

AN ESSAY

Inventory

*On a camera roll, twelve hot sauces, and
the gratitude list that would not end.*

BY CHRIS WYATT · A TWELVE-MINUTE READ

FOR A WHILE NOW, MY PHONE HAS BEEN TELLING ME TO BE grateful. Every few swipes, someone in soft golden light explains that every day is a blessing. That gratitude changes everything. That I should cherish the little things.

I have built up a decent immunity to the genre. Most of it sounds like a greeting card that hired a publicist.

But one evening recently, my immunity was down, and I decided to try it the way you take a free sample at the grocery store. No commitment. Fully prepared to walk away. I would take a picture of something I was grateful for. Maybe two. Later, I would look at the pictures and remember.

That was the entire plan.

I started with a green candle on the kitchen counter. I do not know where it came from. I have no business owning it. But it was there, and it was green, and it was a candle, so I took its picture. Then the dog bowls, both full of water. Then the dogs themselves, who had not asked to be documented but, being dogs, forgave me immediately.

Then the coffee maker, and right beside it, the machine that turns tap water into sparkling water on command. It occurred to me that these two

had been standing shoulder to shoulder for years, like coworkers who had never been introduced. Then the ultra-purified water. Then the Viking stove. Then the refrigerator. Then the inside of the refrigerator.

Then the kitchen island my family calls Spice Island, where I counted the hot sauces out loud. One. Two. Three. Four. It kept going.

There are twelve. I own twelve hot sauces. I photographed every one of them.

Somewhere around the ninth bottle, I realized the experiment had gone wrong. Or possibly right, in a direction I had not planned. There was nothing in the room I did not want to photograph. The list had no last item.

When I scrolled back through my camera roll, it did not look like a gratitude journal. It looked like I was documenting the house for an insurance claim.

Hold on to that thought. It turns out to be the most useful thing that happened all night. But first, the question the experiment raised: why is it that once you start counting, you cannot stop?

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The short answer is that nothing on the list is actually one thing.

Take the candle. For nearly all of human history, light after sunset was a serious expense. The economist William Nordhaus once reconstructed the price of light across the centuries, and his numbers are hard to believe. In 1800, an hour of good reading light, bought in tallow candles, cost more than five hours of labor. Today the same light costs less than half a second. We have beaten the dark so thoroughly that we now set small fires indoors for the smell. My green candle is not a light source. It is a victory lap.

Take the sparkling water. In 1767, Joseph Priestley moved in next door to a brewery in Leeds, and before long he had worked out how to dissolve the gas rising off the fermenting beer into a glass of water. It was frontier

chemistry. The same man later isolated oxygen. I push a button and get what he spent his evenings chasing, and then I complain that it is not cold enough.

Take Spice Island. The original Spice Islands were real, a scatter of volcanic specks in what is now Indonesia, and European powers fought over them for generations. In 1667, at the peace table in Breda, the English and the Dutch agreed that each side would keep what it held. The English kept Manhattan, which they had seized three years earlier. The Dutch kept a speck of a nutmeg island called Run, and at the time, plenty of people thought the Dutch had the better end of the deal.

Meanwhile, not one of my twelve hot sauces could have existed in Europe, Africa, or Asia before 1492, because chili peppers come from the Americas. Before the sixteenth century, there were no chilies in Thai cooking. None in Indian curry. None in Korean gochujang. The flavor I keep a dozen versions of, within arm's reach, has been in most of the world for about five hundred years. In culinary terms, that makes it the new kid.

And take the water, which should stop this essay cold. According to the latest figures from the World Health Organization and UNICEF, about 2.1 billion people, one in four humans alive, still do not have safely managed drinking water at home. Roughly 106 million drink straight from rivers, ponds, and irrigation canals.

I own a filter that makes my water purer than it needs to be. I have not merely solved the problem a quarter of the planet is still working on. I have overshot it. My dogs drink cleaner water than most humans in history ever did.

This is why the list will not end. Every object is a thread, and when you pull one, the whole sweater comes with it.

In 2008, a design student in London named Thomas Thwaites set out to build a toaster from scratch, copying one that sold for about four pounds. It had 404 parts. He allowed himself five materials. He hauled

iron ore home from an old mine in a suitcase. He smelted some of it in a microwave. It took him nine months. It cost him more than eleven hundred pounds. When he finally plugged it into the wall, it toasted for about five seconds, and then it began to melt.

A kitchen looks like a room. It is actually a crowd. Every gadget on my counter is the compressed work of thousands of strangers who never met each other and never met me.

When I aimed my phone at the candle, I was not photographing a candle. I was photographing a supply chain, a chemistry tradition, and the long, expensive war against the dark. No wonder I could not stop. I was not making a list.

I was pulling on the world.

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So why do I not feel this every day? Why did it take a camera and a quiet evening to notice that I own an absurd quantity of hot sauce?

The soft-light videos imply it is a character flaw. We are spoiled. Distracted. Ungrateful. The neuroscience is kinder.

Your nervous system is built as a difference detector. Neurons that fire at something new fire less the second time, and less still the tenth. Researchers call it repetition suppression. It is why you cannot feel your shirt until someone mentions it, and why you cannot smell your own house. The brain files anything unchanging under “not news.” My roof has been reporting “still here” every single day for years, and my brain, very sensibly, unsubscribed.

I want to defend taking things for granted, because it deserves a better lawyer than it usually gets.

An animal that stopped to marvel at its shelter every morning would not have lasted long. Attention is expensive. The brain spends it on what might feed you or kill you. The roof does neither. Ignoring it is not ingratitude. It is efficiency.

It is also something better than efficiency. It is trust.

Nobody takes for granted what they cannot count on. In places where the water fails, people think about water all day. The engineers who built my town's water system succeeded precisely because I have never once thought about them. Taking something for granted is the highest review a system can receive. Five stars. Forgot it existed.

Civilization, seen from a certain angle, is a machine for turning miracles into furniture.

The research on gratitude quietly agrees. In one six-week study, the psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky and her colleagues asked students to count their blessings. The ones who did it once a week got happier. The ones who did it three times a week did not. Gratitude habituates, like everything else. Turn it into a chore, and it becomes one more unchanging stimulus the brain learns to tune out.

The instruction to feel grateful every moment is not just impractical. It defeats itself. Nobody can live in the state I was in with that camera. You would never make it out of the kitchen.

So the right model is not constant gratitude. It is taking things for granted as the normal operating mode, with gratitude as the occasional audit. Most of the time, you run on trust. Every so often, you open the books and count what is actually there.

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Which brings me back to the camera, and an awkward finding.

In 2014, the psychologist Linda Henkel took students on a museum tour. She asked them to photograph some objects and simply look at others, then tested them the next day. They remembered the photographed objects worse. She called it the photo-taking impairment effect. The camera remembers, so you do not have to. My plan to take pictures so that I would remember was, according to the literature, a plan to forget more efficiently.

But Henkel found an exception. When people zoomed in on a particular detail, the memory held, and not just for the detail but for the whole object. The camera was never the problem. Lazy looking is the problem. Framing a shot forces you to decide what you are looking at, and deciding what you are looking at is the exact opposite of taking it for granted.

I will probably never scroll back through those pictures of hot sauce. It does not matter. The photos were a pretext. The looking was the point.

There is an even stronger trick, and this is where the insurance claim comes back.

In 2008, a team of psychologists that included Timothy Wilson and Daniel Gilbert asked people to think about their romantic partners. Some wrote about how they had met. Others wrote about how easily they might never have met at all. The second group came away more satisfied with the relationship. The researchers called it mental subtraction, and they titled the paper, perfectly, “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

Imagining the absence of a good thing does more for you than contemplating its presence, because absence is news and presence is not. The imagined loss slips past the filter.

Seneca knew this two thousand years ago. He advised setting aside a few days, now and then, to live on the cheapest food and the roughest clothes, and to ask yourself whether this was really the thing you had been afraid of.

An insurance adjuster and a grateful person are making the same list. They photograph the same candle. The same stove. The same twelve bottles of hot sauce. The only difference is timing.

The adjuster comes after the fire.

Gratitude is the inventory you take while the house is still standing.

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When I finally put the phone down, I had two thoughts.

The first was that I am, as the videos would put it, blessed. Although the sentence in my head had a stronger adjective in it.

The second felt more profound. I would feel exactly this way even if I had a lot less.

I want to test that one, because it is precisely the kind of thing that feels true in a warm kitchen and falls apart outside it.

The case for it is stronger than you might expect. Look at what was actually on the list. Almost none of it was the expensive part. The miracle of the Viking stove is controlled fire. The Viking just adds horsepower to a miracle any hot plate delivers. The miracle of the ultra-purified water is clean water. The “ultra” is decoration.

The miracle of Spice Island is flavor, and a bottle of hot sauce is among the cheapest luxuries on earth. The psychologist Paul Rozin, who has spent years studying why humans are almost the only animal that learns to love the burn of chili, calls it benign masochism: the thrill of pain, with no actual danger. A roller coaster you can buy for a few dollars.

And the dogs, easily the best thing in the room, do not come in a premium tier.

Epicurus, who has an undeserved reputation as a party guy, said he was content with bread and water. In one letter he asked for a little pot of cheese, so that he could feast whenever he liked. His point was that the pleasure lives in the category, not the upgrade.

The research on hedonic adaptation points the same way. We get used to upgrades fast. The premium wears off. What remains, once the novelty fades, is the base layer. Water. Warmth. Flavor. Company. A roof. If my gratitude is really attached to the base layer, it should survive a downgrade.

Now let me red-team it, because a man standing next to a Viking stove, announcing that he would be equally happy without it, deserves some scrutiny.

First, it is cheap talk. I have not run the test. Nearly everyone who has ever said that money cannot buy happiness has said it from a position that did not require finding out.

Second, the research on scarcity cuts hard the other way. The economist Sendhil Mullainathan and the psychologist Eldar Shafir have shown that scarcity taxes the mind. When you are worried about rent or food, the worry eats the attention you would otherwise spend on everything else. They call it bandwidth. And gratitude runs on bandwidth.

My night of photographing candles required a free evening, a quiet mind, and the absence of any real emergency. The capacity to notice is itself on the list. It may be the most expensive thing on it.

Third, there is a floor, below which “be grateful” stops being wisdom and starts being an insult. You do not tell someone drinking from an irrigation canal to count their blessings. Gratitude is a way of seeing. It is not a policy. When it gets used as one, as a way of telling people with less to stop asking for more, it has gone bad.

So here is where I land, honestly. I believe I would say the same thing with a lot less, down to a point. The candle could go. And the Viking. And eleven of the twelve hot sauces. The feeling would survive, because the feeling was never about the premium.

But somewhere around clean water, safety, and enough quiet to think, there is a line. Below it, what I felt in my kitchen would stop being a feeling and become a discipline, the kind people in hard circumstances practice with a courage I have never been asked to find. Below that, it would be something I have no right to prescribe to anyone.

And if gratitude is an audit, it has to be an honest one. A real audit does not only count what you have. It also shows what you owe.

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Afterward, I looked up the phrase I had set out to fight, the way you do at that hour of the night.

“Granted” came into English through Old French, from the Latin *credere*: to believe, to trust. It is a cousin of *credit* and *creed*, disguised by an odd medieval sound shift that turned the C into a G. Along the way, it also came to mean to give, formally, the way a king grants land.

So the phrase has two ideas folded inside it. To take something for granted is to take it on trust. And a grant is a gift.

I no longer think the first meaning is the enemy. Most days, I should take the world on trust. That is what a working civilization feels like from the inside, and the people who built it have earned my forgetting.

But every so often, on an ordinary evening, phone in hand, nothing on fire, I want to read the phrase the other way.

It’s a given.

Read slowly, that is two sentences. I can count on it. And somebody gave it to me.

Both are true.

Only one of them makes you reach for the camera. ♦

SOURCES. William Nordhaus, “Do Real-Output and Real-Wage Measures Capture Reality? The History of Lighting Suggests Not,” in *The Economics of New Goods* (1997). Joseph Priestley, *Directions for Impregnating Water with Fixed Air* (1772). The WHO and UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme’s 2025 report on household drinking water. Thomas Thwaites, *The Toaster Project* (2011). Grill-Spector, Henson, and Martin, “Repetition and the Brain,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* (2006). Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade, “Pursuing Happiness,” *Review of General Psychology* (2005). Henkel, “Point-and-Shoot Memories,” *Psychological Science* (2014). Koo, Algae, Wilson, and Gilbert, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2008). Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* 18. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, book 10. Rozin and colleagues, “Glad to Be Sad, and Other Examples of Benign Masochism,” *Judgment and Decision Making* (2013). Mullainathan and Shafir, *Scarcity* (2013).