

As we face the prospect of getting back to normal in the wake of COVID-19, many of us have questioned if normal is even possible. Some of us may even have mixed feelings about resuming normal life as we deal with a variety of emotions from the pandemic and its aftermath.

- Lonely
- Scared
- Confused
- Suspicious
- Apprehensive
- Isolated
- Anxious
- Vulnerable



Some of the emotions we feel may include...

Do some of these emotions seem familiar? I know I have felt many of these during the pandemic and its aftermath.



In parts of Spokane near where I live, people often walk down the street with their heads down, trying to keep distant from others, feeling suspicious and vulnerable about interaction, and not even saying hello. If you stop to be friendly or reach out to a stranger, people quickly become suspicious of you.



Many of us are longing for human presence but feeling scared at the same time.

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This is okay and normal.



When the black death ravaged through Europe in the fourteenth century, many people dealt with similar confusions and emotions.

And while COVID is not nearly as bad as the black death, it has still brought to the surface some of the same human struggles we have had to deal with before.





COVID – like the black death - has revealed wide rifts in our society, as opinion has become polarized.

After being separated politically through divisive politics and demagoguery, people were already feeling isolated, angry, and suspicious. Then COVID hit and we were isolated still further.

I personally got drawn into controversies as various people kept telling me they didn't care if their actions caused other people to die, and when I wrote about this online I received hate mail as a result. Some good

friends told me they lost all respect for me because I occasionally wore masks, while other people shared that they were being judged for not wearing masks. It seemed like everyone was being pushed to take sides.



Others have been wounded as COVID controversies have spilled into the church. In many churches, there have been arguments between those who are pro-mask and those who are anti-mask, or between those who feel the government has over-hyped the threat of COVID vs. those who feel the government hasn't done enough to help.

So COVID-19 and its aftermath have left deep wounds in our society, in our relationships, and in our individual lives.

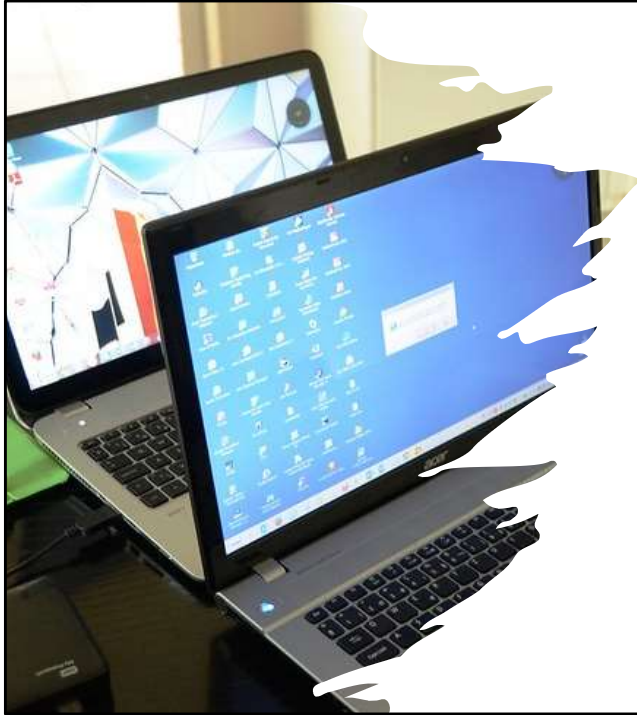




Some of us (including people I know) have lost loved ones to COVID, or have friends who are grieving because their family members have died from the pandemic. Some of us even feel responsible for their deaths, blaming ourselves for not doing more to practice social distancing.

Still others have lost jobs and even homes.

We may still be processing what happened, maybe with no one to talk to, and so we are not ready to get back to normal.



Many of us have been made lonely and depressed by our computers.

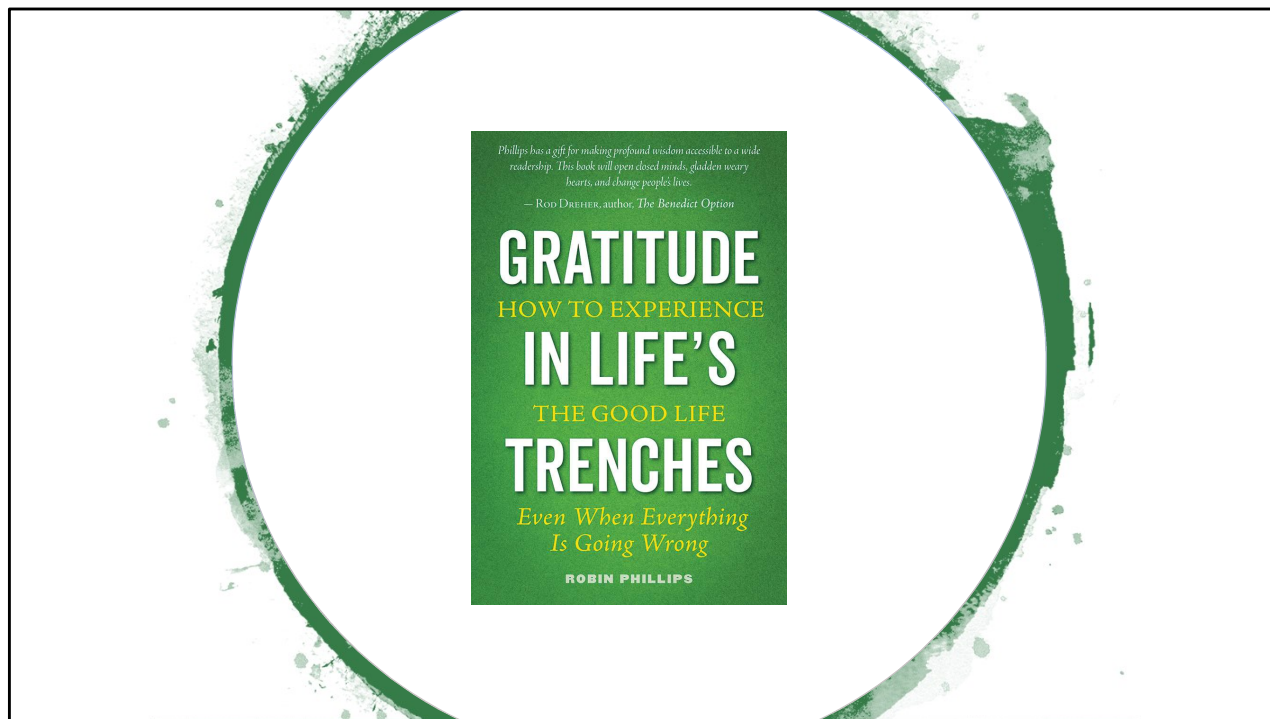
For years we had been told that everything physical can, will, and should, be replaced by virtual counterparts

Yet during COVID, we found that the virtual world did not deliver on its promise of greater connection.

We found that what the internet does best, namely to connect us, it also does worst.

Stuck at home and glued to our computers and smartphones, we have not become more connected than ever before, but less. Virtuality failed in its promise of emancipation, and simply underscores our remoteness from one another.

Many of us feel safe being remote and do not know how to get back together, to learn to trust again, and to abandon the safety of our homes for the unpredictability of physical interaction, with its risks, joys, and dangers.



Last year, I published a book with Ancient Faith aimed to help people wrestling with these and other challenges. I want now to share some insights from my book that can help us navigate some of these confusing and complicated emotions we may be dealing with, as we work towards healing on both on the personal and cultural level.

Some important concepts after periods of great shock

- Resiliency
- Repair
- Recovery

Some important concepts after periods of trauma, shock, and hurt, include resiliency, repair, and recovery.

When I was researching for my book, it was interesting and counter-intuitive to learn that vulnerability plays an important part of resiliency.

In the book we talk about embracing vulnerability through leaning into pain rather than pushing against it. It seems like a paradox, but by leaning into our vulnerability and learning to exercise hospitality towards painful emotions, we create the conditions whereby we can also experience conditions central to our wellbeing, including resiliency.

## Vulnerability Creates Resilience

From page 207 of *Gratitude in Life's Trenches*:

- Women who were terminally ill from breast cancer lived twice as long when having people with whom they could talk about how they were feeling, and with whom it was safe to be vulnerable.



Women who were terminally ill from breast cancer were put in a support group with other women in a similar condition.

Many of these women could not talk to their family and loved ones

about how they felt, because the subject was simply too painful. In many cases, the support group was the only place these women felt they could open up, the only place they did not need to hide their feelings, and where they had permission to be transparent about their fears, anger, and grief.

The women in this groups were compared to other women dying of breast cancer who did not have the same context of support. Both groups received the same medical treatment.

The women in the first group lived twice as long though they received



conventional medical treatments, did not go to such a group. This suggests that the freedom to be vulnerable is associated not merely with emotional health, but also with a high degree of physical resiliency.



“When we make ourselves invulnerable to the emotional impact of the pain, then we inadvertently numb away our capacity to feel love, joy, empathy, and thanksgiving. When we harden ourselves as a defense against fear, grief, disappointment, shame, rejection, or vulnerability, the result is that we also reduce our capacity to feel the emotions that are important for well-being.”—*Gratitude in Life’s Trenches*, page 201:

## Brené Brown

“We can’t make a list of all the “bad” emotions and say, ‘I’m going to numb these’ and then make a list of the positive emotions and say, ‘I’m going to fully engage in these!’ You can imagine the vicious cycle this creates: I don’t experience much joy so I have no reservoir to draw from when hard things happen. They feel even more painful, so I numb. I numb so I don’t experience joy. And so on.” —Brene Brown



Chapter 8 of my book is about vulnerability, and I quote the following words from Brene Brown.

As we begin healing from the pandemic, try to be mindful of areas of vulnerability that you may be facing. Then lean into those areas of vulnerability with mindfulness and self-compassion.



## What Am I Feeling?

**What am I feeling right now?** Try to give your feeling a name. Examples of common unpleasant emotions include sadness, anxiety, embarrassment, fear, anger, loneliness, confusion, and shame. Sometimes you may not know what you are feeling, and that's okay too.

**Can I receive even these difficult emotions with love and self-compassion?** Remember, treat your painful feelings with the same hospitality you would show to a friend who came to you with painful emotions.

**How are these emotions affecting my thoughts?** By noticing how your emotions are affecting your thoughts, you can treat those thoughts as something outside yourself and let them go. Just because a thought pops into your head doesn't mean you have to believe it. Common thoughts associated with painful emotions include "This is going to last forever" or "These feelings will adversely affect the quality of my life."

**How are these emotions manifesting in my body?** Use mindfulness (i.e., paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally) to notice how your emotions manifest in your body, and then focus on that part of your body with loving attention.

On page 232 of the book, I offer the following questions to help people get in touch with what they may be feeling, and to receive those feelings with hospitality.

Resiliency is  
Developed From  
Putting Yourself in  
Uncomfortable  
Situations

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In chapter 7 of my book I refer to the work of Dr. Jordan Peterson.

Dr. Jordan Peterson explained a secret about challenge and stress. When two groups of people experience a stressor, with one group voluntarily embracing the stressor and the other group having no choice, the people in the former group typically use an entirely different psychophysiological system for dealing with the stress. When we embrace stress voluntarily, we use the system associated with positive actions like approach, challenge, and adventure, not the systems used for defensiveness, withdrawal, and negative emotions.

Those of us who face suffering or challenging circumstances can leverage these findings for our benefit. By approaching unavoidable suffering as a challenge, an opportunity for growth, or a spiritual adventure, we change the psychophysiological system we use for dealing with it, leading to greater resiliency and growth.

# Build Resilience Through Gratitude

A 2003 study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that gratitude was a major contributor to resilience following the terrorist attacks on September 11. Recognizing all you have to be thankful for—even during the worst times of your life—fosters resilience.





## Gratitude is a *Practice*



“Without exception, every person I interviewed who described living a joyful life or who described themselves as joyful, actively practiced gratitude and attributed their joyfulness to their gratitude practice.... When it comes to gratitude, the word that jumped out at me throughout this research process is *practice*.”

Is gratitude an emotion or a behavior? Light is shed on this question by researcher Brené Brown. In her book *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Brené Brown tells how she used to assume that the people who were naturally joyful were grateful. But after devoting countless hours to interviewing hundreds of people about joy and gratitude, a surprising pattern started to emerge. Brown’s research began showing that joy emerged out of a conscious choice to engage in gratitude activities, not the other way round. “Without exception,” Brown writes, “every person I interviewed who described living a joyful life or who described themselves as joyful, actively practiced gratitude and attributed their joyfulness to their gratitude practice.... When it comes to gratitude, the word that jumped out at me throughout this research process is *practice*.”

Brown rightly distinguishes between a gratitude practice and a gratitude attitude. To simply say, “I need to have a grateful attitude” is about as helpful as telling ourselves to have a dieting attitude or an exercise attitude. What counts is actually practicing gratitude in a tangible way.

Such activities could include

- Gratitude journaling
- Making a point to thank people you appreciate
- Focusing on blessings you take for granted
- Refusal to verbalize complaints or criticisms regardless of how you feel
- Imagining what your life would be like if certain things were taken away, and then making a point of thanking God for those things
- Cognitive reframing

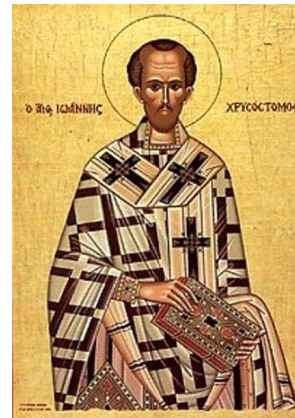
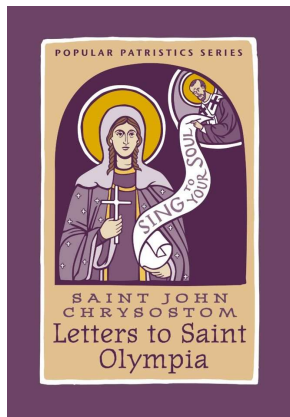
There are some of the gratitude practices you can do, and in my book I discuss many of them with real life examples of people who have endeavored to move from grumbling to gratitude. Through these practices, we create the conditions in which gratitude can exist as an emotion.



“Learning contentment is an object of discipline, and exercise, and care, for it is not easy to attain, but very difficult, and a new thing.”

—St. John Chrysostom

# Leverage Suffering for Spiritual Growth



While writing my book and researching some of the ways that suffering can be leveraged for spiritual growth, I was helped by looking at the teachings of St. John Chrysostom (c. 349–407). Through his Biblical teaching, he made an enemy of the wicked Roman Empress Eudoxia. Hoping to silence St. John, the empress sent soldiers to carry him into exile in 404.

St. John's close friend, the Deaconess St. Olympia, fell into emotional turmoil because of these events. Prior to his exile, St. John had been a mentor to St. Olympia, in addition to working with the deaconess in governing the churches. In these letters he shows her how suffering can be leveraged for spiritual benefit.

1. nobly endure emotional pain with meekness and thanksgiving;
2. rejoice in *everything*, even emotional pain;
3. struggle to lay hold of joy in the midst of hardship;
4. strive to accept all difficulties calmly and graciously, as sent from Providence for your spiritual growth;
5. no matter what you may be feeling inside, struggle to resist the spirit of fear, despondency, and hopelessness;

6. continually remind yourself that there is only one thing that can actually harm you, and only one thing that is truly distressing and worth being afraid about, namely sin;
7. respond to emotional pain with life-giving thoughts, such as reflection on the future rewards laid up for those who patiently endure suffering, including the suffering of emotional pain;
8. no matter how intense your afflictions may be, strive to keep your soul fixed on Christ;
9. when suffering emotional pain, take care of yourself physically and emotionally, for the sake of those who love you and also so that you can be stronger for resisting temptation.



## Key Take-Away Points

- By leaning into our confusing emotions with courageous vulnerability, and talking about them with others, we can achieve greater resilience;
- When we harden ourselves as a defense against vulnerability and risk, we also numb away our capacity to experience conditions that are important to wellbeing, including empathy and gratitude;
- We can strengthen our resilience by approaching challenges as opportunities for growth;
- We can strengthen our resilience by practicing gratitude;
- Gratitude is a practice – something we can cultivate through right habits.
- All suffering is an opportunity for spiritual growth if received in the right way

