

# *Gratitude*

# JUMP-START GUIDE

FOR COMMUNITY LEADERS IN ACTION

**Merriam Webster Definition:**

jump-start, verb

1. To start (an engine or vehicle) by temporary connection to an external power source (such as another vehicle's battery)
2. a: to start or restart something rapidly or forcefully  
b: to impart fresh or renewed energy to something: ENERGIZE

Grassroots Gratitude  
LORRAINE WIDMER - CARSON



*Fostering gratitude as the secret strength of community leadership*

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: ABOUT THIS JUMP-START GUIDE**

Gratitude is like a corkscrew that touches our hearts and souls, and connects our internal compass to the world beyond. Gratitude hinges the soft spots buried deep within us to our expansive place in the universe.

Through gratitude, we can look inside ourselves, and simultaneously see ourselves within our greater ecosystem of relationships, realities and the galaxies that connect us to the past, present, and future.

### **Gratitude is an essential tool for building cooperation.**

2 Fostering gratitude is a secret strength in every walk of life, and especially in community leadership. There is an irony, though: Gratitude is deeply personal, buried in the privacy of your heart, but generates maximum benefit when it is shared publicly. Gratitude becomes generosity. Gratitude becomes your life purpose in motion. Gratitude can ground you in your priorities while motivating you to expand your networks and accept the help of others.

Researchers have reported that the top three character strengths most strongly correlated with well-being are: Hope, Gratitude and Love. Research also confirms that an effective way to strengthen your gratitude muscles and wire your fleeting moments of gratitude, actually changing the shape of your brain, is to write longhand in a journal. By hardwiring your thoughts towards the positive and decommissioning the default switches that easily fire a negative mindset, you are rewiring your brain's thought patterns. By intentionally shifting your mental habits towards positivity, you are also improving your coping mechanisms, when faced with adversity.

### **Gratitude is an attitude that can be trained – like a muscle**

When approached on a regular basis, gratitude deepens our joys and brightens our burdens. And, one of the most powerful ways to build gratitude muscles is to keep a journal.

In this guide, I invite you [to write longhand](#), with a paper and pen, in a private, comfortable, calm space. This mode of writing is the best approach to gratitude and its many complexities, as it links your thoughts in the fertile soil of memories, dreams, and experiences, to your emotions in the here and now.

They say that it takes at least 30 uncomfortable days to form a new habit, and that you may begin to notice shifts as you approach day 14. Other theorists suggest that it takes at least 21 days to start forming a habit. After another 90 days, the habit has a chance to become sustainable. No matter your starting point, this jump-start guide will help get you to a new threshold of self-awareness and positive change, taking you right up to day 14 of a fresh cause for pause and reflection.

**The goal:** To dedicate 20 minutes a day for 14 days, taking time to focus your attention on the private practice of writing longhand. Yes, doodling is permitted.

**The outcome:** By intentionally noting the various factors at play in your life, you will discover the many layers to your thoughts, including your reasons to be grateful, while simultaneously polishing your leadership style.

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The pages that follow include the following:

- Thoughts on the present and future states of community leadership
- Insights into gratitude as a force for change
- An introduction to your gratitude writing practice
- 14 daily writing practices with invitations, exercises, and reflections
- Links to additional resources

It's been a pleasure creating this jump-start guide in support of your learning and development journey. Once you decide this pursuit is worthy of your time, talent, and attention, be sure to celebrate and savour your new insights.

Further, I hope you will find ways to reciprocate your gratitude growth and keep paying it forward.

*Lorraine*

*January 1, 2023.*

## THE FUTURE OF COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

As a leader in your community, you have an impact on others. Change is clearly a constant, rules keep changing, the timelines and resources required to reach your collective goals are fluid. In these days of COVID-dynamism, and public health initiatives, leaders are forced to adjust, course-correct and reconsider patterns, habits and processes on an almost-daily basis.

### **Community leadership is a creative art form.**

There is no one set of rules, but community advocates of every stripe agree that our communities thrive when the quality of its relationships—individual to individual, and organization to organization—are of high quality.

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Grassroots Gratitude is heartened by leaders who create conditions for high-quality relationships. We imagine conversations that encourage mutual respect, deep trust and a solid understanding of processes. The world is aching for leaders who understand that life is an ebb and flow, who have emotional intelligence and compassion for themselves and for others. Leaders realize that their decisions have impacts on others. Critical to our collective success, is a leadership style and willingness to be supportive, to show up for each other, and to offer honesty in times of adversity as well as in times of celebration.

There are so many examples of community leaders doing wonderful things in the world today. They understand the influences and linkages between people, processes, places, and variables. I'm reminded of the book, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*, by Suzanne Simard. The author dedicates her life's work to understanding cycles at work in the old growth forest. Her ground-breaking (pardon the pun) research confirms the vital role that mycorrhizal fungi play, facilitating nutrient exchange and the reciprocity of living systems above and below ground.

The sub-soil transference of carbon, nitrogen, amino acids, and sugars between various species of trees gives the forest a kind of intelligence and Simard draws comparisons to the human body's neural pathways and our

social systems. The forest is healthy when its natural systems, processes and energy flows are allowed to flourish even in the aftermath of disruption, extraction, or interference.

Bringing things back to the idea of gratitude, I am reminded of the book *Authentic Happiness* by Martin Seligman. In it, Seligman describes the powerful student assignment that includes writing a thank you letter, then speaking the thank-you aloud in front of a class, where the person being thanked is in attendance. Of “Gratitude Night,” Seligman writes that “the givers, the receivers, the observers all cried. When starting to cry, I didn’t know why I was crying. Crying in any class is extraordinary, and when everyone is crying, something has happened that touches the great rhizome underneath all humanity.”

### **Gratitude is the great rhizome that connects us to each other.**

5 Gratitude connects each of us as trees in our personal forest, binding us in our myriads of relationships. It is an essential tool for building co-operation and improving our transfer of essential services—nourishing us from the inside out.

Grassroots Gratitude is inspired by community leaders who model gratitude, empathy and humility. The community leadership that we envision is one that builds networks of co-operation, disabling the competitive mindset focused on squelching the opposition. As each of us hones our strengths as respectful, caring, resilient beings, we can choose gratitude as the better tool for understanding diversity. With gratitude we can sharpen and improve our collective intelligences - social, emotional, and ecological.

## GRATITUDE: A FORCE FOR CHANGE

Gratitude is more than a greeting card sentiment. It is a compass, a mirror, and a personal calibration tool for viewing your life with a richer perspective. Gratitude is a complex emotion, a life skill, a virtue, and a character strength. Your reasons to be grateful are rooted in your personal systems of beliefs, and emotions fueled by attitudes that influence your hopes, thoughts and dreams. It takes intentional effort to understand and unpack your inside stories, but with gratitude you can find many rewards, and become a force for positive change.

### **Gratitude creates its own energy.**

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Gratitude is a force that demands action. When it fires up, it generates a pro-social motivation that is generous and life-affirming. Gratitude inspires positivity, creativity, hopefulness, a sense of abundance and curiosity. Gratitude has been proven to improve relationships at home, in the workplace and on the playing field. By giving and accepting gifts in the spirit intended, and by reallocating positive feelings with intentional kindness, you influence the dynamics of your relationships – to yourself, to others, to your past and into the future. Gratitude can influence vibrations that echo across space and time.

As you shift your relationship to yourself, you will shift your relationships with others. As your relationships evolve in the larger world, you will gain a stronger foothold and be better positioned for reaching bigger goals, your BHAG's (Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals). By finding reasons to be grateful, you may also find:

- More reasons to be positive. Like attracts like, and not only will you be more fun to be with, people who are positive, optimistic, caring and generally more fun to be with will want to join your circle.
- Your life-satisfaction increases. Your need for 'retail therapy,' for instance, may dwindle. Grateful people are less materialistic and did you know? Studies show [that materialistic people are less happy](#).
- Your baseline mental health status will trend away from chronic anxiety, loneliness, or depression. Meanwhile, your emotional pendulum will swing in the direction of satisfaction. And if not complete satisfaction,

there is a decision making tool that mixes the words “satisfy and suffice”: Satisficing. As in ‘good enough’ – because seeking perfection is a quick route to disappointment, resentment, and frustration.

- You see and recognize benevolence in the world.
- Stress levels drop. Your heart becomes healthier thanks to lower levels of cortisol.
- You smile more easily, with a full complement of dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin – the feel good hormones.
- You feel less isolated and more connected. Gratitude is an anti-dote to loneliness. In a society that overvalues privacy, gratitude helps us to understand the balance between individuality and community.
- Gratitude is a natural anti-depressant with no known negative side effects.
- Living life in a ‘gratitude condition,’ improves your understanding of others. Your emotional intelligence grows as you become more empathetic, self-aware, self-compassionate and extend the same to others.
- Gratitude increases compassion, mindfulness and generosity—strengths that build resilience.
- You gain a deeper understanding of mutual relatedness, and a new appreciation for our shared humanity.

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## The science of gratitude

The science is clear: the best way to deepen your gratitude practice and get closer to understanding its transformative power is by writing longhand in a journal and/or by writing thank you notes. As you find your reasons to stay hopeful, you are finding your reasons to be thankful. As you find your reasons to be grateful, you feel more supported, connected and joyful.

Author Robert Emmons, authoritative gratitude researcher and founding editor of *The Journal in Positive Psychology*, reports in his book *Gratitude Works!:*

- People are 25% happier if they keep a gratitude journal
- People sleep 30 minutes longer per evening, and exercise 33% more each week compared to people who do not keep gratitude journals.
- Hypertensives achieve up to a 10% reduction in systolic blood pressure, and decrease their dietary fat intake by up to 20%.

- Experiencing gratitude leads to increased feelings of connectedness, improved relationships and even altruism.

In addition, as [VIA Institute on Character](#) reports, the top three character strengths most strongly correlated to our individual wellbeing are: Hope, Love, and Gratitude. Where VIA is the acronym for Values in Action. One study found “that the capacity to love and to be loved was the single strength most clearly associated with subjective well-being at age eighty”. No better time to start than today!

Research studies with diverse participant groups reveal that the practice of gratitude leads to:

- Increased feelings of energy, alertness, enthusiasm, and vigor
- Success in achieving personal goals
- Better ability to cope with stress
- A sense of closure in traumatic memories
- Bolstered feelings of self-worth and self-confidence
- More solid and secure social relationships
- Generosity and helpfulness
- Prolonging of the enjoyment produced by pleasurable experiences
- Improved cardiac health through increase in vagal tone
- Greater sense of purpose and resilience

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When your gratitudes start sprouting, they become a motivator of curiosity and creativity, a social contagion, and a cause for action. When you give priority to slowing down, focusing on small details...

- As you intentionally savour and pay attention to things that bring you joy, your stress levels go down, your optimism rises
- As you make written notes and declare important things happening in your life, you become more grounded and able to prioritize tasks, understand issues, and reframe change challenges
- Gratitude refreshes your levels of hope and energy. With renewed hope and energy you can recommit to actions that make your world a better place in which to live, work and play.

## YOUR GRATITUDE WRITING PRACTICE

One of the best ways to stick with a new habit is see it as part of your identity. If you want to show up as a community leader who is self-aware and lives in alignment with your core values, then keeping a journal is an excellent habit to hone.

When you invest time in a writing practice that's grounded in gratitude, your inside voices of acceptance, hope and kindness gain confidence, clarity, and insight. There are no known harmful side-effects to being grateful, as long as you practice it with humility, integrity and authenticity. Gratitude should never be used as a power tool for bartering or negotiating.

Writing in a journal is also a splendid way to develop your deeper sense of curiosity, wonder and creativity. At any point in time, you can ask yourself. "I wonder, I wonder, ..." and then meander along some wondering, wandering paths of speculation, in the privacy of your pages.

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Through the habit of writing longhand, and keeping a tally of your gifts, joys, and yes, your burdens and anxieties, you can flourish and stand taller in the spaces you occupy. But fair warning: writing takes discipline, and being grateful demands courage. This process will bring you closer to tender places and vulnerabilities that you might rather keep buried in the soil. Be patient and gentle with yourself.

### **This practice is yours alone**

There is no right way to do anything that follows. You are the captain of your ship and while I am offering encouragements and prompts, you are the director of places that your pen explores. There is no pressure, but consistent encouragement to pay attention, stay aware and consider your options. Make your choices with good intention. Give yourself permission to adjust the harness, find a day and time that works for you, but keep committing to showing up at the page – and identify as someone who enjoys 'the writerly life'.

## The practice

Begin with a positive mindset and a personal declaration that this is a private conversation. Thoughts are not facts. Writing in a journal is part imagination, part factual, completely fantastical. As in, part fantastic, part fantasy, and purely theoretical.

You may notice that your self-limiting beliefs and your negativity biases are the first to arrive. This is normal – we are hardwired with negatives, and there may be a chorus of crazy voices ringing in the hallways of your memory. Let's assume that with time and effort, you will find some positives.

As you give yourself permission to get curious; as you customize your journal practice in the way that makes sense for you, you will be giving yourself a tremendous gift. First, you must believe in the importance of the activity – and believe me, it is important. But you can't take my word for it, you have to do this for yourself.

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If you are curious, encourage your inner voices of negativity, self-doubt and skepticism, to calm down, listen for a small voice of innocence whispering, "Okay. What do I have to lose? This is just me talking to myself – and I already do a lot of that. What if I talk to myself, with a pen in my hand, a growth mindset in my head and a simple willingness to try?"

Let's do this!

Week 1	Invitation	Exercise	Reflection
1	<p>First thing in the morning, before opening email or checking messages, set your timer for 20 minutes.</p> <p>“Notes to Self.” Bullets, word clouds, mind maps, doodles, are all good options as you begin to begin.</p>	<p>Note today’s date, and the time of day. Does the calendar or clock hold any significance?</p> <p>Rate your energy levels on a scale of 0 (cratering) to 10 (sky high).</p> <p>Where are you in your emotional, social, physical and/or spiritual journey?</p>	<p>Was 20 minutes a good length of time? If you feel like you could go longer, adjust your time tomorrow.</p> <p>What’s changed for you since you first sat down to write? Physically? Emotionally? Mentally?</p>
2	<p>What’s on your mind: People? Relationships? Hobbies? Schedules?</p> <p>What are you most excited about today, or curious to discover?</p>	<p>Write your first impressions of this new habit you’re building: How are you feeling? Calm? Confident? Curious? Scared? Wobbly? Resentful?</p>	<p>If you like to fill in the blanks, try writing:</p> <p>I am so excited about _____</p> <p>That said, I am really dreading _____</p> <p>I would feel better if I could: _____</p>
3	<p>Home. Work. Friends. Community – you have a full life. What’s bubbling up on your emotional radar today?</p>	<p>What are some current concerns?</p> <p>List 5 things that are bugging you:</p> <p>Write another list of 5 things you are savouring these days:</p> <p>Make a note of a joke you heard recently or something that brought a smile to your face.</p>	<p>Did you know that ‘emodiversity’ is a thing? You can <a href="#">read about it later</a> – but for now, you are writing and should give yourself permission to feel the full range of feels and let the pendulum swing on your emotions.</p>
4	<p>What time of day is best for writing? How long do you need? Sometimes it’s slow to start – be patient. Good things take time.</p>	<p>Write about the setting around you, using as many descriptive details as possible. Be specific.</p> <p>Complete the following sentences:</p> <p>Today, the big thing I am thinking about...</p> <p>I would really like to start by saying...</p> <p>I am feeling...</p>	<p>This exercise insists that you use a pen and paper and writing longhand. How is it going? What are you noticing about the effort – any benefits? Any negative voices rising from the past? Is it easier to express yourself with images or words?</p>

<p><b>5</b></p>	<p>Sit. Move. Read. Write. Stand. Socialize. Nutri-fy. Hydrate. Breathe.</p> <p>Are you taking fitness or nature breaks? How is your sleep? Diet? Are you able to schedule your week?</p>	<p>Write about ways you enjoy spending time in nature.</p> <p>Describe some of your favourite outdoor activities.</p> <p>What is your favourite season?</p> <p>Write about your joys and list some worries for spending time outside. Physical. Emotional. Spiritual.</p>	<p>Finding ways to disconnect and turn off the noise is an important skill. Walking in nature can help you to open your mind, your senses, and relieve tension. Walk out the door, take a big inhale and feel the air in your nostrils, in your lungs – all four corners of your full body!</p>
<p><b>6</b></p>	<p>What are you noticing? Do you want to write today – or give yourself a day off? If you are reluctant – make a couple of bullet points about what’s going on, what’s energizing you? What’s draining you?</p>	<p>Give a quick score to your energy level</p> <p>0 = Depleted, exhausted</p> <p>10 = Over the top</p> <p>Give yourself another score for relaxation:</p> <p>0 = I can’t relax. My brain is like a squirrel on steroids</p> <p>10 = I know how to do nothing perfectly well</p> <p>Write about the relationship between these two scores.</p>	<p>Six days into this phase of habit forming and it is time to savour a momentary pause for body, mind and soul. Breathe. Pause. Enjoy.</p>
<p><b>7</b></p>	<p>Is anything changing in your world? What is staying the same?</p>	<p>Make three lists for today:</p> <p>Things I would be happy to leave behind</p> <p>Things I am missing and hope I haven’t lost</p> <p>Things that I am looking forward to</p>	<p>Revisit your two scores from day 6. How do you want to get ready your second week of writing? Can you accept that things cannot change and stay the same? Something has to shift.</p>

Week 2	Invitation	Exercise	Reflection
8	<p>Take a look at your first journal entries, and think about this previous week of your writerly life.</p> <p>As you find your groove with a pen and a paper, how are you feeling? Is it becoming easier to express yourself? With words or images?</p>	<p>Make a list: Things I will pay attention to this week. Right here, right now, rate your...</p> <p>Energy levels?</p> <p>Fitness goals?</p> <p>Quality of sleep?</p> <p>Quality of important relationships?</p> <p>Shifts in food or drink preferences?</p> <p>What else?</p>	<p>Is there any heat (positive or negative energy) rising in your heart? Your belly? Your mind? Your jaw?</p>
9	<p>Stepping up with greater self-confidence, think about projects you're excited about, and your reasons why.</p>	<p>Make a list of your current activities that are a good match with your skills and personal interests. Make a second list of deficiencies, where you are going to need help. Who do you need to reach out to? What kind of support system would be beneficial to you and your crew?</p>	<p>Over time, and with gratitude and humility, we realize that we cannot do it all by ourselves.</p>
10	<p>You know your skills and competencies. What about sharing them?</p>	<p>Make a list of "Things I bring to the table" or "Ways I like to shine".</p> <p>Make a list of "I am happiest when..."</p>	<p>Whenever we make changes, there will always be some gains, as well as some losses. What gains are coming your way? What potential losses are you thinking about?</p>
11	<p>By now, you may have noted some red flags, whether it's an overheard conversation, a memory or a niggling problem you have been resisting, unwilling to unpack. Maybe these flags are rising at work, at home, or inside your head. Pay attention to them.</p>	<p>Give yourself a date to revisit a stuck situation, or the thought you can't rid yourself of. Are there some ear worms wiggling around in there?</p> <p>"The burning question I am considering is _____."</p> <p>"I am going to think about this again in XX days." Mark the date on your calendar</p>	<p>Can you set yourself some mini-goals? What do you want to make note of today? Where do you need to take action? What action and by when do you want to have the task complete?</p>

<p><b>12</b></p>	<p>Think of yourself at this exact point in time. Personally or professionally – or both.</p>	<p>Write a list of people you like spending time with, and why.</p> <p>Do you see yourself thriving or languishing? Are you feeling challenged or stressed – in a good way or bad?</p> <p>Are you leading or following? Maybe both? Say more. Be specific.</p> <p>Name at least one person you would like to get to know better. Describe your ‘why?’.</p>	<p>What steps can you take to get to know this person? What’s holding you back, or blocking your way? Remember these pages are personal and not for sharing. Thoughts and emotions flow. What you are thinking about today is temporary and fleeting. Let it go!</p>
<p><b>13</b></p>	<p>At home, work, or play, name a person or a group of people who have helped you recently.</p> <p>Who are they? What was the nature of their help?</p> <p>How did they help you?</p>	<p>Start your first sentence: “I am so grateful for....” List five things</p> <p>“But, something that is really bothering me right now is...”</p> <p>Consider whether this bother could lead to a gratitude you have not yet realized.</p>	<p>Nearing the end of your second week, what roads are opening up for you? What roadblocks remain? What is the next change challenge you wish to approach?</p>
<p><b>14</b></p>	<p>Spend at least 20 minutes alone outside today.</p> <p>If you must take your phone, set it to airplane mode, and use it to take a photo, or write a quick note about something from nature that you are wondering about.</p>	<p>Return to your journal. Describe in detail what you saw, felt, heard, thought about or smelled – use the note or the memory to embellish and embroider a moment in time.</p>	<p>It’s time to begin planning your next steps.</p> <p>What do you believe to be true in the world?</p> <p>What new truths about yourself have you discovered during these 14 days of writing?</p>

## ABOUT GRASSROOTS GRATITUDE

During COVID-19, as I researched the science of gratitude, I also grew to understand the benefits of writing longhand, a habit I have been practicing for almost 30 years. As I read about the significance of building habits of mind, habits remembered, and habits shaped by our lived experiences, Grassroots Gratitude, my brainchild was growing.

My book, *An Ecology of Gratitude: Writing your way to what matters*, launched in November 2021. It has become the solid launching pad and the vision behind this jump-start guide. It has also helped to anchor my legacy project and this social purpose venture, Grassroots Gratitude, with a mission to: Foster gratitude as the secret strength of community leadership.

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By fostering gratitude, Grassroots Gratitude is eager to ignite positivity and possibility in the imaginations of all who see themselves as leaders. Will you join me in imagining a bright and shiny future for our grandchildren and their great-grandchildren, thriving in an environment of clean air, clean water healthy soils and right relationships?

**How will you stoke your gratitude in the days, months, and years to come?**

By finding your reasons to be grateful, your motivation to live each day with purpose will grow stronger. I am always open for a conversation, and would love to learn how this jump-start has affected your heart-hand-head processes. If you would like to continue to write your way along, sign up for one of my courses, or purchase copies of my book for your organization, message me at: [lorraine@grassrootsgatitude.ca](mailto:lorraine@grassrootsgatitude.ca)



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