

EPISODE 236

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.6] PF: Welcome to episode 236 of Live Happy Now. I'm your host Paula Felps thanking you for joining us. If you're even a casual listener of our show, you probably know that we love gratitude. When we learned about the book, *The Thank You Project: Cultivating Happiness, One Letter of Gratitude at the Time*, we knew we had to talk about it on the show. What better time to talk about it than right before Thanksgiving.

Nancy Davis Kho, is a freelance writer, podcast host and author of *The Thank You Project*. She talked to me about how the project started, what it taught her and why each of us can benefit from writing thank you letters.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:39.8] PF: Nancy, welcome to Live Happy Now.

[0:00:41.9] ND: Thank you so much Paula, I'm really glad to be here, appreciate the invitation to join you.

[0:00:46.3] PF: We're glad to have you here, this is such a great topic because we are huge gratitude nerds here. So your book fits right in with the things we love talking about and I wonder first of all if you have always had an interesting gratitude or if it's something that you cultivated recently?

[0:01:01.9] ND: I have not. I mean, I've considered myself a grateful enough person. I was somebody who grew up in a household where you wrote thank you notes or you didn't get to play with the thing or use the thing. So, I would say I had a pretty good gratitude habits but the way that these gratitude letters evolved really changed the way I think about it. I think you know, writing a performative thank you on somebody's Facebook wall or writing "Dear X, I liked the gift, thank you for sending it to me," is very different from what I'm talking about in *The Thank You Project*, which take a little bit more work and a little bit more consideration.

I think I have become an aficionado of gratitude. I stumbled in to it and now I realized, you know, how magical it is to think about in a deliberate way.

[0:01:50.0] PF: It really is and you chose to practice it through letter writing and can you explain what made you decide to start this and a little bit, I guess just a little bit of background on how you came to this.

[0:02:03.1] ND: It was the end of 2015 and I'm a 1966 baby so I knew 2016 was going to be the golden jubilee year as I started telling people — I basically can get away with anything I want, it's my golden jubilee year, just like the queen. But I was pretty reflective because I'd seen a lot of friends lose their parents and I've seen a lot of friends go through divorce and I just felt very lucky, I just had — I just really understood in a pretty deep way that I was a fortunate person at the end of 2015. My parents were around, my husband and I had been married almost 25 years at that point, we had two healthy kids.

And so, I felt moved to write thank you letters to the people who had helped me to get to that point because I knew, you know, I have not gotten to where I am in my life all on my own. I've really had a lot of help along the way and it just seemed like an appropriate way to celebrate this milestone birthday.

So, I decided I would write one gratitude letter each week to somebody who had helped or shape or inspired me up into that point. You know, starting with friends and family and I figured, after I get through that list, I'll figure out who else gets one of these letters. So, as often happens when you think everything is going great, suddenly things will not be going so great.

[0:03:17.9] PF: Surprise.

[0:03:21.5] ND: Oh, universe, you heard what I said, did you? It ended up being a pretty rough year personally and also, I think for everybody because it was the 2016 presidential election and the anxiety levels were high for everyone who I knew at least. It turned out that every week I would sit down to write my letter, I got in the habit of doing it on Friday afternoons after work was done and I could just feel my shoulders settle and I could feel this sense of warmth and really connection and joy in writing these letters because what I was doing was documenting the way one person in my life had been there for me.

I think in a time when I felt, it would have been easy to feel alone, to feel disconnected and to feel worried, I was every week telling myself, you've got people and you're fine. You're facing her things but you faced her things before and you're writing about them in this letters.

So, it was a really unexpectedly powerful way to I guess really gain perspective and get into more of a gratitude habit that year and so I didn't mail all the letters, you know, as the letters piled up, I started thinking, well, if you think about who helped or shaped or inspired you, it's not necessarily people you're still in touch with.

Some of the letters I wrote and didn't send but it really just got me into this mindset of okay, you know, you're okay, everything's going to be fine and you have so much to be grateful for.

[0:04:53.3] PF: It seems like that would be an incredible reset every week and even knowing, going into it, say by Thursday, was your mind starting to go to this next letter and some of the things that you appreciated?

[0:05:06.7] ND: Oh, well I mean, that was the cool thing, that's what I loved about doing the book versus writing the actual letters because it was three years later that I started writing this book which is all about how you too, listeners or readers, can undertake your own happiness gratitude letter project and I wanted it to be grounded in science which is why I was so thrilled to be invited on to your podcast TBH because I got to dig into all of this research on gratitude and happiness and forgiveness, which is something I didn't see coming that how those things are all inter related and you know, the quantification of why those things work so well together.

Some of your past guests on the show were instrumental either in my reading or my interviews with them in understanding why this works. What I found out and this is something that I learned and talked into Dr. Christine Carter from the Greater Good Science Center, is that basically, if you take the time to think a really authentic gratitude thought, you know, if you take the time to think deeply about why you appreciate somebody.

Your parasympathetic nervous system gets triggered and it calms you down and it is like a rest button for being mad that you were stuck in traffic or worrying about your bills or all these other

things just thinking deeply about gratitude and appreciation around somebody specific can act really as a way to reset that parasympathetic nervous system.

And the amazing thing and I try to say this throughout the book, that happens whether or not you write a word on a piece of paper. I am a proponent for writing it down because of other reasons which maybe we'll get to in the discussion but even just thinking these thoughts is a really effective way to get back to center, to feel less distressed. That to me was really magical so that I could spend a whole week thinking about the person whose letter I was going to write the following Friday and just thinking about it every day was its own little mini reset.

There's research out there that shows that even doing it less than once a week, the feelings can last for up to a month. It's crazy, I interviewed a woman — because I also wanted to have other people's experiences, I was concerned at the beginning that maybe I was a gratitude super taster, you know? I just like — maybe I felt it more than other people and I didn't want to suggest something that wouldn't work.

So, you know, besides talking to the researchers to make sure that what I was experiencing was real. I talked to a few other people who had also done gratitude, thank you letter writing projects in some shape or fashion and there was one who did a hundred letters in a hundred days which to me was bonkers.

[0:07:47.7] PF: That was unbelievable.

[0:07:49.1] ND: I know, but she loved it. She said I don't know if I could have gotten the benefits if they hadn't done it which she called — if I hadn't gone into it in such a gratitude on steroids way. So for her, it was — that was the right pace and again, I say throughout the book, you do you, whatever works for you but I thought it was reassuring to hear that even if you do one a month, you are still getting the benefits because that's how long lasting — that's how durable the feelings of happiness can be that are tied to gratitude.

[0:08:16.2] PF: And then there's the benefit that added bonus of if you do mail the letter and that person receives it, you know, there's an appreciation that they have and one thing I really like that you said in your book that you did not mail it with expectation. This was your project, so if you didn't hear back from them, that was no thing.

How did that feel though when people did receive it like your dad framed it, you know? Can you talk about some of the responses you got and what it meant to them and to your relationships?

[0:08:45.8] ND: Yeah, I did, I decided, nobody asked me for thank you letters so it is not fair for me to say well, I can't believe they didn't write me back or say something, right? I knew that going in, however, every single person to whom I mailed the letters. There were few I didn't send, but every person who got a letter from me, acknowledged it in some way and it might have been just a text, a really lovely text that they sent.

All the way up to my dad who framed it and put it over his desk which was – the sweetest thing

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[0:09:14.0] PF: I love that.

[0:09:15.1] ND: I got letters back in some cases so it makes me – it made me feel great. I was so pleased that they felt appreciated. That was the whole point and so it was wonderful to get notes back. I mean, I include one in the book. I wrote my obstetrician who was a really skilled physician and super busy, she's one of the top OB's in San Francisco and I can tell you sometimes what it's like going across the Bay Bridge in labor if anybody ever wants to hear that story twice, not once, but twice.

But she wrote me back and I couldn't believe it because she's so – she's delivering babies all the time but she said, it meant so much to her to know that she made a difference and how much she appreciated hearing from it and I thought, oh my gosh, all these people out there who do heroic things and nobody ever really takes the time to tell them how that impacts them down the line.

Because if my kids weren't delivered safely, my life would look so different.

[0:10:13.9] PF: Yeah. That's one of the things that your book really helps us do is kind of open up the scope of who we think that we should think. Because we tend to, you know, our family, our friends, we think about that but you had some interesting categories. Let's talk about some of those unexpected categories that you found?

[0:10:33.8] ND: Well, I advocate writing a letter to your first crush because somebody has to tell you where the on, off switch is and I think you should have fun with these letters. It's not meant to be a terrible homework assignment and you know, that's a fun one to write. Think about who was that person when you were – I don't know, 12, 11, I don't know how old you are, I'm not judging. Who you know, made you think, "Oh my god," I'm thinking about this on a particular because I'm doing a Thanksgiving episode where we've taken this a little bit before Thanksgiving but I'm doing an episode on my own podcast where I asked people to send in their stories of people to whom they were grateful.

I got a really long detailed, lovely story about somebody who wrote a letter to somebody who was grateful to Shawn Cassidy. I mean, the hair on Shawn Cassidy, we should all be grateful to Shawn Cassidy but she talked about how it was so instrumental to her as a writer because she writes YA, She writes young adult fiction and she can go back and remember what it was like to be in seventh grade and to be in love with this object that's completely out of reach but helps you kind of experiment with the early feelings of love.

It's like a safe boyfriend or girlfriend who you never have to actually be in a room with. That's developmentally really important. That's a fun letter to think about writing and I talked about – you know, I wrote to my favorite author who has been dead for 200 years, she's not going to be able to read it but I wanted to thank her. Yeah, as the scope gets bigger and bigger, it gets easier to think of who else – I would not be who I am without Jane Austin Novels.

I would not be Nancy Davis Kho. Without my deep abiding love of all things Jane Austin.

[0:12:25.2] PF: That's so cool and I think one thing that really comes through as in reading this book is you realize how fun it is. I mean –

[0:12:33.5] ND: I hope so. It was for me.

[0:12:36.0] PF: It makes me want to do this and you make it really easy to do this, you start out with the chapter of lining up your letters and first of all, you are a planner, I got to say. You had this thing figured out. Can you just kind of walk us through how someone does start this while they're waiting for your book to arrive?

[0:12:54.2] ND: Sure, well, you know, I did spend 15 years doing strategic planning and international product marketing. So I finally came home to it, it all came together with the writing. So there is basically three steps, I call it see, say and savor. So the first thing is to make a list of people that you think you might want to write to but don't sweat it. Just brain storm a list and then stop because — more people can come in, people might fall off the list and I recommend picking friends and family first because you got a lot of material there and these are probably people who would love to get a letter from you.

So it is better to start with the easy ones first where you know you are going to write a letter that is positive, you are going to give it to them. Those are fun to write, they are fun to gift to somebody. So that's kind of where I started. The saying part is just really thinking deeply about how they've impacted you. So we have a million — I can think of friendships I have had for literally 50 years. There is somebody I wrote to I have known for 50 years, which is weird because I am 30 but —

[0:13:57.5] PF: Those are retro things —

[0:13:58.4] ND: Yeah, exactly, and that forces you to think about what specifically did they bring into your life? How specifically did they shape them and the one thing I say in the book like if you had to phone a friend, what kind of problem would you call them for? What is the piece of advice you would go to them for and it was an interesting exercise in just when it came to my friendships to think about, "Oh this is the person I go to when I want to talk about career problems but this is the person I go to when I need parenting advice."

And it was a little bit like a nice inventory of what your relationships are made up of so you know I try to really challenge myself to be specific and to give examples and this is just the writer in me — use as much specific detail as you can because you are so nice. That is a great thing to hear but it doesn't really mean much if you say, "You know when my parent died, you came and you sat with me in silence for two hours and that is exactly what I needed," or "You once change my entire me for me to brainstorm and that is how I got to a job interview," — you know there is lots of things that we can do there.

[0:15:05.0] PF: Yeah.

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[0:15:09.5] PF: We still have plenty more to learn from Nancy Davis Kho about writing thank you letters and we'll be back with her in 60 seconds but first, we wanted to take a quick break to talk to you about a great new partner that can make your holiday season happier, healthier and even easier. Do I have your attention?

While you are trying to keep up with the busy season from Thanksgiving to New Year, sizzlefish.com is here to take some of the headache out of your holidays. Not only do they have an amazing selection of top quality sea food but they will deliver it right to your door. One of my favorite things about sizzlefish.com is that all of their fish is all natural and responsibly sourced, which means I know every time I order my sea food, I am getting a product that doesn't just taste good, it is truly good for me and it is good for the planet.

So whether you want to sample some different types of fish, sign up for a subscription box or even buy some holiday samplers as gifts, shipping is always fast and always free so there is nothing fishy about that. If you are interested in this great tasting healthy fish and sea food, check out sizzlefish.com and as an exclusive deal for being a listener, you can use the discount code "happy" for 10% off your first order. That's discount code "happy" for 10% off your first order.

Now, let's hear more from today's guest, Nancy Davis Kho and the third step to creating your plan for writing thank you letters.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:16:32.1] ND: And then the third part of it is what I call savor, which means you keep a letter of every letter you write, you know mailed or not, you keep a copy of what you wrote and then put them all together because at the end of this process, you are going to have what is basically an instruction manual to you about how you came to be and it to go back and reread these letters and just to have the physical heft of a stack of letters in your hands, is very powerful.

It is a visual reminder that you are not alone that you have been helped that you have surrounded yourself — you had the good taste to surround yourself with interesting helpful people or to learn lessons from the negative ones who are in your life who you might write to and now that I think is a really powerful. That was one of the things that I did not expect. I mean I guess I thought I would keep copies of the letters but you know the day I have sent it to a little copy shop.

And I had this bound thing that I still three years later, I flip through it all the time. It is really nice to reread those letters.

[0:17:35.8] PF: That's very cool and it does serve as such a powerful reminder of how fortunate you've been and one thing I found incredibly interesting and would not have thought of is that you also were writing thank you letters to people you might be estranged from and we normally don't think of that. So can you talk a little bit about that?

[0:17:57.1] ND: Well I, you know once I got pretty good with this rubric of who has helped shaped or inspired me, I knew there were some ex-boyfriends who had been really important to me at that time that I was with them even if I wasn't with them anymore and even if it was a former, a high school friend who I became estranged from but I wanted to acknowledge and those letters I really loved writing because it was a chance to reframe the narrative that had gotten — that could potentially have gotten negative.

You know you look back at an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend and you think, "Oh my god what was I thinking at the time," you know? But if you look at it — well, maybe that person was really generous with their compliments to you at a time where your self-esteem is in the crapper and you know that was what you needed from them at the time and they gave that to you. Well that is something to acknowledge.

You don't have to send that letter but I think it is a way to look back at yourself with some empathy at these past relationships and say, "Well I wasn't a dummy for being friends with that person because here is what I got out of it at the time and at some point, it no longer worked and wasn't healthy for me or just wasn't going to go forward," but it is meaningful to take time and reframe that story and look back at yourself and the other person with what is hopefully forgiveness and affection, rather than just resentment.

And again, I say in the book — there are people in your life who may really truly have been bad. You don't need to thank everybody but maybe there are. Yeah you know I mean there is probably some ex-boyfriends or girlfriends who really do deserve the big X, but you know, if you can look back at those relationships with a little bit of forgiveness and tenderness towards both parties, you may find yourself a little bit happier going forward.

[0:19:51.3] PF: That is an excellent advice and when we talk about writing a letter, how long does your letter need to be?

[0:19:58.5] ND: Well Paula, everybody gets to make their own rules. I am not the boss of you. In my case —

[0:20:02.4] PF: Oh okay —

[0:20:04.0] ND: Yeah, don't listen to me. I will tell you what I did, I made my one typed page. I can't handwrite anymore because I have been sitting at a computer for 25 years and you cannot even read like I hand wrote my signature and I prayed people could read that. So I did one typed page and that meant editing, it meant making some choices about what I included. You could do whatever feels good. The trick is find the thing that you actually wanted right every week.

Find the length that you actually would look forward. If two pages feels like the right amount and gets you excited about writing then do two pages. If half a page is all you're conveying out that is a great half a page.

[0:20:45.0] PF: That is terrific. Do you have a favorite or is it like children and you have one but you can't tell anyone?

[0:20:52.7] ND: I think my favorite — I will tell you the one I probably cackled the most as I was writing it really was the letter to Jane Austin. I was hoot and hollering in my office as I wrote that one just because I thought, well I had to explain some things to her because she doesn't know what 2016 is like. So, I just entertained myself in trying to explain to her what movies are and

because I had to thank her for all of the reason she gave us to see people like Collin Firth in Breach Pants.

You know thank you Missis Austin that was a gift. So anyway that was probably the most fun to write — but no, they all played their part. Every letter played its part.

[0:21:37.6] PF: That is terrific. So I can't let you go without talking about the playlists, because that is a great part of this book and I absolutely loved it and first of all, you and I have a very similar musical interest so.

[0:21:48.0] ND: Oh really?

[0:21:48.5] PF: We can talk up on — but yeah, tell us about the playlist that were included in the book?

[0:21:53.7] ND: Well, I have both a blog and a podcast with the word mix tape in them, you know? So as you can tell I am one of those people who thinks in song lyrics and it never occurs to me to not answer your questions in song lyrics but I just as I started writing, I kept thinking of songs that reminded me of this person that I was writing about or this category of people that I was writing about. So I said to my editor is it okay if I include playlist because I don't know how to not do that frankly.

And she was like, "Yeah it is fine, don't worry about it" so what I loved is they got an illustrator who I don't know if she is a Gen. X'er but she knew how to draw. She knew how to draw a cassette tape, the cassette tape illustrations of the book I think are top notch but —

[0:22:37.5] PF: Yeah, absolutely.

[0:22:38.5] ND: Yeah, so I had fun putting the playlist together and they are all up on Spotify now. I put my college daughter to work this summer. She put all my playlist together so if you go to Davis Kho on Spotify you can hear the playlists from the book but as any mix tape mavin would know, I was editing the playlist almost more than I was editing the books. They would give it back to me for another round and I was like, "These will never be done," you know there is always great songs that come out.

That are just the right one and at some point the editor was like, "You need to stop with the edits on the playlist," so they are there for you. They are imperfect I am just going to say it now, they are never finished.

[0:23:17.8] PF: That's terrific. What we'll do is on our webpage we'll make sure that we'll include a link to your Spotify so they can enjoy those playlist. So you have given us so much to think about with gratitude and writing letters — what do you have coming up next?

[0:23:30.4] ND: Well what I would love for this to lead to is you know a chance to do some hands on Thank You Project workshops. I would love to be working with whether it is a student groups or corporate groups or civic groups because I think just getting together with folks and helping them understand how to write that first letter and how to put together that list of recipients, my goal is for people to read the book and really want to have a bit of steam to get started.

And I would love to be able to do some workshops where we really do actually work on writing the letters because it gets easier. Once you get the first one done, the second one is easier and so on. So yeah, I am hoping that 2020 has me meeting in person with folks and helping spread the Thank You Letter Project, helping spread the thank you letters further and further appeal.

[0:24:18.7] PF: That is terrific. Well, when that is up and running make sure you let us know and we'll Tweet that out. All right, well Nancy thank you so much for joining us today. This is a fun book, it is an educational book but not in a stogy kind of way at all and there's playlist so it is fantastic.

[0:24:37.8] ND: Thank you so much for having me on Paula. I really enjoyed talking with you.

[0:24:41.1] PF: All right, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:24:46.5] PF: That was Nancy Davis Kho, author of *The Thank You Project: Cultivating Happiness One Letter of Gratitude at a Time*. To learn more about Nancy, her new book and of

course, those fabulous playlists we talked about, please visit us at livehappynow.com and we'll give you links and more information.

We hope that you are already a subscriber to Live Happy Now but if you are not, you can find us on the Pandora Podcast Network, Spotify, SoundCloud, Stitcher, iTunes and Google Play. Just look for us on your favorite platform, hit subscribe and then you will never miss an episode.

That is all we have time for this week. We'll meet you back here again next week for an all new episode and until then, this is Paula Felps reminding you to make every day a happy one.

[END]