March on
Do not tarry.
To go forward

is to move toward perfection.
March on, and fear not the thorns
or sharp stones on life’s path.  

– Kahlil Gibran

This chapter describes an event in a high school where expressing gratitude in the midst of adversity seems to be an absurd notion. It clarifies that a recommendation for gratitude in difficult situations does not advocate a passive response, or an acceptance of the status quo. I am not suggesting that gratitude should be used to fix a difficult situation, but rather provide a means by which we can grow through reflection. An approach is suggested where gratitude can assist as one enters, goes through, and comes out the other side of difficult times. By using some of the challenges facing the high school teachers as the backdrop – such as violent students and low morale – the chapter explores the appropriacy, relevance, and deeper meaning of gratitude in times of adversity. I postulate the relevance of gratitude in building teacher resilience, and draw on the wisdom of writers who invite us to consider how adversity can develop our strength of character.

When gratitude seems absurd

I was shocked and perplexed at the cold response I received from a group of seventeen staff as soon as I walked into a meeting held after school on a Monday. We were to discuss the next steps for gratitude work at their school. Heads of department of each curriculum area, administration staff, and both principal and assistant principal were present. Several hundred students attended Palmwood College, a regional state school with a wide demographic. This was our third meeting. On my first visit five months earlier, all of the fifty Palmwood teachers had spent two days exploring the relevance of the practice of gratitude at their
school. After this they were invited to participate in an action research project where they nominated one or two gratitude practices to students, and then took note of the effects.

When I had first introduced the pedagogy of gratitude to the principal and assistant principal, they had thought that this was a perfect time to focus on connecting with students through acts of gratitude. They could see direct links with other initiatives they had recently embarked upon – most notably, School-wide Positive Behaviour Support. They were also keen to invite teachers to reflect on the power of their inner attitude and State of Preparedness at the beginning of the day. During this visit I had conducted focus groups to explore the effects of their gratitude practices. Now I was to meet with the executive staff on the following Monday afternoon to report on the results of a previous questionnaire, as well as some initial findings from the focus groups.

On my way to the meeting I was accompanied by the principal, Steve. As we walked along the corridor we were greeted by the assistant principal, who said to Steve, “You’re so lucky that you were away all day today. I just wouldn’t want to wish this day on anyone!” Steve had been at a full day workshop with me and twelve other principals from the district, where we had been exploring the possibility of setting up gratitude initiatives in other schools. Steve had taken a call at morning tea about a fight that had been brewing in the school grounds, but he had not taken it too seriously, as this was a regular occurrence at Palmwood. For decades there had been families at war with each other over property, drugs, previous acts of violence and other crimes. This would often manifest in fights in the school grounds, not just between two students, but whole gangs who represented different families. The violence that ensued had sometimes led to police intervention.

As we sat down, I looked around and sensed pain and exhaustion in most of the teachers at the meeting. I wondered if we should proceed with the set agenda. I took my cue from Steve, who acknowledged that it had been a hard day, but perhaps we could learn something about how gratitude might help us deal with it. He wanted me to first outline some of the findings from the questionnaires and focus groups. Thirty teachers had put their hand up to report on the outcomes of their gratitude practice in form class during the previous term and to take up the next stage of the action research. Many of these same teachers were present amongst this group.

The atmosphere seemed to become colder as I handed out documents with graphs that represented data analysed from the questionnaires, showing significant increases in satisfactory relationships and student engagement throughout the school. Teachers described gratitude practices of meeting and welcoming students at the door, offering bright and positive greetings, and giving priority to their relationships with the students by looking out for things they could thank them for. These had led to outcomes such as students responding with more gratitude; improved relationships; calmer presence; and a friendlier atmosphere. They also