

Lois Cahall:
'practising gratitude
makes you saner'



Love-bombing

MY WAY TO HAPPINESS

American novelist Lois Cahall is an Anglophile and keen self-development fan. So when she fell in love with a Yorkshireman and moved from New York, she decided to experiment in drizzly Oxford by spreading her sunny American attitude of gratitude. But even she was surprised by the results

Photographs **Andy Ryan**

All my life, really, I knew that I was destined to marry an Englishman. So it came as no surprise when a British screenwriter, my Yorkshire prince, declared his love and asked me to move to Oxford with him. Our situation lacked the costumes of the bygone era I'd imagined, but our emotions captured the romance all women's dreams are made of. I'd finally met the love of my life.

I moved to the UK in 2010 and found Oxford was even more of a foreign land than I'd imagined. In the US, practising gratitude is a thing. It makes you saner, happier. Years before, Oprah had made her gratitude journal popular. You list your happy moments, your appreciation of life - and your life gets happier. Gratitude is happiness, it's that simple.

'Attitude of gratitude brings you opportunities beyond your concept,' wrote Yogi Bhaajan, a spiritual leader I'm inspired by. 'And when the prayer becomes the vibration of the soul, mind and self, we can create a miracle.' Sounds complicated, but it means: send good out there, and it comes back.

Being grateful is cultivating awareness for miracles. It can be as simple as looking up at the beautiful grey sky of Oxford and seeing it as blue. I'd adopted this as my way of being, but when I arrived, I found gratitude hadn't reached Oxford. I thought of myself as an experiment - how would people react to my alien attitude? What could I achieve? I was willing to put up a fight, share my gratitude. I was determined to turn this town into my sunny experiment.

At first, my Yorkshire prince called me his 'Poppet'. But after watching me spread my gratitude around Oxford, he began calling me Pollyanna. My mission started with a curmudgeonly taxi driver, who, despite himself, smiled at the £1 tip in his hand, which prompted him to exit his taxi and hop around to open my door. He wished me the nicest day and handed me his card, 'should you ever need to rain your sunshine on me again'.

Then there was the shop assistant at the 275-year-old department store Boswell & Co, who had never seen anyone so enthused by cleaning tools (for my new love nest). He proceeded to follow me around the store, carrying my dustpan, mop and cleaning products. Before long, the entire level of shop assistants were engaged in my enthusiasm to whistle while I worked, turning the floor into a virtual Walt Disney *Snow White* set.

There was the hair salon, Mahogany, where I convinced the shampoo boy he had the best job in town and he gave >>

'Gratitude spreads love and makes the other person feel great'



me the most divine head rub. During my rinse, he declared he'd never before had a customer who didn't 'moan'.

I thanked lovely Lauren at Gee's restaurant - who then always gave me the best table by the window. And Brendan at the bike shop, who pumped my tyre then found me the perfect wicker basket. And finally I told Will and Joe, bartenders at Quod and students destined for big things, 'The world is lucky to have you. It's anyone's guess which of you will end up acting Shakespeare and which will be Prime Minister.' Free refills of Sauvignon Blanc ensued.

The biggest gratitude challenge was my dry-cleaner, the grumpiest man on Woodstock Road. It took me two weeks of saying 'Wow, were the love of my life's shirts pressed to perfection?' until he cracked a smile. Week three, I got a small grin; week four a big ear-to-ear and help putting the dry-cleaning in my bicycle basket. Our friendship grew and when the dry-cleaning wasn't ready one day and he began to apologise, I stopped him mid-sentence. 'Everything happens for a reason. The love of my life was meant to wear the blue shirt for his movie premiere, so it's just as well the white one isn't ready.'

Gratitude spreads love and makes the other person feel great about themselves. It makes you feel happy and makes sure you get what you want, too - a virtuous circle, if you like.

Let's face it, Brits have an innate reserve and are always shocked and delighted at Americans' personal candidness - shocked because they'd never do it but, I think, delighted as they find it liberating. (And often, once you get started, you'll get into the mood, revealing much more to American strangers than you ever would your dearest friends.) Most of us know a negative person, their complaints littering their otherwise charmed life. Gratitude helps you deal with them and it often rubs off on them, too.

But alas, the love of my life and I had a ticking clock - or a time bomb, depending on how you looked at it. Sadly

all the gratitude in the world couldn't change that. My Yorkshire prince's family situation caused our wedding dreams to crumble; my lack of citizenship meant I had to go back to America.

I returned with a broken heart but a happy one - ever so grateful for having had him. I knew this was the biggest test of my gratitude experiment, as I tried to find the upside. 'Maybe it's the journey and not the destination?' I thought. 'Perhaps it's better to have loved and lost?'

What made me feel better was that my love wasn't the only one sad to see me go. The emails and phone calls began, asking when I would be 'coming home to Oxford' or declaring, 'Oxford needs you!' An email came in from Anna Belinda, my fairy-godmother local dressmaker, who'd shared my gratitude attitude. For 41 years, she had dressed the brides and theatre-goers of Oxford, ladies headed for Wimbledon and ladies who lunch. I'd deliberately chosen her to dress me for an awards ceremony when my Yorkshire prince was nominated because I thought it would sound radically brilliant, when asked who'd dressed me, to say 'Anna Belinda of Oxford', instead of Stella McCartney or Alexander McQueen.

She invited me to her retirement party and I was humbled at the thought, wanting to wear my burgundy gown one more time in her honour. But I wasn't ready to return to the fresh wounds of Oxford, so I declined. Even my dry-cleaner called to enquire when I might be dropping off any clothes - an excuse to hear my chipper tones, I suspect.

I knew the only way around my heartbreak was to express it. So I turned to my keyboard. I turned my pain into words, my words into scenes and

banged out a television script. It was the story of a Carrie Bradshaw character who goes from her *Sex And The City* life to what she believes will be *Downton Abbey*, only to find it's more like *Desperate Housewives'* Wisteria Lane.

My British agent loved it and within two weeks it was in the hands of 'national treasure' Stephen Fry's production company. As I write this, it's being considered for development, but even if he doesn't produce it, I'll be 'grateful' for the opportunity of the chance; certain some new producer will snap it up.

So it seems my experiment in gratitude may have paid off. I believe nothing is coincidence in life, but all about what you get back if you give out the gratitude attitude. So thank you, reader, for reading this. Merci beaucoup. Gracias. *Lois Cahall is the author of the bestseller Plan C: Just In Case (Bloomsbury, £14.99) and most recently Court Of The Myrtles (Bloomsbury, £9.99)*

A MORNING GRATITUDE RITUAL

Before getting out of bed, lie on your back and close your eyes, bringing your attention inward and upward to your third-eye centre, the meditation point on the brow between the eyes.

List five things you are grateful for. This morning mine were: 'I am grateful to be alive. I am grateful for my beautiful daughters and loving friends. I am grateful for the dinner date I had last night. I am grateful for my cat at the foot of my bed. I am grateful for the cup of coffee that awaits me.'

Next, project the positive, no matter how dismal the reality. Tell yourself, 'Today is going to be a good day. I can feel it.' List the things you want to happen, then turn responsibility over to the universe and manifest positivity reflected back. Often, by the time I get to my desk with that cup of coffee, I've got an email that turns my day from good to great. 📧