

Gratitude

A 21-day Journey

Christen Sistrunk

Created by Christen Sistrunk, MA, LPC-S
Houston Center for Valued Living
For personal use only. Not for resale or redistribution.



Like many people, I've had seasons where nothing felt "good enough," and I lost sight of the beauty right in front of me. Practicing gratitude consistently can boost optimism, sleep, patience, and overall life satisfaction and it's not about ignoring hardship.

Gratitude works best when it coexists with real emotions. Making space for sadness, anger, or grief alongside noticing what's good allows the practice to feel honest and healing. You don't have to feel grateful all the time to benefit from it just begin where you are.

Christen

The Science Behind Gratitude

Neuroscience tells us that repeating an activity daily strengthens the neural pathways in our brains, helping form automatic habits (Hebbian theory). Gratitude is no exception. A consistent, mindful gratitude practice has been shown to:

- Activate the brain's reward pathways (Kini et al., 2016)
- Reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety (Wong et al., 2017)
- Improve relationships and increase empathy (Algoe, 2012)
- Enhance resilience and recovery after trauma (Emmons & Stern, 2013)

This is about more than just writing things down. It's about learning to tune your awareness toward what is true, nourishing, and meaningful—even in seasons that are hard.

So go ahead—grab your phone and set that daily alarm. Choose a sound you don't normally use so your brain pays attention. Show up to this process with gentleness, honesty, and openness. You are worth the time and reflection it takes to build something deeper and more meaningful over the next 21 days.

Recent studies (e.g., Layous et al., 2020; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2021) suggest that:

- People benefit more from gratitude practices when they include reflection on how they contribute to others' well-being.
- Gratitude combined with self-efficacy—the belief that you made a positive difference—can lead to increased self-worth and deeper purpose.
- This form of gratitude shifts the focus from just feeling thankful to being an active part of what's good in the world.

Honest Gratitude: Why Authenticity, Emotional Awareness, and Power Dynamics Matter

Gratitude is not about ignoring pain or forcing joy. In fact, it works best when it includes emotional honesty. This journal is designed to hold space for your full humanity, including the parts that struggle, ache, or feel conflicted.

1. **Gratitude and Emotional Awareness** You do not have to feel good to practice gratitude. Letting yourself name sadness, anger, or fatigue while still identifying moments of thankfulness creates emotional flexibility. Research shows that this flexibility supports better resilience, lower anxiety, and improved well-being.
2. **Gratitude ≠ Toxic Positivity** Toxic positivity tells us to only focus on the good. Authentic gratitude makes space for the whole picture. It honors hard things without letting them define us.
3. **Gratitude and Power** Sometimes, saying 'thank you' can feel complex—especially if there's a power dynamic involved (e.g., with a boss, parent, or spiritual leader). If you feel conflicted about showing appreciation, that's worth noticing. Gratitude should not require self-abandonment.
4. **Gratitude as a Practice, Not Perfection** It's okay to miss a day or feel stuck. Gratitude is a process, not a performance. Come as you are.

Here we go...

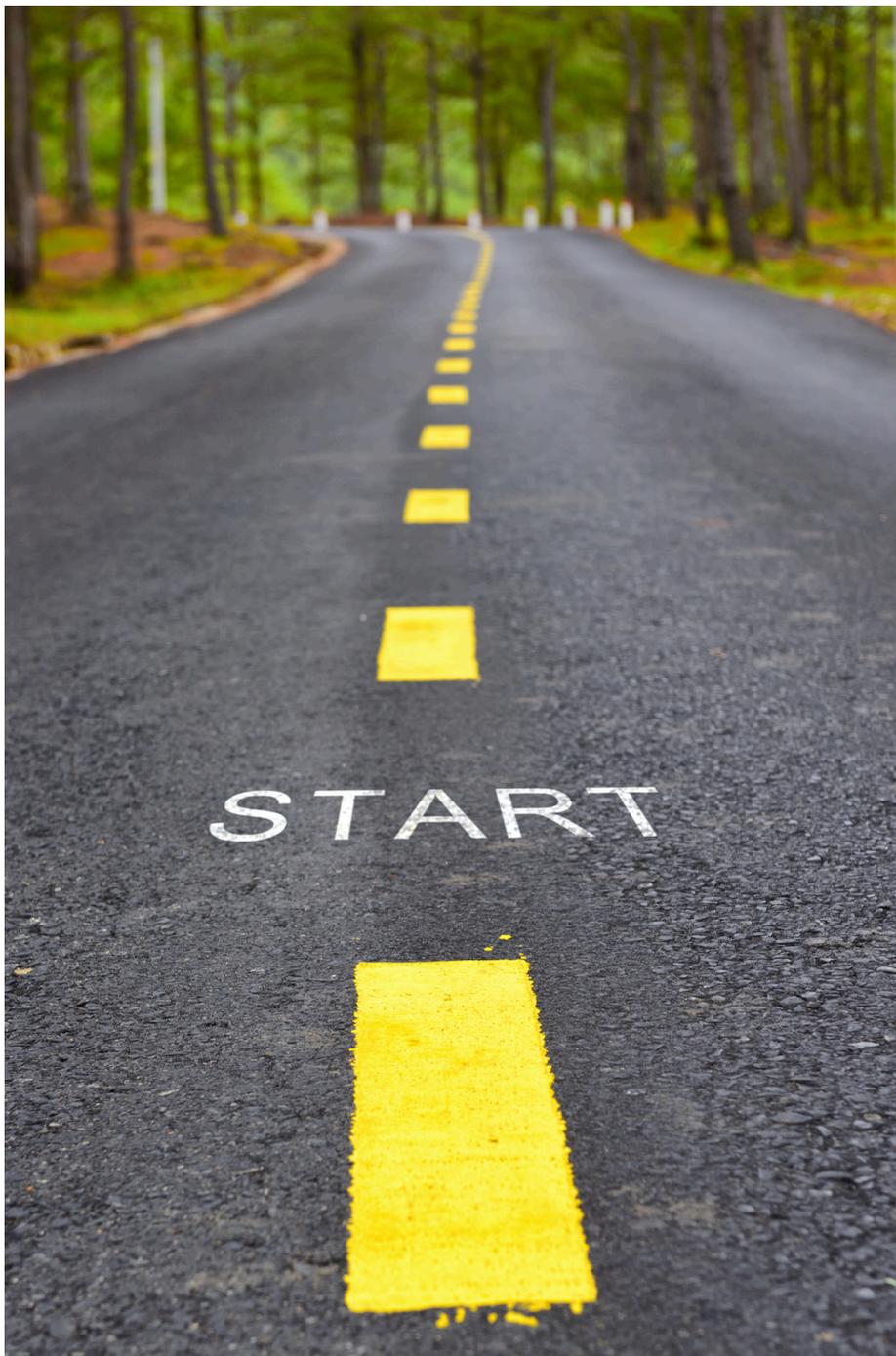
GRATITUDE

(1) Each day you will write down three things (person, place, or a thing) that you are grateful for and why you are grateful for that person, place or thing.

(2) Each day you will think of someone that you are going to come into contact with or even someone that you can reach out to and express your appreciation. Be sure to describe what they specifically did and how that impacted you.

(3) Each day you will work on identifying one thing that you appreciate and like about yourself.

(4) Each day you can examine one way that you have contributed to the world (big or small). Ask yourself: How did I show up? What did I offer, even if no one noticed? Why does it matter to me?



Day 1

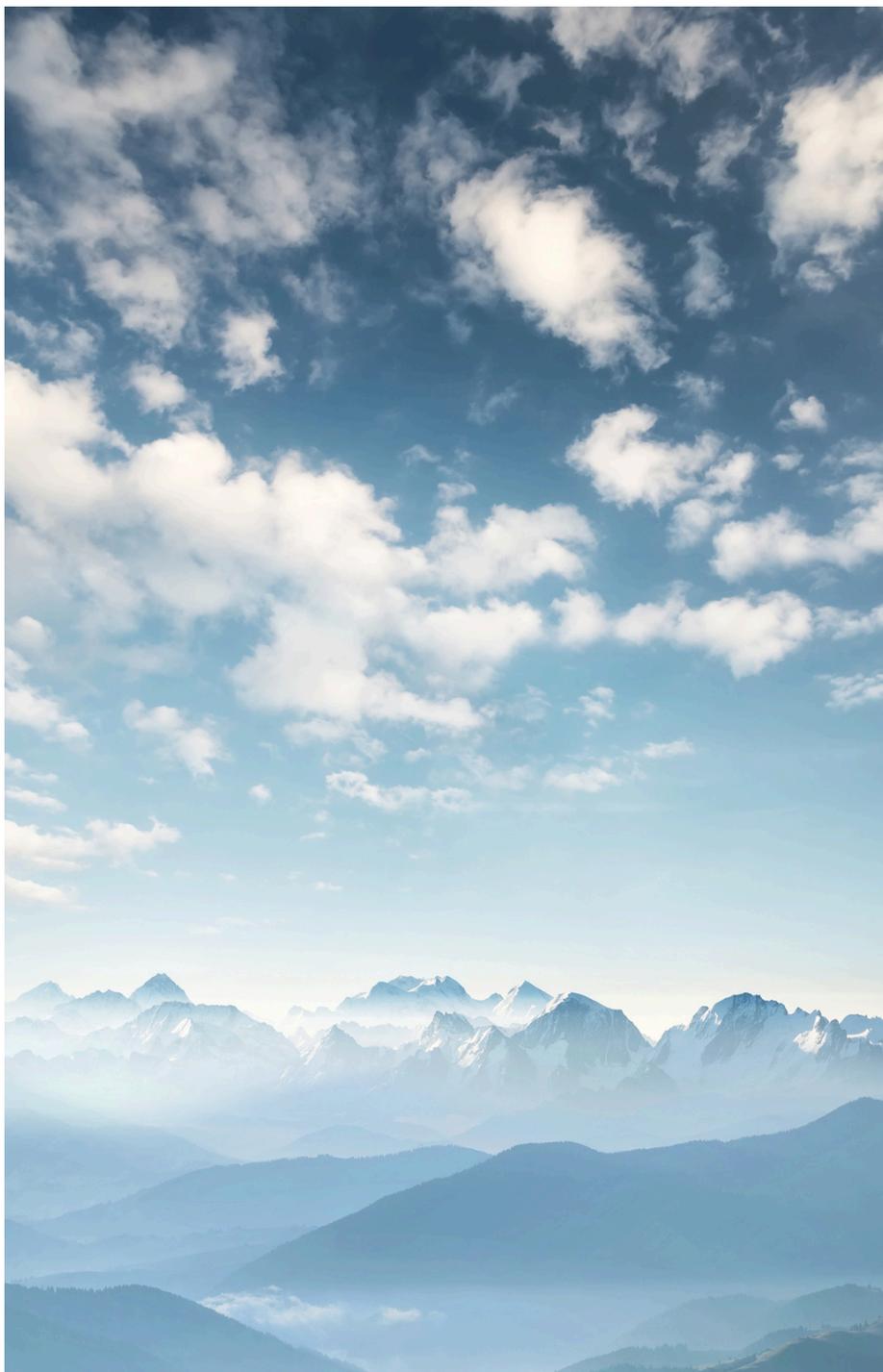
NATURE DOES NOT HURRY, YET
EVERYTHING IS ACCOMPLISHED.
- LAO TZU

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

ONE WAY I CONTRIBUTED TO THE WORLD
TODAY:



Day 2

HUMILITY IS NOT THINKING LESS
OF YOURSELF BUT THINKING OF
YOURSELF LESS. – C. S. LEWIS

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

ONE WAY I CONTRIBUTED TO THE WORLD
TODAY:

Day 3

GOALS HELP US PUT FEET ON
LIVING OUT OUR VALUES.
- CHRISTEN SISTRUNK

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION



Day 4

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS, BUT
SUCCESS WAITS FOR A PERSON
TO COMPLETE A TASK.
- ACE COLLINS

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

DAILY REFLECTION

WHO DID I CONNECT WITH TODAY?
WHAT DID I APPRECIATE MOST ABOUT THAT
CONNECTION?

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.

Day 5

IN OUR RESPONSE LIES OUR
GROWTH AND OUR FREEDOM.
- VIKTOR E. FRANKL

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION



Day 6

GRATITUDE TURNS WHAT WE
HAVE INTO ENOUGH.
-MELODY BEATTIE

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

Day 7

TAKE TIME TO FILL YOURSELF UP
SO THAT YOU CAN HELP FILL
OTHERS UP.
- CHRISTEN SISTRUNK

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

Day 8

AUTHENTICITY IS THE DAILY
PRACTICE OF LETTING GO OF
WHO WE THINK WE'RE SUPPOSED
TO BE... -BRENÉ BROWN

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

DAILY REFLECTION

WHAT'S SOMETHING I'VE SURVIVED THAT
MAKES TODAY'S GRATITUDE POSSIBLE?

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.

Day 9

KEEP FIGHTING FOR WHAT YOU
WANT. -ANONYMOUS

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION



Day 10

EVERYTHING WE DO SHOULD BE
A RESULT OF OUR GRATITUDE
FOR WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR
US. - LAURYN HILL

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

DAILY REFLECTION

WHAT EMOTION SHOWED UP THE MOST TODAY?
WHAT DOES IS IT TELLING ME ABOUT MY
NEEDS?

Handwriting practice lines consisting of 25 horizontal dotted lines.

Day 11

GRATITUDE IS RICHES.
COMPLAINT IS POVERTY.
- DORIS DAY

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

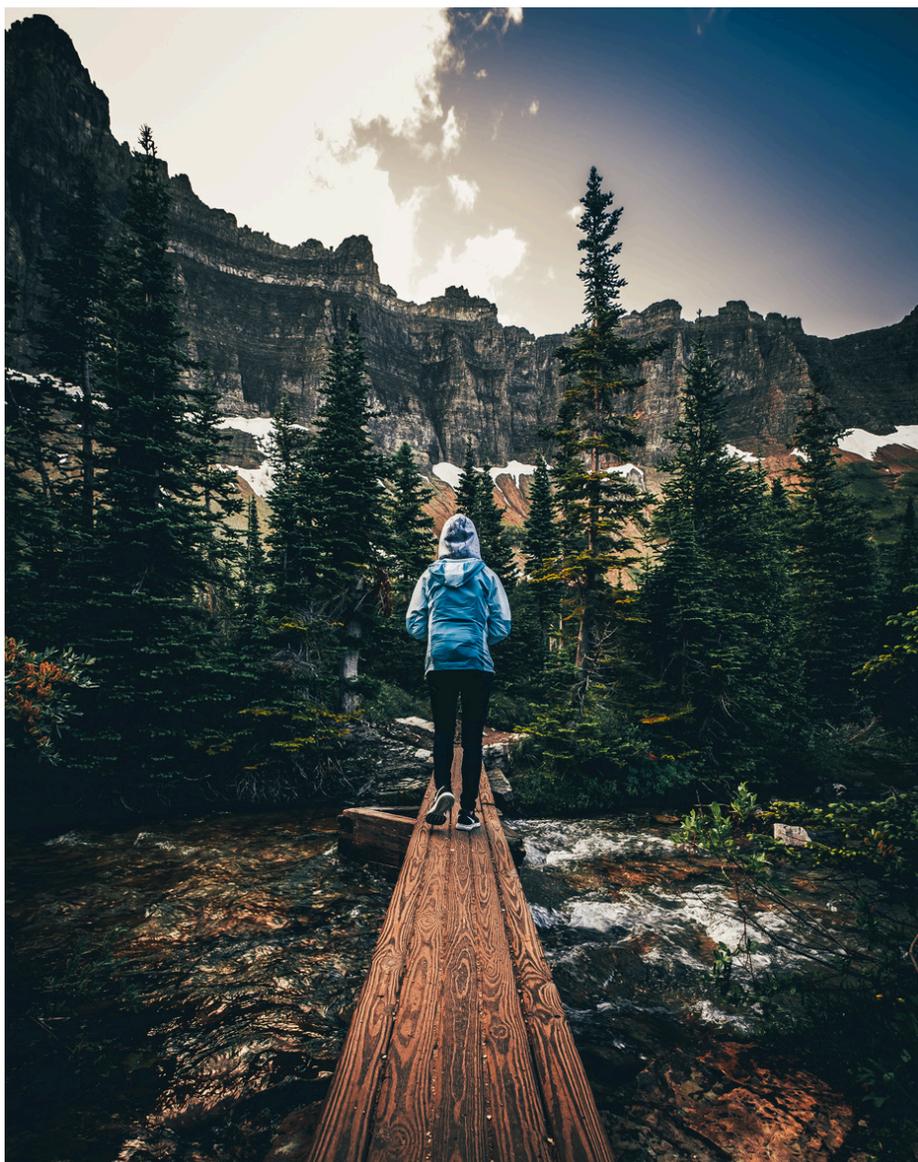
ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

DAILY REFLECTION

WHERE DID I SHOW RESILIENCE TODAY?

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.



Day 12

IN EVERYTHING GIVE THANKS...
- 1 THESSALONIANS 5:18

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

Day 13

NO DUTY IS MORE URGENT THAN
GIVING THANKS.
- JAMES ALLEN

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

Day 14

THE HEART THAT GIVES THANKS IS
A HAPPY ONE, FOR WE CANNOT
FEEL THANKFUL AND UNHAPPY AT
THE SAME TIME. - DOUGLAS WOOD

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

DAILY REFLECTION

WHAT IS ONE SMALL THING THAT BROUGHT ME
PEACE TODAY?

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.



Day 15

MAKING YOURSELF A PRIORITY
DOES NOT MEAN YOU ARE BEING
SELFISH.
- CHRISTEN SISTRUNK

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

DAILY REFLECTION

WHERE DID I NOTICE GOODNESS AND GRACE
TODAY?

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.

Day 16

WE MUST FIND TIME TO STOP AND
THANK THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE A
DIFFERENCE IN OUR LIVES.
- JOHN F. KENNEDY

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

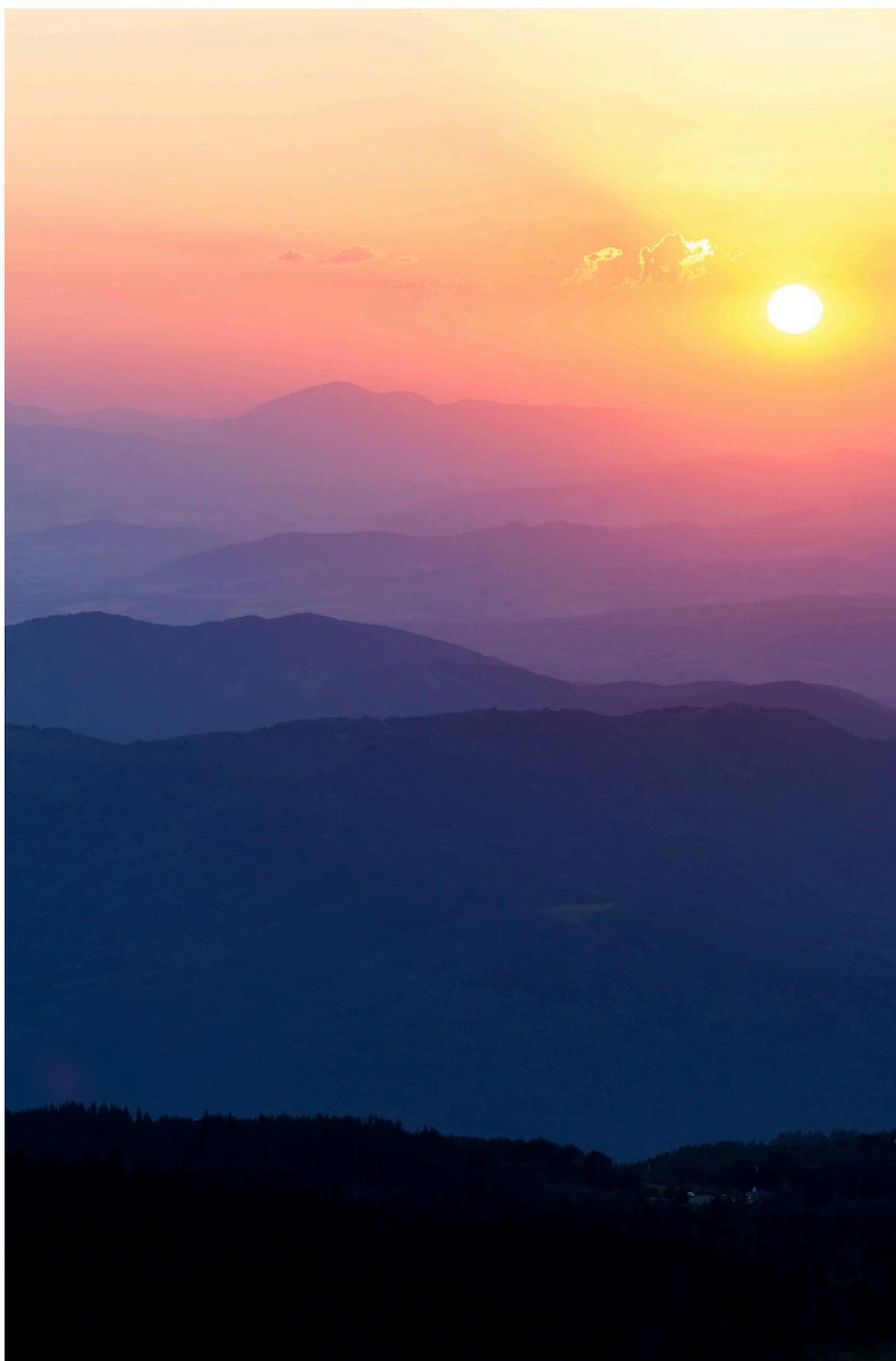
ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

DAILY REFLECTION

DID I SHOW UP IN A DEFENSIVE OR LIMITING
WAY TODAY?

Handwriting practice lines consisting of 25 horizontal dotted lines.



Day 17

GRATITUDE IS NOT ONLY THE
GREATEST OF VIRTUES, BUT THE
PARENT OF ALL OTHERS.
- MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

DAILY REFLECTION

WHAT DID I LEARN ABOUT MYSELF TODAY?

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.

Day 18

GRATITUDE LOOKS TO THE PAST AND
LOVE TO THE PRESENT; FEAR, AVARICE,
LUST, AND AMBITION LOOK AHEAD.

- C. S. LEWIS

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

DAILY REFLECTION

COULD I HAVE BEEN MORE VULNERABLE TODAY?

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.

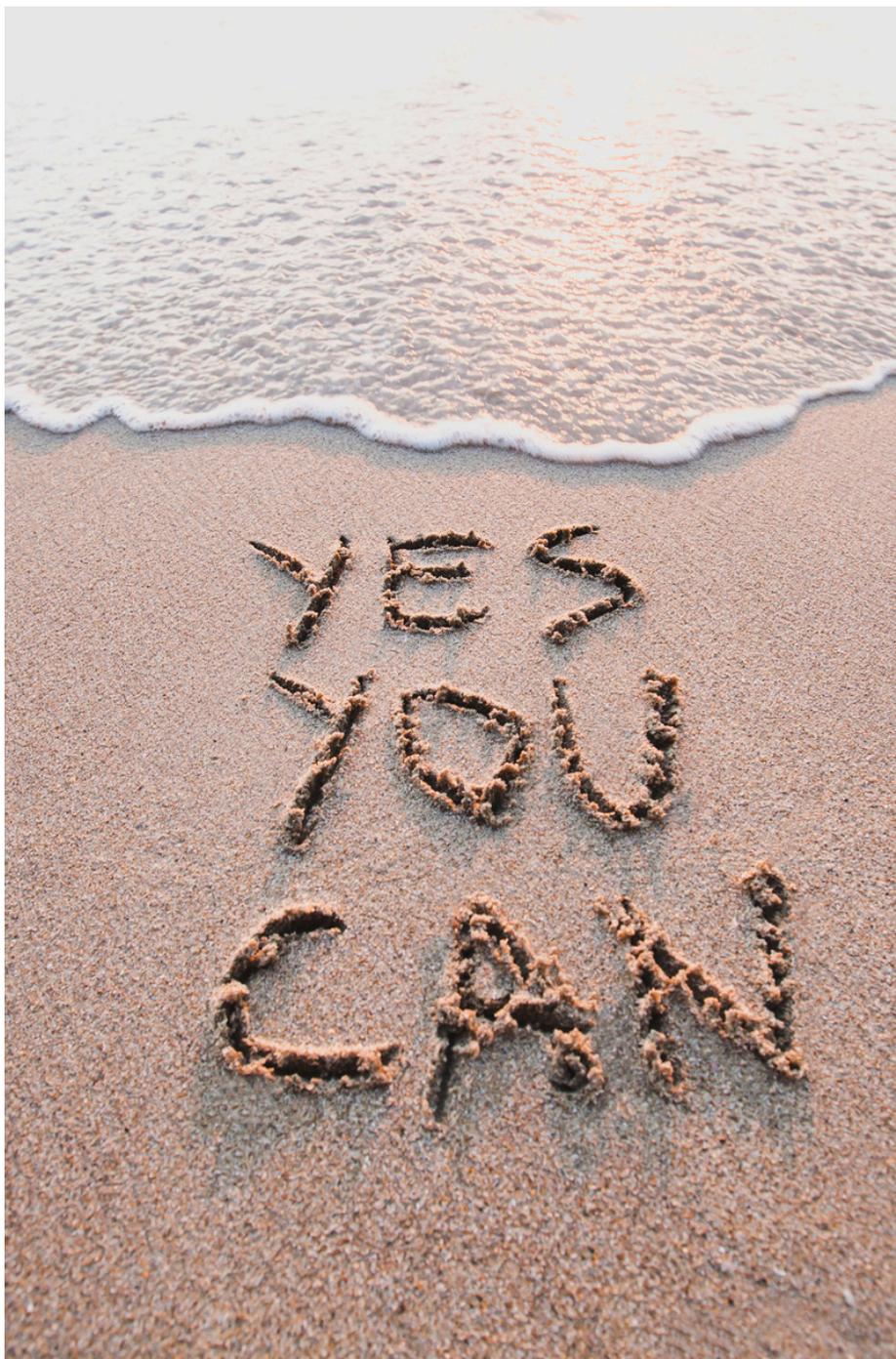
Day 19

WHAT SEPARATES PRIVILEGE
FROM ENTITLEMENT IS
GRATITUDE. - BRENÉ BROWN

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION



Day 20

GRATITUDE IS THE ABILITY TO EXPERIENCE
LIFE AS A GIFT. IT LIBERATES US FROM THE
PRISON OF SELF-PRE-OCCUPATION.
- JOHN ORTBERG

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION

DAILY REFLECTION

WHO OR WHAT IMPACTED ME IN A POSITIVE
WAY TODAY?

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.

Day 21

O LORD THAT LENDS ME LIFE,
LEND ME A HEART REplete WITH
THANKFULNESS.
- WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

THREE THINGS I'M
GRATEFUL FOR

ONE PERSON I WILL THANK
TODAY & WHY

SELF-APPRECIATION



You did it! I truly hope that the past 21 days have helped you move a little closer to living the life that you desire.

Resources:

Here are some of the places that I have found inspiration and helped me learn more about *gratitude*:

- Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection: Letting go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are*. Hazelden Publishing.
- Collins, A. (2010). *Gratitude: Practicing contagious optimism for positive change*. Zondervan.
- Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(2), 377–389. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.2.377>
- Frankl, V. E. (1997). *Man's search for meaning*. Pocket Books.
- Gordon, A. M., Impett, E. A., Kogan, A., Oveis, C., & Keltner, D. (2012). To have and to hold: Gratitude promotes relationship maintenance in intimate bonds. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 103(2), 257–274. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028723>
- McCullough, M. E., Emmons, R. A., & Tsang, J. (2002). The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 112-127.
- Smith, J. A. (2021). *Gratitude project: How the science of thankfulness can rewire our brains for resilience, optimism,.. and the greater good*. READHOWYOUWANT.

