

Introducing a new generation to Alice Walker is certainly a selling point, but it's the unique perspective on appreciating the world around us that seals the deal.