

Expressive Gratitude

An Interview with Joel Zuckerman

EDITORS' NOTE Joel Zuckerman (*gratitudetiger.com*) has learned gratitude from the ground up, from a granular level. He's written some 250 Letters of Gratitude over the last decade, commencing, appropriately enough, around Thanksgiving, 2013. Zuckerman is the only two-time winner of the International Network of Golf's Book of the Year Award (Pete Dye in 2009, Pro's Pros in 2013). He has written ten books in total, contributed to more than 110 publications worldwide, and has made repeated appearances on Golf Channel, Sirius XM Radio, and PBS Radio. His entertaining and informative speaking presentations have been enjoyed by appreciative audiences in Boston, Bora Bora, Scottsdale, Scotland, Fiji, Florida, and many points in between. His clients include corporate groups, high-end country clubs, and luxury cruise liners.



Joel Zuckerman

Will you discuss your life journey?

Mine has been circuitous, to say the least. For the first 15 years post-college, I tried on and rejected different careers like so many ill-fitting suits. In brief, I sold Yellow Pages in Manhattan, then moved on to magazine advertising. I spent a number of years on the New York Mercantile Exchange, then returned to my roots in Western Massachusetts and started a small business which had the dual distinction of being uninspiring and unprofitable concurrently. When I relocated my young family to Savannah, Georgia in 1997, I managed to land a job as the golf columnist for the *Carolina Morning News* on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, one of the true Meccas of the game. It was pure serendipity, considering I hadn't written much more than a grocery list in the preceding decade-and-a-half.

I could feel in my bones from the outset that writing was what I was meant to do. I quickly parlayed that job, which I kept for a decade, into magazine work. First local, then regional, then airline, and finally national. I wrote my first book in 2003, followed in quick succession by seven others in 12 years, two of which captured Book of the Year in the golf business. While my profile was raised, I started speaking professionally – luxury cruise ships, corporate retreats, country clubs, conferences, etc. After saying all I could possibly ever think to say about golf – the books alone comprise a total of 2,000 pages, not to

mention a thousand feature stories for a hundred different magazines, newspapers, and websites – I slowly started to turn my focus to gratitude. Now I speak to audiences about a subject far more important and life-enhancing than golf could ever be – the concept of proactive or expressive gratitude.

Where did you develop your interest and passion for the concept of gratitude?

I wrote my first Letter of Gratitude in November 2013, just prior to Thanksgiving. After reading about the concept in a book, I decided to try my hand, simply as an intellectual exercise. At the time, it never occurred to me I would write a second letter. However, I was so taken aback by the feeling of warmth and accomplishment it gave me, within a week I wrote another letter. Then a third. Eventually it was a dozen, then a hundred. Now, little more than ten years after that initial attempt, I'm closing in on 250 Letters of Gratitude written and sent. No other writing I've done – not the books, the magazine covers, the fiction, the travelogues, the long form features, etc. – have ever provided the same level of satisfaction that the Letters of Gratitude have.

How do you define the meaning of the word gratitude?

It would be easy to use a dictionary definition, but let me spin it differently: Having gratitude is when you're able to see the good in any

situation – not always easy, by the way. To coin a phrase, Gratitude is the Glass Half-Full.

Let me expound on my current circumstances. I'm writing this with a large brace covering most of my left leg. I managed to tear my quadriceps tendon, in the Peruvian Andes of all places, and surgical repair is scheduled. I focus on the fact that I made it down safely – via horseback, mountain stretcher, ATV, then three flights back home – and that my wife continued on with my encouragement, enjoying this “bucket list” adventure in the company of other friends and traveling companions after my sudden departure. I'm grateful I can drive, as my right leg is unaffected. It's fortunate that my family is close by and can assist during this temporary invalid stage. These “waves of gratitude” that I focus on help to ameliorate the inevitable sadness, anger, self-pity, FOMO, that are the inevitable byproducts of this rotten luck – at least a little bit.

Can gratitude be taught or is it something a person is born with?

It can definitely be taught. However, it will come easier to some than others. It's no different than those with a facility for foreign language, or those who grasp algebra or trigonometry more easily than their classroom peers.

I'm an East Coaster by birth, “Type A” personality, impatience is in my genes. Resentment, part of my DNA, like hazel eyes, seethes just below the surface. But focusing on gratitude, specifically proactive or

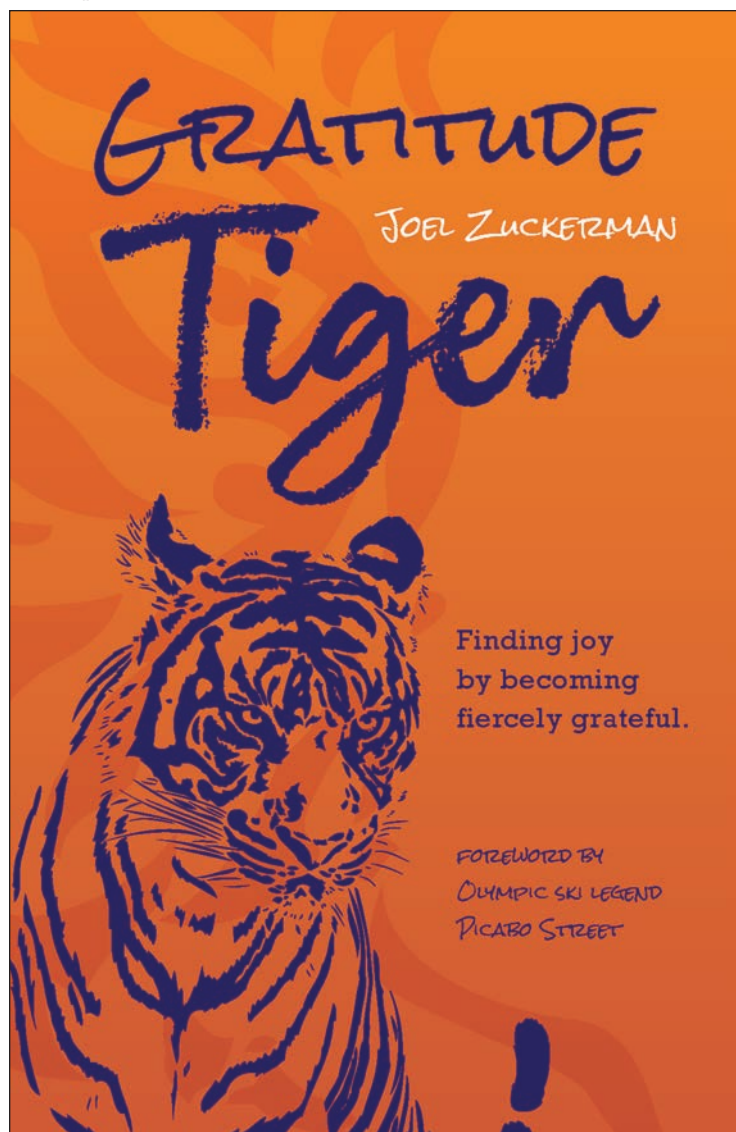
“No other writing I've done – not the books, the magazine covers, the fiction, the travelogues, the long form features, etc. – have ever provided the same level of satisfaction that the Letters of Gratitude have.”

expressive gratitude, can soften a personality's rough edges. To me, the main course, the crux of this matter, is to write letters of gratitude to those who have made a difference in your life. I can say this from personal experience. It will have positive effects on equanimity, well-being, sleep patterns, and even blood pressure.

What interested you in writing the book, *Grateful*, and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?

I'm currently in the process of completing my tenth book, and *Grateful*, which was the ninth book chronologically, is the only book in my oeuvre that wasn't conceived and written as a commercial endeavor. It was a "love letter" to the hundreds of individuals to whom I had written Letters of Gratitude. I decided to bind these first 180 letters into a beautiful hardbound 400-page book and give it away to those I cared about.

It was meant as a "legacy book," so people who have impacted me from youth to deep middle age could see how I felt about them, how grateful I was to know them. At the same time, by perusing the text, they could peer into other relationships I've enjoyed, in many cases, because these circles intertwine with people they also knew personally or had at least heard about previously.



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You mentioned that you are currently completing another book, *Gratitude Tiger*. Will you discuss this book?

I truly thought *Grateful* was my literary swan song, and a good note to go out on. But recently, in the last month or two, I realized I have this intrinsic knowledge that I wish to share with anyone – which would theoretically be everyone – who wants to improve their equanimity, mindset, and personal relationships through the process of focusing on proactive, as opposed to reactive, gratitude. That is why I'm hard at work and excited to share my unique understanding of gratitude in *Gratitude Tiger – Finding joy by becoming fiercely grateful*.

Let me make a crucial point: My deep understanding of gratitude is not because I'm a PhD or a clinical psychologist. It's simply because I've composed and sent some 250 Letters of Gratitude to an incredibly diverse array of individuals who have helped, mentored, befriended, loved, or shown me kindness. I've written to those I've known for 60 years and those I've known less than six weeks. Letters have been sent to people in my regular, if not daily orbit, and to those who I'm likely to never see again. I've even written a few letters to individuals I've never seen, or in a few odd cases, spoken to. This ever-expanding collection has changed and improved me. It can do the exact same for anyone else who chooses to embrace this simple, yet incredibly enriching, philosophy.

The crux of the book will be The Seven Pillars of Expressive Gratitude, which are the seven vital reasons why writing letters is so life-enhancing. However, this will be a comprehensive, yet entertaining look at all the nuts-and-bolts surrounding letter writing – and I do mean letter writing. These are not texts, emails, memes, emojis, gifs, tik-toks, or any other dross. Other chapters include: "Acknowledge you probably won't be acknowledged." "Grateful...not Ghandi." "Finishing this text with a word about texts." And other irreverent, easy-to-digest, but informative and thought-provoking concepts surrounding proactive, or expressive, gratitude.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

In researching *Gratitude Tiger*, I am discovering some interesting truths about younger workers (Millennials, Gen X, etc.) that I wasn't aware of. Career development, better work/life balance, greater autonomy, more well-being opportunities, and the option to work remotely are among their top priorities as they seek employment. So much different than when I was starting out four decades ago, when the first, second and third goal was initial compensation, opportunities for advancement, and earning the chance to increase one's salary dramatically.

Since money doesn't seem to be the priority it was a few decades ago, I would advise a young person to tread carefully, find a company that aligns with their personal values, has a management team that values ethical behavior and endeavors to treat both customers and employees with the respect they deserve. They're not solely focused on the bottom line and increasing revenue. Either working on their own, forming a partnership with a friend, several friends, or like-minded individuals, or even if they choose to enter the corporate universe, it will ultimately be more enriching to work to help society and repair the world, in whatever capacity that means. For that reason alone, they can and should be grateful. ●