The discipline of gratitude

*If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not charity, I gain nothing.* 1 Cor. 13:3 NIV (1984)

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch theologian, first introduced me to the term “the discipline of gratitude.” Gratitude, says Nouwen, goes beyond the “mine” and “thine” and claims the truth that all life is a pure gift. I like what that term, “the discipline of gratitude,” suggests. It reminds me that my charitable giving needs to be regular, systematic, even strategic. It suggests that I need to think of giving as a spiritual discipline, not just in the sense of giving money to someone in need, but also in giving of my time, energy or abilities. Gratitude as a discipline involves a conscious choice, almost like an athlete in training for competition.

Having a sense of gratitude leads to generosity—and ultimately to being a cheerful giver: one who gives freely and generously with a sense of joy and no expectation of material return or obligation.

Having a discipline of gratitude influences how I spend my resources: my time, my energy and my money. Calvin taught us that we are trustees of what we have received, not free possessors. In Sunday School we learned about being good stewards. It reminds me that my family has been truly blessed. We have an embarrassing abundance of resources—far more than most people on the planet—and more than we need in order to live a comfortable life. Charles Dickens urged us to see our lives in this larger perspective: “Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has plenty; not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some.”

I want to exercise a discipline of gratitude that shows thanks for my many blessings by giving to charity regularly and generously. Have I also exercised the discipline to make sure my contributions are invested wisely in organizations that are operated efficiently and effectively and are truly making a difference? Do I have a plan about which charities I want to give to? I want that to be part of my discipline, too. I want to understand what the organization is trying to do and to understand its mission and programs. How do they measure their progress?

Questions for reflection:

1. Do you think of gratitude as an emotion or as a discipline—or as something else?
2. What in your life would change if you began to practice gratitude as a discipline? How would you go about practicing this discipline?

—Robert Ottenhoff, Class of 1970, President and CEO, GuideStar