

---

UCF Forum

---

11-26-2014

## Saying Thanks Isn't Always Simple

Melody Bowdon  
*University of Central Florida*

 Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum>

Information presented on this website is considered public information (unless otherwise noted) and may be distributed or copied. Use of appropriate byline/photo/image credit is requested. We recommend that UCF data be acquired directly from a UCF server and not through other sources that may change the data in some way. While UCF makes every effort to provide accurate and complete information, various data such as names, telephone numbers, etc. may change prior to updating. UCF welcomes suggestions on how to improve UCF Today and correct errors. UCF provides no warranty, expressed or implied, as to the accuracy, reliability or completeness of furnished data.

---

### STARS Citation

Bowdon, Melody (2014). Saying thanks isn't always simple. UCF Today, 2014-11-26. Retrieved from <https://today.ucf.edu/saying-thanks-isnt-always-simple/>

This Opinion column is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in UCF Forum by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).



## Saying Thanks Isn't Always Simple

By Melody Bowdon  
UCF Forum columnist

Wednesday, November 26, 2014

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving, and people all over the country will gather around tables with loved ones to express thanks for time together, getting through another year, and green bean casserole.

Of course, the holiday is rife with baggage (literal and figurative), and many people will boycott it entirely or will visibly or invisibly limit their participation, whether because of the problematic history of the events it represents, because of their own personal associations with the holiday, or because of work schedules, travel limitations, or distance from friends and family. Whatever we're doing, most of us will have thanks on the brain for at least a few minutes this week, and that's a good thing. But gratitude can be a sticky wicket.

In the long-running TV cop series *The Closer*, Kyra Sedgwick's title character, Brenda Leigh Johnson, was constantly saying "thank you" in a deep Southern drawl to everyone around her, including employees, strangers, and even the criminals she was famous for driving to confess. Though many scenarios called her sincerity into question, and often her gratitude was met with a significant eye roll from those around her, I loved this aspect of her character because it vividly showed the power of saying thanks.

Brenda packed apology, intimidation and a firm change of topic into every drawn-out "thank yooooou," leaving those around her speechless, for there is no established negative retort to an expression of appreciation, sincere or not.

Complicated thank-yous are everywhere. In the past couple of decades, a secular cult of gratitude has emerged around us. During her high-profile years, Oprah Winfrey wove together tenets of pop psychology and world religions to present gratitude as a path to a centered and positive life, encouraging viewers and readers to focus on blessings over challenges.

A contemporary offshoot is the frequent social media trend in which friends ask each other to post things for which they are grateful. Taggees then share appreciation for beautiful sunsets, great families, good health, and steady jobs, occasionally teetering on the brink of publically sanctioned bragging.

But despite the cynicism that may come through in these observations, I believe that gratitude is incredibly powerful and important for a variety of reasons.

Gratitude helps us keep things in perspective. Even the most seasoned pessimist can think of ways in which most situations could be worse. Feeling and expressing gratitude for the positive things around us can shift our focus from what's working against us to what's working for us, and, in my opinion, a positive attitude can materially impact the outcome of many situations.

Sincerely accepting gratitude connects us with other people. Many of us are better at thanking others and even doing things for others than we are at receiving thanks. I'm thinking not of the ritualistic thanks we receive in daily life but of those moments when we have had a real impact. Engaging with another person and openly accepting their acknowledgment that something we have done for them has shaped their life in a positive way can be a humbling experience. It sometimes requires us to accept praise for something that we did because we knew it was the right thing to do. It sometimes causes us to reflect on what more we could have done. But it almost always requires us to see ourselves and our actions, momentarily, through the eyes of another, which can be an intimidating but gratifying act.

Expressing gratitude also helps us to feel it.

In preparation for writing this column, I crowdsourced what I called “compulsory gratitude” with my social media friends. I asked the value of, for example, requiring children to write thank-you notes for gifts. While a couple of friends expressed concern about the idea of forcing children to lie about their feelings, most suggested that gratitude is a process that requires practice. One friend suggested that expressing thanks is a critical element of being part of a community and compared requiring students to learn the practice to what she called “compulsory clothing in public.”

A cousin who works in social services pointed out that there are developmental reasons to require children to engage in rituals of gratitude. Faculty colleagues noted the positive experiences they’ve had with asking students to write thank-you notes to guest speakers, suggesting that people enjoy the opportunity to express appreciation even in those contexts when they might not have thought of it on their own, and that everyone appreciates receiving a handwritten thank-you.

Friends cited theorists and religious figures to suggest the same basic concept: The experience of gratitude is learned through practice and socialization.

And it’s good for you — like your green bean casserole.

—

*Melody Bowdon is executive director of UCF’s Karen L. Smith Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning and is a professor of writing and rhetoric. She can be reached at [melody@ucf.edu](mailto:melody@ucf.edu).*