

Ep #191: A Twist on Gratitude



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Tobi Fairley

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You are listening to the *Design You* podcast with Tobi Fairley, episode number 191.

Welcome to the *Design You* podcast. A show where interior designers and creatives learn to say no to busy and say yes to more health, wealth and joy, here's your host, Tobi Fairley.

Hey, friends, and if you're in the US, happy thanksgiving, friends. I hope you're enjoying your day wherever you are. I'm mixing it up a little bit this year for thanksgiving. I usually host thanksgiving at my house. But we decided to go out of town earlier this week to watch our favorite college team, My Alma Mater, the Arkansas Razorbacks play basketball in Kansas City. And so my sweet mom took back the thanksgiving duties for this year, so thanks mom. It feels like a treat to be taken care of.

Of course I definitely helped but not the same as when I'm getting my house ready. So kind of a nice little break this year. So as you're listening to this if you're listening on thanksgiving day or the day after, I'm probably either about to eat a whole bunch of sweet potato souffle, or I'm having my second, or third, or fifth, or seventeenth helping because it's my favorite. And I could literally eat it for my appetizer, and my entre, and my dessert, and my breakfast the next morning and I do basically. So yay for sweet potatoes.

Okay so if you're here, obviously you are if you're listening. I think this is a good time for us to talk about gratitude. Gratitude sounds like the typical thanksgiving day topic. But as I usually like to do, I am shaking it up a little bit, putting a twist on the way we're going to think about gratitude today. So I didn't come up with this. I learned it from some very smart ladies at the end of last year. And it's really been a gamechanger for me so I wanted to share it with you too.

So about a year ago last December or so I read a book called Burnout by Emily and Amelia Nagoski. And the Nagoski sisters are right up my alley. We have so much in common. And I first heard them on Brené Brown's

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podcast which is a fantastic episode and I highly recommend you go listen to that one after this. It's awesome. And it's all about why we burn out.

And really kind of the gist of it and this is not necessarily a spoiler alert, you're going to find it out really soon in the book. But the whole concept is that we burn out because we don't really close the loop on processing our emotions and our stress.

So what the Nagoski sisters say causes our burn out is that we interrupt our emotions from being fully felt and fully processed. So our emotions, our stress, if you want to call it that, our traumas, they're essentially getting stuck in our bodies all the time which makes a heck of a lot of sense when you read this book. And there's so much more amazing stuff to this book, including all the things that matter to me.

There's stuff about the patriarchy, and diet culture, and the expectations those systems have for us and the toll they take on us. And there's just a lot of stuff that's really, really good. But at the very end of the book, kind of in a little, tiny spot, sort of a little gem there is this concept of how to do gratitude differently. These sisters taught me a completely different way to think about gratitude that has really impacted me in a big way over the last 11 months.

So what is this twist on gratitude that I am speaking about you ask. Well, typically we are used to using something like a gratitude journal. And it's just a way to focus a lot of times on what we have. And a lot of us have gratitude journals, or we just use a plain journal. But when we do have those gratitude journals they ask us, they prompt us to list the three things, or the five things, or the 10 things we're grateful for every day. And usually what we put in that list are the things we have.

And a lot of times it's something that money can buy that we put on that list, not always but a lot of times. And all of that sounds amazing and it is. And there's definitely nothing wrong with focusing on our blessings because just the positive spin focusing on gratitude can put in our brains has been shown to scientifically alter us in a really positive way. In fact researchers at

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Harvard in the area of positive psychology say that gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness in people.

And gratitude helps people feel more positive with their emotions. It helps relish good experiences when they're happening and after they happen. It helps improve our health, it helps us deal with adversity and build strong relationships. So it's really important. Even just the list we talked about, there's nothing wrong with that list. And in the research at Harvard that they did, the typical ways that people were practicing gratitude to garner these benefits were gratitude journals, and prayer, and meditation, and even just reflections which could mean simply counting your blessings in your head.

And they were also doing things like writing thank you notes or thank you emails because those were also found to create the benefits of gratitude, thanking other people. So all of that is good. But what the Nagoski's noted in their book is there's more to gratitude than just positivity. There's also a shadow side per se, of gratitude. And it can kind of make gratitude practice a little hard on some of us. It's pretty interesting to think about. So when we're like, "What do you mean, Tobi, what could be negative about a gratitude practice?"

Well, let me tell you a few things that I learned in this book, Burnout. So first of all one of the big problems is being grateful doesn't erase bad things happening in life. So I learned in my life coaching to call it 50/50, life is 50/50. And of course it's not always exactly 50/50. But it just means that across your life there's just about as many bad things that happen as good things. And at any given day or week that can be true. And we all wish we could get to that place where our life is 90% good and only 10% bad but it doesn't ever happen.

So gratitude doesn't erase bad things happening. And it can be really confusing to us. It's kind of hard or really hard for us to hold space for two conflicting ideas or feelings at the same time. How can we be grateful for our own health when maybe our parent or our child has a serious illness? It's weird, and uncomfortable, and confusing. And just thinking about our good health might bring up some really negative emotions, or memories, or

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thoughts about what's happening in the lives and the health of other people we know.

Or how could we be excited about making more money than ever in our business when we see lots of friends, or people we love, or family members struggling to make ends meet? Or even on a more global kind of level, not just in our personal relationships like these other two examples. But just thinking of the world at large we often have a hard time accepting our own good fortune or privilege when it's not available to everyone. Whether that be food, or shelter, or safety, or money, money to pay rent and living expenses, or just basic human rights.

We think of them and we think I'm so glad I have those. But following that thought almost immediately a lot of times is this negativity, these heavy, hard emotions when we think about all the others who don't have those things. How can we be grateful for all our many blessings when there are so many people in the world struggling, when there are people starving? There are people starving right in our own community, or at least very hungry.

And it's really actually a challenge to hold space in our brain for those things to be happening at the same time. And a lot of people really struggle with this. So the Nagoski sisters say that being grateful for what we have can actually make us feel bad instead of good. We might feel guilt, or shame, or sadness. There's so many negative emotions we could come up with, anxiety, frustration, anger. There's so many things that could come up when we think about our position, our blessings compared to others. And I really get that.

And we often do the comparison game, both with our blessings but even with our pain. We want to rank our pain as if there's a scale. My pain is not as bad as your pain. And when we do that, we may actually weaponize our blessings or our sufferings against ourselves because we're thinking things like how could I be depressed or unhappy right now when I have so many things to be grateful for? As if gratitude negates clinical depression, or really severe anxiety, or even mild anxiety. It doesn't negate it.

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Or why do I want a better paying job? I should just be grateful for the one I have. There are so many people that don't have a job at all, there's so many that are unemployed. This is really weaponizing our blessings or the things that we might be grateful for against ourselves. And it can be really painful and really problematic. Again as if blessings, or wealth, or material things negate anxiety, or clinical depression, or addiction, or other mental health issues, or physical health conditions. Or as if having some of what we need means we should not want the rest of what we need.

So when we weaponize our gratitude it can be like the podcast I did a few weeks ago about self-gaslighting, or spiritual bypassing, or toxic positivity. It can be problematic to take something that should be good and use it against ourselves. And it can be a problem when you negate real health issues or real personal needs because you're believing the blessings you do have should have you not complaining or feeling any negative emotion in the other parts of your life. And that can be toxic positivity.

So how many times when we consider our own pain or our own struggles do, we immediately follow with something like, but it's not that bad, and so many other people have it so much worse than me? Any level of the comparison game, you all, or ranking our challenges, or our traumas, or our pain is never a good idea. And gratitude for what we do have just won't ever negate some of the other things that life serves up to us. So what can we do about it? Where in this podcast and in the book, *Burnout*, did the Nagoski sisters' ideas really help us think about this differently?

Well, they definitely helped me have some shifts. And here's what they suggest. They suggest instead of just thinking about or being grateful about what we have, the what, they say to make a shift and instead think about who we have, number one. And how things happen in our lives, number two.

So for example, instead of focusing on what we have, stuff, health, money, when we aren't just focusing on that. And we can shift to focusing on who we have, the other people in our lives, our relationships, our teams, our families, our friends, our neighbors, the people like us, the people that think

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like us, the people we connect with on Instagram, those people. There is an actual shift in us. And even when bad things are still happening we can focus on those people in our lives that make it all more bearable, and more special, and more meaningful, and more inspiring.

And second, they say being grateful for how things happen. And I've noticed this really, really shows you not only what role you played in the process of what's happening in your life, but also what role those other people played.

So for example, not just being grateful that you have money but how the money happened. I'm so grateful I started this business and I put myself out in the world, that I took a chance with my business. And I went to that event where I met my first client, that great client that decided to let me work on their big vacation home. And I'm so grateful I have the team that's helped me pull off this really big job for them this year.

And there's just something about really outlining the way things happened, the way the money came to you in this example that really causes less guilt or shame oftentimes. Because it's not as if that money just fell into your lap. It's not as if you're undeserving of the thing that you have, but rather you can see the whole role that you had in it, that others had in it, the actions you took to make that money happen, the things other people did to make this happen and make it possible. And at some level that removes some or all of that compare and despair game.

So you can more easily hold the fact that there's two contrasting ideas a little better because you can say, "Yeah, there are a lot of people that are hungry and that don't have the money for food, the money that I have for food." But at the same time I am so grateful for the way I put myself out in business and for the clients that help me create money. So I can not only feed myself but I can also help feed other people too. And that's a different way of thinking about gratitude, it sort of gives me chills when I think about it and when I say it.

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It's just a different level of connection and meaning that happens when we frame our gratitude this way instead of just listing things that we're grateful for. So if you want to make this shift in your gratitude practice here's how you can try it. Get out your journal and start writing about a person, or people, or the who, and also consider writing about the way something happened that you're grateful for.

So when you do this, you want to write down a detailed account of the event, start to finish, notice who was part of the event, what they did or said, including yourself and how you each contributed to bringing this thing to be. Describe your feelings that you felt when it was happening originally and also your feelings that you feel right now as you reflect on this event. And write down how the event really unfolded and why it happened, and what came together in your life to make this event happen.

Then spend a few moments feeling really grateful, or even meditating, or in prayer for this whole experience and the people involved to make it happen. You all, this shift has been huge for my gratitude practice thanks to the Nagoski sisters and this great book, *Burnout*. And today as I reflect back on all my blessings and connect them with the people and the experiences that made it all happen, I feel a deeper sense of joy, and fulfillment, and yes, gratitude than when I practice the old way of just jotting the things down that I was grateful for. It is a gamechanger.

And let me just say while we're on this topic before we wrap up, in case I haven't said it in a while, how grateful I am for each of you who listen every week. How fun is it for me to really think of all the people and all the steps that go into making this podcast happen week after week, and yes, you, the listeners are a huge part of that. So thank you, thank you. I could not do this without you.

Okay friends, I hope that you liked this twist on gratitude. Do check out the book, *Burnout*, it was one of my top five books that I read in all of 2020. And on that note, I know you all love to hear what I'm reading. And I've read about around 40 books this year in 2021 and I'll be bringing you my favorites from that list in just a few weeks, as we're wrapping up this year or

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maybe right after the new year. So I won't forget. But burnout was definitely in my top five last year. So I highly recommend you read it.

And that's what I have for you today. I hope you enjoyed it. I'll see you back here next week and you don't want to miss that episode because I'm going to be talking about a whole new way to think about million dollar businesses. And how this new way of thinking may be the very shift you need to help you create the business you have been dreaming of. Okay, bye for now, I'll see you then. Happy thanksgiving for all of you in America once again and thank you so much for being here.

Thank you so much for listening to the *Design You* podcast, and if you are ready to dig deep and do the important work we talk about here on the podcast of transforming your mindset and creating a scalable online business model, there has never been a more important time than right now. So, join me and the incredible creative entrepreneurs in my *Design You* coaching program today. You can get all the details at TobiFairley.com.