



## INTRODUCTION

# THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

One summer day in 2016, I climbed the stairs to the guest room in my parents' house, where I had been staying for three weeks. I sat down at Dad's desk—the guest room, when unoccupied, was his home office and his Official Golf Channel Viewing Room. Directly in my line of sight was a thank-you letter I'd written to him earlier that year. My father loved the letter so much, he had immediately framed it and hung it over his desk so he could see it every day.

January 15, 2016

Dear Dad:

As you know, because you probably drove me home from the hospital, 2016 is the year I turn fifty. I have had such a fortunate life that I decided the best way to commemorate this Golden Jubilee year is to write thank-you notes to the people, places, and pastimes that have enriched my life along the way, and this week it's your turn. You and

Mom had to be the first two people to get these notes, for reasons large and small.

Thank you, Dad, for being such an involved, interested, and supportive father to me. Your years of work at Kodak to support our family are the tip of the iceberg. You were, in a word, present: there to pop flies in the driveway in a largely unsuccessful attempt to help your youngest kid get better at softball, there to comb and untangle my long hair after a bath while I sat transfixed by *Gilligan's Island*, there to drive to Syracuse and deal with a rental car when I got stranded en route between Rochester and Philadelphia during college.

I'm also grateful for the ways in which you were hands-off—letting me screw up and fix smaller predicaments often enough when I was living at home that I didn't feel overwhelmed when the big ones happened to me as a grown-up. Sally, Larry, and I all knew that our successes were ours to claim—you never made us feel like you were taking credit for them, which these days is a rare parenting trait indeed. I think your granddaughters are probably grateful I had you as my role model in that sense.

As a dad, you set the standard for men in my life. Which is why it never occurred to me to date losers who treated me badly (well, one guy in twelfth grade, but you didn't know about that, and it only lasted one "date") or anyone who tried to cut me down. You were always, always supportive of my ambitions, and your faith in my ability to achieve my goals, especially in my work life, was at least half the reason I ever did.

When I think about my fondest memories with you, I'd have to stack our road trips on top—back and forth from Rochester to Philly so many times in my college years, and the time we went to Disney World for your job when I was twenty. Even our last road trip, as we drove from Oakland to Mendocino in a blinding winter rainstorm, caravanning behind Andrew with Mom and the girls up Highway One—I thought we'd get blown into the ocean, but you just kept saying, "This is so beautiful! Wow! You're doing great!" until my nerves settled down. The time you showed up in Munich with almost no warning, when I had just moved to Germany for my first job out of college, and you gave me what I was too stubborn or proud to admit I needed: a big fat dose of home and validation (that I worked for a nutcase). Sitting in the pre-dawn hours with you in February 1998 as you timed my contractions when Maddy was on her way. And I don't know if you remember this, but I loved when I was little and we'd walk around the block together at dusk and sing "Me and My Shadow" and do our best fake tap-dance steps.

Even as we all get older, you continue to teach me things and set a standard I'd like to follow: downsizing and moving into your lovely townhome while you and Mom can really enjoy it; helping Aunt Noonie with her finances and household, daunting as that can be; continuing your volunteer work at camp and the fire department; and all the other millions of ways you help people around you without expecting anything back in return. Let me reassure you: we will ALWAYS need you and have handyman projects for you at our house, whenever you come.

Maddy and Lucy are so lucky to have you and Mom as grandparents, and I especially love how you and Maddy have your engineering studies in common. God knows Andrew and I don't know what she's talking about.

I love you so much, Dad. Thank you for being so good to me, always.

Love,  
Nan

Then, I opened up my laptop and typed "EULOGY" into a new document.

Six weeks earlier, while playing golf in his Friday morning league, my eighty-one-year-old dad had fainted. He got up, finished the eighteen holes (of course), drove himself home (of course), and waved off my mom's concerns. Though my mom's worsening dementia made it impossible for her to adequately sound the alarm bell over Dad's fogginess and uncharacteristic confusion to any of their three kids, it was clear in retrospect that Mom knew something was off with her husband of fifty-eight years.

My older siblings, Sally and Larry, both of whom live near my parents, figured it out anyway in their regular phone calls to Mom and Dad that weekend, as did I across the country in Oakland. On Sunday morning, they called me to say they were driving to the house together to take Dad to the ER, thinking he had perhaps suffered a concussion. By Monday morning, we all knew what had instigated the fainting: an enormous, heretofore undetected brain tumor caused by Stage 4 metastasized melanoma, a merciless disease that had staked its claim via tumors

in his lungs, kidney, and bones. There was no humane cure for a man his age at this stage of this disease. We could only make him comfortable for what would turn out to be the numbingly short remainder of his life.

Throughout the quickstep assault of Dad's deterioration from cancer, because I'd had the foresight to write my thoughts down and send them in a thank-you letter, there was one simple but fundamental worry lifted from my shoulders: I did not have to worry that my father would slip away without knowing how much I loved him. Not a moment needed to be spent in self-recrimination or doubt. I could put my energy into caring for him and helping him transition peacefully, surrounded by his family, in the home that he loved.

That letter created a moment of peace for me at a time when I badly needed it. And the solace I took from its existence reinforced something I had been figuring out since I started what I would come to call my Thank-You Project: it offered me, the writer of the thank-you notes, at least as much benefit as it did the recipients. I had been a freelance journalist for more than a decade by then, but this project was the smartest writing I had ever done.

Not the content of the letters, per se—I will leave that to the recipients to judge—but the mere act of writing them. Though I had sent the letters with no expectation of responses, I had heard back from many of the people to whom I had written, who were touched that, in this era of texting and emojis, I had taken the trouble to fill a full printed page with my thoughts about why they meant so much to me.

I never set about to make myself feel better by writing

these letters. But it happened in doses large and small, over and over, throughout that year. And thank goodness it did, because, starting with Dad's death, my Golden Jubilee year did not turn out to be quite the party I had expected.

Dad had been Mom's primary caregiver as her dementia worsened, and it was only after he passed away that my siblings and I grasped the full extent of her illness. It meant working together to figure out a way to honor her wish for independence and familiar surroundings without endangering her health and safety. As Sally said more than once, "We don't really have time to grieve Dad. We're too busy worrying about how Mom will make coffee in the morning." Throw in a heaping dollop of guilt that I returned to California after the funeral, while my brother and sister and their families who lived nearby immediately became Mom's hands-on helpers.

I had barely unpacked from my dad's funeral when it was time for my husband, Andrew, and me to help our oldest daughter pack up her square tonnage from Bed Bath & Beyond and head back east for her freshman year of college, three thousand miles away. While it certainly was not a loss to see our Maddy start her adult life, and our youngest daughter, Lucy, was still at home, it was a significant adjustment at a time when I was already feeling pummeled.

If you, like me, are in the middle phase of life—what I term "the years between being hip and breaking one" on my Mid-life Mixtape blog and podcast—you know it's a time of feeling pressed flat by concerns over aging parents and growing kids and careers and health and maybe a heaping dose of "Well, how did I get here?" If you do feel that way, you're not alone. Labor

economists David Blanchflower of Dartmouth University and Andrew Oswald of the University of Warwick have conducted research showing that a typical individual's happiness reaches its nadir during middle age for both males and females in the seventy-two countries they studied, before levels of psychological well-being start to climb again. It's the so-called Happiness U-Curve, which sounds like an awesome amusement-park ride but feels more like your stomach after four corn dogs, one Tilt-a-Whirl ride, and a bad session at the Fun House mirrors.

Did I mention that this entire Thank-You Project took place against the backdrop of the 2016 presidential election? Remember that one? Kind of stressful and anxiety-provoking. During the months I was writing my letters, I would scroll through the interwebs or flip on the television in hopes of mindless escape from my personal worries, and instead I'd see yet another example of what seemed to be a complete loss of polite civic discourse, proof that we were going straight to hell on skids.

And then I would fire up the Word doc in which each recipient had his or her own single-spaced page, take a deep breath, and think, "OK, how did my high school best friend save my bacon? Oooh! There was the time we went to the homecoming dance and I was despondent over my date and she dragged me to the bathroom and said, 'HE IS WEARING BLUE SHOES; THIS IS CLEARLY HIS PROBLEM NOT YOURS,' and then we laughed so hard our mascara ran." And the cacophony of my anxiety over the country's direction would quiet just enough to make it all bearable.

It turns out that the restorative power of deliberate gratitude, the delight that comes from knowing you will make

someone's day when they read your words, the recognition that you—yes, *you*—are supported and loved as you make your way through the challenges of the world is a heady tonic.

To be clear: even if many of my letters got me thinking about long-ago events and situations, this exercise isn't about wistfulness and nostalgia. It's about taking a little time to dwell in the past as a useful means of taking stock of where we are now and reinforcing where we want to go in the future.

Months later, when I wrote "Love, Nan" on the fiftieth and final letter, I printed and bound a copy of all fifty letters into a book to keep on my nightstand. That was my last, best fiftieth birthday gift. When I feel low—because, let's face it, the news is full of things to make us fearful, I still fret about my mom every day, and for whatever reason the girls aren't thrilled when I try to live their lives for them—I grab that book and flip to a random letter or three to reread.

The reminder I get of all the different ways I have been supported throughout the years, the tactile heft of a book in my hands that reminds me that a whole team got me to where I am today, is powerful medicine. It leaves me, to use a favorite phrase cribbed from my friend Jill (Letter #10), "suffused with a sense of well-being."

But don't take my word for it. There's a growing body of science that has quantified the psychological and physiological benefits of gratitude and its direct correlation to levels of happiness.

Let's start with a definition of gratitude, courtesy of Dr. Robert A. Emmons, a professor of psychology at the University of California–Davis, and one of the world's leading experts on the subject. In his 2007 book, *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude*

*Can Make You Happier*, Dr. Emmons defines two components of gratitude. “First, gratitude is the *acknowledgment* of goodness in one’s life.” It is the positive affirmation of the people, places, and things that make our lives worthwhile. The second component, he writes, is figuring out where that goodness comes from. “Gratitude is *recognizing* that the source(s) of this goodness lie at least partially outside the self.” Understanding that many of the sources of happiness in your own life are outside of your direct dominion and acknowledging from whence that goodness springs are crucial ingredients in the gratitude recipe.

Research published in 2015 in *Frontiers in Psychology* found that an ongoing practice of gratitude basically rewires our brains to reward us for the positive perceptions we have of the people around us. That begets more gratitude and “elevation,” a lovely scientific term defined in a 2000 article by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt as “a warm or glowing feeling in the chest [that] makes people want to become morally better themselves.” Pour me some elevation, barkeep, and make it a double!

Dr. Christine Carter, sociologist and senior fellow at the Greater Good Science Center at University of California–Berkeley, which studies the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of well-being, says, “All of our emotions serve different functions. We can say, in broad strokes, that negative emotions like fear and anger are more fight-or-flight-related and can trigger things like increased heart rate, accelerated breathing, and muscle tension. The positive emotions, on the other hand, reset the nervous system.”

Dr. Carter points out that when it comes to stress in the modern world, our bodies don’t do a great job of differentiating