

# Kristi Nelson

## on Why Gratefulness Brings Happiness

by April Thompson

**K**risti Nelson has dedicated her career to leading, funding and strengthening organizations committed to progressive social and spiritual change. Today, at the helm of the Network for Grateful Living, she is helping awaken thousands of people around the world to the life-changing practice of gratefulness. Co-founded by Benedictine monk, teacher and author David Steindl-Rast, the network offers educational programs and practices that inspire and guide a commitment to grateful living, and spark the transformative power of personal and societal responsibility.

Earlier in her career, Nelson founded a values-based fundraising, consulting, training and leadership coaching company, working with groups such as the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, Buddhist Peace Fellowship and the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. She also served in director-level positions for the Soul of Money Institute, Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society.

Nelson lives in Western Massachusetts with her family, grateful to be surrounded by the wonders of the natural world and connected to a vibrant, loving and grateful global community.

***Why is it helpful to differentiate between gratefulness, gratitude and thanksgiving?***



Gratefulness is a proactive orientation to life that originates inside. You wake with a sense of thankful awareness for the gift of another day, of all the miraculous things your body did overnight to keep you alive and healthy and an all-encompassing sense of the great fullness of life.

Gratitude is more of a response to something going well; anything from receiving the perfect present to five green lights on the way home to beautiful weather. It can become an addictive pursuit to try to get life to deliver something positive again and again, whereas gratefulness emanates from a more unconditional core.

Thanksgiving bubbles up when we're so filled with a sense of gratefulness—that great fullness—that we overflow into finding ways to express thanks aloud and in actions, such as delivering praise or being of service.

***In what way is happiness related to gratefulness?***

The truth is that it's not happiness that makes us grateful, but gratefulness that makes us happy. We can have all the things that should make us happy, and that we wish would make us happy, but unless we feel grateful for what we have, it's likely nothing will truly make us happy. Happiness can be susceptible to outside circumstance, whereas gratefulness is an orientation we can more consistently maintain.

## ***How do we cultivate gratefulness as a way of being, rather than an intermittent feeling?***

It's a three-step process: stop, look and go. First, we pause to be present; slow down enough to notice all the things for which we can be grateful.

Second, we enlarge our perspective to take nothing for granted and acknowledge that life is short and uncertain, so we are grateful each day we wake up. This step is also about being aware of our privileges, starting with our ability to see, hear, move about and function. It keeps us aware, awake and alert.

Consider how we feel when electricity returns after an outage or when we can use our hand or foot after a cast comes off. Within minutes, we can forget how appreciative we were for those things, so we need to build reminders into our lives.

Third, we generate possibilities. Find ways to express appreciation or nurture something we care about by engaging in an actively grateful way. Even when we suffer hardship, shifting our awareness to notice whatever is sufficient, abundant and beautiful enables us to be grateful. This creates a ripple effect, bringing more reasons to be grateful. It's a radical way to live.

## ***Which other qualities of life that people now seek give you hope?***

It gives me hope when people seek contentment. Paradoxically, discontent gives me hope too, because when people recognize injustice and social biases, it pushes us to engage; to stand up and take note of what's not okay and needs to be changed.

Love also gives me hope, especially when individuals seek to love more generously, inclusively and compassionately. It brings me the most hope of all when I see people building bridges and stretching their own capacity to love beyond their comfort zone.

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