

Why We Should Change the Noun "Gratitude" Into a Verb

Preparing for a joyful holiday in this crazy time.

By Dr. Kenneth Silvestri

Posted on PSYCHOLOGY TODAY on Nov 17, 2020

"We have to turn the concept of gratitude from a noun into a verb."

—Meerabelle Dey

I like using more verbs and fewer nouns. It underscores the expression "that the name is not the thing." Nouns and their adjectives always seem to bring up a dependency on labels, i.e., good, bad, winner, loser, quantity, quality.



Source: Alora Griffiths / Unsplash

Verbs, on the other hand, open the world of contexts, where the "how's" and "what's" of our inquiries inform and allow us to evolve. This is where fluidity encourages collaboration and a recognition of our interdependency. Creating verbs and consequent behavior from static descriptions is what I attempt every day as a therapist, teacher, and group facilitator (and with myself too!).

Since I was asked to write something about being grateful to inspire during this crazy time, I would like to share a simple exercise relevant to the coming holiday that can be done alone or in a group. In this case, we will use the word "gratitude," although other nouns can be chosen in this process that represent individual concerns.

- (a) Imagine you are looking through a focused lens at the word "gratitude," noticing any problems or concerns that you may have visualized from this word.

(b) Now ask yourself what new behaviors you would like to have regarding this noun. Think especially about how it affects you in this present moment with the holidays approaching.

(c) Next, actually look forward at an object and simultaneously widen your lens, describing in a peripheral manner with some detail your immediate surroundings—up, down, and sideways as well as continuing to expand this view beyond the confines of the room, community, and world.

(d) After this, come back to your original, focused lens and describe any differences (that can make a difference) regarding your initial problem or concern that occurred from this exercise. At this time, come up with an active sensation word that was elicited from (feeling, seeing, smelling, etc.) by widening your lens and creating a new perspective. Ask yourself how your sensation relates to your original concern. Create a visual collage of emerging descriptive contexts that elicit changes that you previously might not have recognized or understood. Share this with a trusted friend or significant other that may also have tried the above process.

"Gratitude" is generally defined as the quality of being thankful, with a readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness. Sounds nice, but it is seldom practiced in this way. Could this be a result of not seeing the terrain beyond the map? *When we transform this noun (and for that matter any noun) into a context of active sensations... a verb..., we enter the world of infinite possibilities.* Stephen Nachmanovich in his wonderful book, *The Art of Is*, believes "we can make the jump into thinking systemically, to realizing that we are verbs, not things."

There is a segue, a powerful verb for each one of us to explore and notice the transitional spaces that anthropologists describe as "liminal opportunities." *This is a moment when many improvisational avenues emerge as possible directions, not only to collaborate with each other but to interface with nature.*

What this indicates is that we are all victims of our Western cultural framework that emphasizes "cause-and-effect" thinking built on a form of grammar which separates subject and predicate. "We need a road, let's build it," without considering its peripheral impact on the specific surroundings. This creates, in most cases, suppression of the wider perspectives of life, something that is at odds with nature, which does not

do well to be described in fragments.

Nature is messy and at the same time systemically beautiful.

Our aesthetic endeavors of art, music, poetry, and all creative ventures are an important way to get as close as we can to it. When nouns are converted into action verbs of sensation, we can roll into the many things that make up our world beyond the limiting mechanistic ideas that pervade our society and negatively affect our nervous system and emotions. This is what Nora Bateson, President of the International Bateson Institute, refers to as "Warm Data," the "information about the interrelationships that integrate elements of a complex system."

As human beings, we have the capacity to overcome imposed linear thinking and to become more ecologically aware of our actions and surroundings.

The offerings that are available can be mutually enjoyed as is demonstrated by the good vibrations felt in such experiences as the magical blending martial art of Aikido (the way of harmony), Tai Chi, yoga, and other mindfulness activities. This goes deep into our biological roots to help our response to stress by soothing our nervous system, specifically the Vagus Nerve, the nerve of compassion which regulates our sense of security.

It also influences how we communicate. A jazz quartet for instance can consist of individuals improvising and at the same time creating a unified harmonious sound. Pendulums that start out with different rhythms will eventually sync their movement. Due to cultural constraints, we have been programmed to miss the many interdependent contexts of our immediate world and beyond, which is all part of how nature works. Most of our problems, from climate issues to social dysfunctions, can be traced to this misinterpretation.

It is my sense that today it is ever more important to allow yourself to explore the infinite number of portals to gratefully celebrate with those who are special in your life. These trying moments with a pandemic that looms over us have redefined our lives. *It would be beneficial to be poetic, sing a song, harmonize beyond the confines of words, and allow the uniqueness of who you are to define the joys of mutuality in your relationships.*

Try being the active verb of gratitude... to take part in how to make sense of the love and affection that is needed in our midst. It is when we pause and consider using a peripheral lens that the opportunity to "gratefully" leap into new improvisational possibilities becomes a reality.

It is within our nature to blend with each other to enhance the celebration of this holiday season in new and different ways.