

How Grateful Are You?

A career military man once told me about his experience in Ethiopia. The outdoor markets had meat hanging from racks that sat out in the hot sun until someone purchased them. Flies and other insects circled, and crawled, on the meat. And although the smell from the rotting flesh was so foul that he nearly vomited, the village women purchased the meat for their families. My neighbor enjoyed his interactions with the friendly Ethiopian people. Despite their poverty-stricken existence, many were as happy as they were friendly. However, he ate all his meals at the American military base.

In India, nearly half of the population has no toilets. Although the government is determined to provide all Indians with proper sanitation to combat disease, millions of people in that country still relieve themselves outside in the fields. It is the job of hundreds of thousands of people there to remove feces from those fields.

Throughout the world every year, hundreds of thousands of women still die during childbirth – some because they give birth during the night, and there is no electricity for the midwife to see.

According to the United Nations, there are over one billion people in the world living on less than \$2 a day. Millions live in city dumps, picking through garbage looking for something to eat or sell.

If I listed anecdotes or evidence for all the abject poverty in the world, this article would go on for pages. Most of the time, the human condition depresses me. Other times I shrug my shoulders in surrender, knowing that there is little I can do to alleviate such dire situations.

But regardless of my thoughts at such poverty, there is one characteristic of which I wish I had more. Sometimes I feel that I am not grateful enough for what I have.

In the modern first world countries, we take it for granted to switch on the light when we enter a dark room. Yet, nearly 20% of the world still do not have access to electricity. We turn a handle and either hot or cold water begins to flow. Yet, nearly a billion people do not have access to clean water. Even today, many women travel for miles to the nearest stream to carry back water for their family. These are often the same streams where people and animals relieve themselves.

You could debate the exact number or exact percentage of the statistics above, but the overall picture is still bleak.

The problem for too many of us is that we compare ourselves to others in our first world society. Celebrities, CEOs, professional athletes, our neighbors, coworkers, friends, and even many members of our family seem to have it better. Yet, when compared to the world's standards, the vast majority of us are also wealthy.

There may be no better measure of the state of any country, than the gratitude of its people. If its people are ungrateful, they will be unhappy. Unhappy people demand. Unhappy people rebel. Unhappy people cause strife. Unhappiness spreads.

No country is perfect because no people are perfect. No politician can ever bring about utopia. No economic policy will ever result in perfect employment. Nothing can solve your problems forever, since tomorrow's needs may differ from today's.

It is good to strive to improve your life and the lives of your compatriots. Every country, every people, every region, city, or village can always improve in some manner.

For decades, many Westerners have called for cultural and political change with the expectation that such change will improve our society. After all, many argue, it cannot get any worse. However, it is important to recognize that most people in the world envy our status as citizens of modern first world countries. So while some cultural changes may indeed improve our lives, perhaps what would improve our lives the most is some acknowledgment and gratitude for what we already have.

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