



UK Extension's  
**Universe of  
Possibilities™**

**SKILLS FOR CREATING HAPPINESS AND BLESSING OTHERS**

## *Gifts of Gratitude and Blessing*

**S**ometimes, invaluable treasures lie right in front of us, just waiting to be more fully and creatively used. Such is the case with the gifts of gratitude and blessing. Gratitude has to do with feeling and expressing appreciation. Blessing is the act of giving something positive to another in thought, word, or deed.

Having a thankful heart and reaching out in blessing to others are hardly new concepts. That's part of their beauty: They are easily understood, widely recognized as valuable, and used by diverse groups of people. But we have only begun to tap the potential of these amazing tools. The possibilities and benefits are immense.

Counselors, philosophers, and all major religions encourage expressing gratitude and blessing others, and researchers have discovered that these practices are associated with an impressive array of positive outcomes both for givers and receivers. Even when carried out solely on the level of thought, as in silent prayer for another, significant positive changes in health and overall well-being have been documented.

Researchers also have found that positive thoughts produce benefits even when directed toward animals, plants, fungi, bacteria, and blood cells. To the imaginative mind, the potential of these findings is staggering.

## 7 Core Principles

- 1** Almost any individual, relationship, family, organization, community, or nation can benefit from the skillful application of gratitude and blessing.
- 2** Gratitude, the skill of feeling and expressing appreciation, can be beneficially practiced on three levels of increasing difficulty: (1) for what is unexpected and wonderful; (2) for the positives in life that we often take for granted; and (3) for the various challenges that test our resolve and creativity and that often contain hidden blessings.
- 3** As with gratitude, blessing—the act of giving something positive to another—can be effectively practiced in thought, word, and overt action.
- 4** Mounting research has documented the substantial power of both prayer and intentionally directed thought.
- 5** With gratitude and blessing, both the giver and receiver reap important and substantial benefits.
- 6** The applications of gratitude and blessing are virtually unlimited, can be used by anyone, require no waiting periods or large capital investments, transcend ideological differences, and are wonderfully contagious.
- 7** Remember, the more centered you are on the Target of Life, the greater your well-being, the wiser your choices, and the more effective you are in everything you do.

**P**ut yourself in the center of the heart of the Target of Life. **Notice that the heart of the Target is clear, unobstructed, full of light.** From there, you see clearly and make choices that are good for you and those around you. You are attuned to your inner guidance and best judgment. You feel at peace, strong, compassionate, joyful, energetic, and creative. Your reflexes are sharp, your immune system strong. You stumble and fall less often, and you handle life's inevitable challenges with more confidence and skill. Your ability to endure prolonged hardship increases. You are naturally more sensitive to others—more patient, generous, and understanding. You more easily express the richness of your authentic self. The more deeply centered you are in the heart of the Target of Life, the more love you feel and share. **You are at your best—physically, mentally, and spiritually.**



*Target of Life*

**Although you undoubtedly have experienced being relatively centered, often little and big things happen that go against your desires and expectations, and you are likely to find yourself thrown off center and pulled out of your heart's wisdom into the surrounding web of minor frustrations and energy-drainers.** Your vitality, peace, and sensitivity begin to fade, and little tensions, doubts, and fears start to emerge. Stress creeps in and things bother you more easily. You are more critical of yourself and edgier with the people in your life. Your effectiveness, spiritual attunement, and physical health start to slip.

**All of this can pull you even further away from the center of the Target of Life into the area of increased darkness and sharp edges.** When you are in this portion of the Target, you have strayed still further away from your center—your heart of hearts, your home of love, wisdom, and joy. Stress levels are high, and it's much more difficult to sense your inner guidance. You're far more likely to become irritable with co-workers and friends, to yell at family members, and to make poor decisions in every area of life. Tension, disharmony, and fatigue take their toll on your creativity and physical well-being. You and everyone around you are affected negatively.

**Beyond this portion of the Target of Life is the outer darkness. Here you can't see well at all; it's a terrible place to be. Insecurity, doubt, confusion, and selfishness are rampant.** Stress soars to dangerous levels, and good judgment plummets to an all-time low. You feel heavy and burdened and make decisions that hurt yourself and others. You are driven by fear, blindness, and anger. In this outer darkness your health suffers tremendously, and all kinds of abuse, destruction, and violence flourish. Despite your inherent goodness, you may find yourself saying and doing horrendous things. Truly, it's a living hell.

**Every individual has a Target of Life as does every relationship, organization, city, and nation.** Even the world as a whole has a Target of Life, and when the world moves too far from its center of love, an array of major problems erupt, including disease, poverty, environmental disasters, international strife, and war.

It is our individual and collective choices that move us away from our intuitive wisdom at the center of the Target of Life into varying degrees of stress, confusion, frustration, and conflict. **Fortunately, by making wise choices at any time, we can move back toward the center of the Target into greater levels of peace, vitality, kindness, and opportunity.**

In the gift of choice lies our greatest power—a power that can be used to uplift or destroy. The Target of Life is a helpful way to understand our individual and collective well-being. **With awareness and practice, we can become highly skilled at detecting and creatively responding to the early signs of harmful stress.** We can gradually learn to stay more deeply centered with increasing frequency, saving ourselves all kinds of trouble and our society billions of dollars in unnecessary health care costs.

**If you have a strong spiritual orientation, you may find it helpful to think of being centered as being in the heart of the Divine Presence—the source of all goodness, harmony, abundance, and creativity.** As temptations confront you and you allow yourself to be lured into making less than optimal decisions, you stray from the center of Divine Love into varying degrees of fear, pain, and self-defeating behaviors. To move toward the center of Divine Presence or toward a self-created hell of outer darkness, to go more deeply into love and joy or to separate yourself from the Divine and become lost in fear and confusion—these are decisions that you face each day. By staying centered and honoring your intuitive guidance, by remaining alert and choosing wisely, you can be at your best more frequently and help to create a world of marvelous possibilities.



The gifts of gratitude and blessing: In a world where most promising solutions come with major price tags, these problem-solvers are essentially free. And while proposals for bettering our lives often spark controversy, gratitude and blessing have a universal, almost innate appeal. They're available for use by anyone, and they already are being practiced enough that people are, in general, convinced of their benefits and comfortable with their use.

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*If you concentrate on finding whatever is good in every situation, you will discover that your life will suddenly be filled with gratitude, a feeling that nurtures the soul.*

Harold Kushner

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Fortunately, gratitude and blessing seem tailor-made for our time-pressured, stressed-out society. Often requiring little or no extra time, they can do wonders for reducing the burden of stress that wears heavily on our physical well-being and diminishes our creativity, spiritual attunement, and joy. Surely every individual, relationship, family, organization, and community can benefit from the increased and skillful application of gratitude and blessing.

These two gifts are easy to use, they're fun, and they generate positive feelings in ourselves and others. Scientific studies have increasingly documented their physiological, mental, and social benefits. ***Best of all, we've only begun tapping into the many ways in which we can more powerfully and creatively employ gratitude and blessing.***

### **DEFINING GRATITUDE AND BLESSING**

***Gratitude is the skill of feeling and expressing appreciation.*** The expression of thanksgiving may take place silently in a person's mind and heart or may be expressed outwardly to one or more people. ***Blessing is the act of extending something positive to another in thought, word, or overt action.*** Of course, gratitude and blessing are interrelated and often overlap. For example, expressing sincere appreciation to someone can

simultaneously be a way of blessing that person, and a visible act of blessing another will often elicit a return expression of gratitude.

### **BENEFITS OF THE GRATITUDE ATTITUDE**

The ancient Roman statesman Cicero said, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others." When we take a few moments to express our appreciation inwardly or to another, we begin to feel happier, more relaxed, and more optimistic. A sense of appreciation is an important part of a positive outlook, and research indicates that a positive attitude is essential to the success of peak performers in both the worlds of business and sports. Studies also provide evidence that a positive, appreciative attitude enhances the body's healing system and general health.

Physician and author Christiane Northrup explains that when you hold feelings of thankfulness for at least 15 to 20 seconds, beneficial physiological changes take place in your body. Levels of the stress hormones cortisol and norepinephrine decrease, producing an array of beneficial metabolic changes. Coronary arteries relax, thus increasing the blood supply to your heart. And your breathing becomes deeper, raising the oxygen level in your tissues.

Scientists at the Institute of HeartMath have discovered that thoughts and even subtle emotions influence the functioning of the autonomic nervous system. This is significant in that the autonomic nervous system interacts with the digestive, cardiovascular, immune, and hormonal systems. Negative thoughts and emotions create autonomic nervous system imbalance, while positive ones encourage physiological balance and strength.

Interestingly, of the numerous positive thought patterns tested by the Institute of HeartMath, appreciation appears to have a particularly strong effect in quickly enhancing the functioning of the autonomic nervous system, resulting in improved hormonal and immune system balance and more effective brain functioning.

HeartMath researchers also have discovered that when an individual engages in thoughts of appreciation, almost immediately his or her heart rate

variability smooths out, indicating heightened psychophysiological coherence—a state associated with reduced stress, increased emotional stability, high performance, and a range of health benefits.

### THREE LEVELS OF THANKSGIVING

*It's easy to be thankful when wonderful things happen to us. That is the first level of gratitude. We reach the second level when we learn to express appreciation for the many blessings that we often take for granted*—examples include good health, refreshing water to drink, the freedom to speak our minds, and the ability to help shape the future.

How easy it is to take our health, our talents, and our loved ones for granted! One of the true joys of life is learning to take nothing for granted. As we gradually master this ability, we approach each moment with fresh eyes, and our hearts brim over with appreciation and peace.

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*As we focus on what we are thankful for, fear, anger, and bitterness melt away, seemingly without effort.*

M. J. Ryan

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*The third and most challenging level of thanksgiving is to maintain a positive, grateful attitude even when confronted with problems.* Of course, we need to deal intelligently with our problems and the associated emotions. Yet, even in the midst of difficult circumstances, the ordeal can be softened significantly by a spirit of gratitude. For example, wrecking your car would be unfortunate. But you might have much to be grateful for—that you are alive, that no one was seriously hurt, that you have a good insurance policy, and that you now know to be more careful on wet roads.

### BENEFITS OF EXTENDING BLESSINGS

When we bless another person in tangible ways, such as providing food, shelter, money, or encouraging words, the benefits are fairly obvious to all involved. However, is there substantial evidence that intangible blessings in the form of thoughts and feelings also produce positive changes?

The answer is yes. According to physician and prayer expert Larry Dossey, more than 100 controlled laboratory research studies show, in general, that prayer or concentrated thoughts of compassion, kindness, and love frequently result in healthful changes in a variety of living things, from humans to plants to bacteria. In fact, the mounting research evidence supporting the effectiveness of prayer is so compelling that Dr. Dossey and other physicians have said that to *not* offer prayer to patients as a potential treatment option may, in the future, be considered a breach of medical practice.

When large groups of individuals combine and focus their blessings, is it possible to influence social indicators of well-being, such as accident and crime rates? The few studies that have attempted to examine this possibility have had considerable limitations; therefore, it's too early to draw any definitive conclusions. It does appear, however, that when groups focus their efforts, the effect of their collective blessings may indeed be substantial enough to bring about favorable changes in key indicators of societal well-being. Well-designed research in this area might hold enormous potential.

### THE ART OF BLESSING OTHERS

The potential ways in which we might bless others are nearly infinite. Expressing one's creativity in song, dance, paint, or poetry can be a form of blessing others if that is the sincere and frequent intention of the artist. Similarly, the strong and consistent intention to give of one's love and skills can make teaching, homemaking, science, and business equally valid and marvelous ways of extending blessings to others.

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*We can bless others with a good word or a smile, a kind action that goes completely unobserved, or simply a good wish in silence.*

David Steindl-Rast

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Generously giving our money, time, and other resources, especially to those less fortunate, extends tangible and invaluable blessings. All types of positive thoughts directed toward others

richly qualify as blessings. Also falling into the category of powerful blessings are caring, heartfelt prayers, and deep meditation in its many varieties.

We can splendidly bless others, regardless of distinctions based on age, culture, educational level, economic well-being, health, and physical limitations. In its myriad forms, the ability to bless our brothers and sisters and all aspects of life is available to each of us endlessly.

### BEWARE OF THE OPPOSITES OF GRATITUDE AND BLESSING

Here's the bottom line: *While gratitude and blessing carry enormous positive power, their opposites—self-defeating negative thinking and complaining, and unkind thoughts and actions directed toward others—have great power to harm and should be strictly avoided.*

Shedding further light on the danger associated with the opposites of gratitude and blessing, leading-edge research suggests that we live in a common “field of energy,” so that what we do to others, for better or worse, we are, in a very real sense, doing to ourselves. If this is true, then anything less than showing compassion, understanding, and love for one another is like self-inflicted punishment—something, of course, that we want to avoid.



### QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

One good question can be worth a shelf full of books. *Think about the broad topic of gratitude and blessing, then write down several related questions.* Ponder your questions and discuss your responses with a friend or with a small group. Here are two questions to get you started:

✧ You've been given a huge sum of money and the services of a wide range of talented professionals. Your goal is to test the possibility of significantly reducing the rates of crime and illness in a large metropolitan area by employing specifically directed intangible blessings, such as loving

thoughts, heartfelt prayers, and deep meditation. Exactly how will you design your research study, and what predictions might you make about the outcomes?

✧ Unlike resources such as water and oil, gratitude and blessing are nearly inexhaustible both in quantity and variety. However, simply as a point of illustration, let's say that, as human beings, we currently use 10 percent of our capacity for expressing these gifts. What might our world look like if we started using 40 percent, 60 percent, or 80 percent of our capacity for gratitude and blessing?



### SKILL BUILDERS

Skill builders help you exercise your creative muscles to give you the strength you need for success. *In addition to the skill builders below, create some of your own on the topic of gratitude and blessing.* As with physical fitness workouts, benefits come from actually *doing* the exercises.

- ◆ Make a written list of all the ways in which you are blessed. Frequently review your list with a thankful heart and add to it as new blessings come to mind or appear in your life.
- ◆ Zero in on a problem you have struggled with in your life. Identify at least three blessings you have experienced as a result of this challenge.
- ◆ Dream up little ways to brighten another person's day. Carry out your plan as soon as possible.
- ◆ Be an angel of kindness and good cheer. Wherever you are, as you feel led to do so, send blessings instantaneously to those around you. You can do this with groups as well as with individuals. Since you extend these blessings on the level of thought, you have few limits, and no one needs to know what you are doing. You can scatter blessings of kindness, encouragement, and joy any time—while at the grocery store, in an airport, on the subway, or as you walk down the street.

- ◆ Write a short, spontaneous note of appreciation to a loved one, a public figure, or a person who provides service for you, such as your child's teacher or the manager of your apartment building.
- ◆ Whether at home or work, promise yourself that you'll give at least three genuine compliments before your day ends. The nice thing about compliments is that they tend to be contagious. There's no telling how far your simple acts of kindness might spread!
- ◆ First thing in the morning or last thing at night, engage in a few minutes of silent, personal thanksgiving. Focus appreciatively and deeply on your blessings, large and small. Then take a moment to rest in the subtle peace that comes from a heartfelt expression of thanksgiving. Finally, in a way that feels right to you, lovingly extend blessings to all those who come into your heart and mind.



### A NEW POSSIBILITY

Bringing a dream to life is a journey. It begins and continues one step at a time. Think about all that you have learned from this publication and how you might put it into practice. Then choose one small goal that you want to accomplish in the next few days. Move toward a new possibility that is really important to you—one that you are enthusiastic about and are confident you can achieve.

*Take a card or a piece of paper and, at the top, write "A New Possibility." Under this heading, briefly state what you will do and by when. Sign this action plan and put it where you will see it often.* Tell a supportive friend or family member about your goal, and frequently visualize yourself following through. Be prepared just in case doubts or roadblocks crop up. Know that you can always draw upon faith, firm resolve, and creativity to overcome any obstacles that may arise.

When you put the deepest desires of your heart into action, it naturally benefits others. Dare to

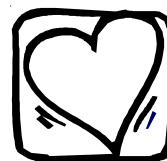
envision new possibilities, and then create your dreams one step at a time.



### POSITIVE THOUGHTS

You may find the following brief thoughts (or similar ones that you create) to be simple yet powerful inspirational tools. You might, for example, memorize and, with deep feeling and concentration, mentally repeat one of these seed thoughts or write it on a card and place it where you'll see it often.

- ♥ At least once each day, I pause to express heartfelt gratitude for the innumerable ways I am blessed. The more I give thanks for my good fortune, the better I feel and the more my blessings expand and multiply.
- ♥ Through difficult times I continue to give thanks, remaining always alert for hidden opportunities and unexpected blessings. My constant gratitude opens up new possibilities and brightens even the darkest of days.
- ♥ I send out thoughts of goodwill and love to all those who come into my heart and my thoughts. It takes very little time and, in so doing, I, too, am blessed.



### LOVE MADE VISIBLE

*Together, let us envision and build a world where all people enjoy optimal well-being. Let us strive to awaken fresh thinking, new enthusiasm, and abundant love. Let us create a world of unimagined possibilities. It can be done!*

## 10 Educational Modules

**UK Extension's Universe of Possibilities™: Skills for Creating Happiness and Blessing Others** is an educational series containing 10 modules. Each module is accompanied by a Macromedia Flash® movie, a PowerPoint® presentation, and other teaching tools. All these resources, along with a Facilitator's Guide, are available free-of-charge in camera-ready format at the following website: [www.ca.uky.edu/fcs/possibilities](http://www.ca.uky.edu/fcs/possibilities).

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Your Vision Map</b></li> <li>2. <b>Making the Growth Choice</b></li> <li>3. <b>The Way of Peace</b></li> <li>4. <b>Heart Intelligence</b></li> <li>5. <b>The Freedom of Self-Discipline</b></li> </ol> |  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. <b>Embracing This Present Moment</b></li> <li>7. <b>Accepting and Loving Your Body</b></li> <li>8. <b>Healthy Relationships</b></li> <li>9. <b>Unleashing Your Creativity</b></li> <li>10. <b>Gifts of Gratitude and Blessing</b></li> </ol> |
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Prepared by **Sam Quick, Ph.D.**, Extension Specialist in Human Development and Family Relations, and **Alex Lesueur, Jr., M.S.L.S.**, Staff Support Associate. A hearty thank you to the many professionals who reviewed and helped to edit these publications. They are acknowledged on the Possibilities website noted above.

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