

Story Frances Whiting

from little things big things grow

In the hustle and bustle of daily life, how often do we stop to



10.4.08
Georgia & the baby bellie...



29.4.08
Every tuesday I take her riding...
Perfect moments... so grateful!



22.8.08
10 years together! waking up with
him is a total delight...



14.3.09
Colour colour & more colour
I love.

The lights going down just before the movie starts. Dark plum jam bought at a fete. Your 80-year-old mother still taking your hand to cross the street. Chenille bedspreads at rented beach houses. Licking the spoon, turning the page, snuggling up, settling down, drinking it all in, letting it all out. Whistling.

We can spend a lifetime in dogged pursuit of happiness that may lie under our noses, or our roofs. And when confronted by images of planes zeroing in on skyscrapers or walls of water sweeping outstretched hands away, we renew our vows to appreciate the little things. Then life's rhythm returns to normal and we no longer hear its music. But what if we decided to revel in those moments? Stop our eternal quest for more verdant pastures and unfurl the picnic rug in our back yards, bindies and all? What if we chose, every day, to be truly grateful for what we have and what is around us? Hailey Bartholomew did, and it changed her life.

A restlessness and dissatisfaction with life has been haunting me. I am tired all the time and even though I love my kids and know in my head they are amazing and so important, I feel little in the day-to-day and lack patience with them.

All I see is endless piles of washing and dishes and house cleaning that will only return as soon I turn around. I love my partner, but he does not understand how I feel my heart is somehow missing the point. I am completely disinterested in my own life ...

Written three years ago in a shaky black hand, this was Hailey Bartholomew's song of suburban malcontent. She was a young mother of 28 with two girls, Poppy, then four, and Zali, then eight, and a husband, Andrew, a graphic designer and a kind, funny man who worked

hard, did not stay out late and helped with the dishes. Hailey also owned a part-time photography business, a bountiful vegetable garden at her home south of Brisbane, and at least one perfect dress. Yet the prosaic nature of her life began to rankle, and she dreamt only of the way things would be one day, rather than the way they were. "I kept thinking, when this happens I will be happy, when the kids are bigger, when my business grows, when we can travel ..." says Hailey, now 32.

She fell into a murky depression, not a slam-against-the-wall dark terror, but a lonely, lingering malaise she could not shake. Friends began to notice the black dog nipping at her heels, and one of them suggested she seek help from what was, for her, a most unlikely source, a Catholic nun. Now in her seventies, the nun, who wishes to remain anonymous, listened

patiently to the young woman's sometimes shouted woes during three separate visits. "When I finished she took my hands, smiled very sweetly and said: 'Hailey, the secret to happiness is reflection and gratitude. All you have to do is stop at the end of each day, every day, think it through – what you did, what you ate, who you saw, where you went – and record something in that day that made you truly grateful, even if it is only one small thing.'"

Going home that night with the nun's words whispering in her ears, Hailey picked up her camera – and "365 Grateful" was born. The pink tulle of a ballet skirt spinning, Scrabble pieces on a tartan rug, rows of just rained-on gumboots, a Rorschach inkblot of maple syrup on a white china plate, a friend's pregnant belly peeking over a frilled bikini bottom. These are just some of the 365 Polaroid photos Hailey took from April 5, 2008, to April 5, 2009, each accompanied by a sentence or two: "my old Lego being loved so much by my girls"; "rows of basil freshly planted".

They are bound in two intricately embossed red leather books, a record of the year she learnt to be grateful. "I decided to try the nun's advice and, being a photographer, I thought taking pictures might work for me better than writing it down," Hailey says.

Finding inspiration elusive, she had to go looking for her first photo – a new blue pot for a favourite green succulent plant. After that, she says, it was easy. "I think what this project gave me, and it didn't take long, was to see the magic in the everyday. At first I had to really search for things to be grateful for and then I guess because my eyes had been opened, I had too many! Some days I'd take a photo and later say 'damn it' because something better would come along. And when it finished, after a year I did not want it to stop; in fact I cheated and went a week over," she laughs.

The project, in truth, never ended. A woman in London snaps a photo of her newborn son, the first of 365 she will take to chronicle the first year of his life. In Sydney, a middle-aged man with a mental illness commits to take a photo a day to try to help him get through each one, while an artist in New York who has given the project her own stamp picks up her brush to paint portraits of people she is grateful for.

Hailey's project – in the age of the internet – has gone viral. There are now hundreds of people all over the world creating their own versions. Some of them are amateur, some are professional photographers drawn to it by Flickr, the photo-sharing website where Hailey initially posted her project.

Others have heard about it by word of mouth, through mentions in the media, from seeing it



Back in focus ... Hailey Bartholomew, whose 365 Grateful project has gone viral; (above and previous page) some of her photos.



on Facebook, or reading about it on Twitter. It's become so popular it has its own website, www.365grateful.com, and a documentary is being made on the project. It will tell all the stories of people from around the world who have embraced it, many of whom have contacted Hailey personally to let her know it has helped them get through difficult times, celebrate new beginnings, and to say goodbye.

She understands their response. What started out as a chore to her became a gift that changed the way she looked at the world. "Just having the camera physically with me every day caused a shift in the way I was thinking. Previously I was concentrating on the negative, but doing this made me consciously look for the positive. That process literally changed the way my brain was working, shifting it from always focusing on the bad to the good."

It also changed the way Hailey viewed Andrew, and their marriage. "I had him pegged as completely unromantic," she laughs, "and I think I was looking for the grand gesture. But I hadn't noticed, or had stopped noticing, all the things he did for me, the way he always gave me the biggest slice of pie with the nicest crust, or would bring me home ice-cream on really hot days, or rub my shoulders if I was working late in the [home] office."

The red leather books contain several of these moments in a marriage that, before the project, was on shaky ground. "Andrew said to me, after 365 was finished, that he thought he was enough for me now. Before he felt he wasn't enough, or couldn't do enough for me, and I am just very grateful that one of the things it did was open my eyes to the person I married."

But for Hailey, the most profound change came from within. "About three months into the project, I woke up one day and bounded out of bed," she smiles, remembering. "I just sort of leapt out, ready for the day, excited about it and that hadn't happened for such a long time. I remember thinking that morning, this is unusual – and I realised I was happy. This project saved me."

I think it's pretty safe to say that 2010 was not a good year. Up until then I had been living a life of blissful happiness. I had two kids, a lovely husband, a roof over our heads. I loved my job and although we were far from rich, we lived comfortably with small luxuries here and there. Then my husband said he didn't love me any more, and he had to leave. I was seven months pregnant.

Clair Bremner started her grateful project in May last year, three months after her life began to unravel. Her husband's departure from the family home in Melbourne in February left Clair, now 29, feeling "hurt, sad, angry and scared".

Moving on ... Clair Bremner, who started her grateful project last year after her husband left her; (below) her older children Charlee, 6, and Koby, 8.



"Being pregnant and hormonal didn't help; it's a time in your life when all you want is love and security, and I just fell apart," she says. "I was in tears every day, I couldn't sleep, I wasn't eating properly and there were times when I wanted to crawl into the corner and disappear."

She did not, she laughs, "feel particularly grateful about anything". She did, however, have two children to look after and, beneath the curve of her belly, a third making his imminent arrival felt. Today her kids are eight, six and 11 months, and very comfortable in front of a camera. "I knew I had a responsibility to them not to fall apart," Clair says. "I saw them as these flickering little flames that I was holding my hands around, so they wouldn't blow out. I had to find a way to be positive for them, and I found it through Hailey's project." Clair had read about 365 Grateful on Hailey's blog and decided she too would start recording the little things. At first, on the days the baby had been crying through the night, finding moments to be grateful was a challenge. Then,

as Hailey also had discovered, the moments started finding her. "At first you can't find them and then you can't stop finding them," she says.

"This project is not a magic bullet, it hasn't fixed my life, but it has made it much happier, and I think the reason for that is because you are taking note of happiness. You are saying to yourself, 'see, here it is, right here in front of you, don't waste a minute of it'. I'm doing the project on my phone, which means I can take the photos anywhere, anytime. It's been a challenge to let go of the professional photographer in me that wants every shot to be perfect – and remember, it's not about taking the perfect photo. It's not even about taking good photos, so what if it's blurred, or grainy or too dark? It's not about that," she says. "It's about seeing things around me that I wouldn't have earlier – and taking note of them so I don't forget them later. To tell the truth, the last 12 months have been hell in many ways – my baby needed emergency surgery, my mum got breast cancer, money has been really tight, and I'm proud that I seem to have made it through in relatively one piece.

"I feel like I've achieved something in taking the photos, and if I am having a down day all I have to do is take a look through my pictures and it's actually impossible not to smile."

Whatever happens I will be grateful, whatever happens I will be grateful, whatever happens I will be grateful ...

Amy Gill is lying on her side in a hospital bed in Sydney's Westmead Hospital, her fingers clasped over her belly stretched tight like a drum between them. She repeats the mantra over and over again as the epidural needle pricks at her back, and she prepares to meet her twin daughters – one of whom she has been told will not survive the birth.

This smaller twin, Rosemary Kathleen, or Rosie, as Amy and her husband Andrew have already named her, has survived her short 34 ►

weeks in-utero and Amy can't quite believe she isn't going to survive this as well. A scan at six weeks had showed Rosie was in trouble, not growing, they said. Doctors didn't think she would be there at the 12-week scan. Amy and Andrew went home and grieved for their littlest daughter, but at the 12-week scan two heartbeats were heard, just as Amy had somehow felt there would be. But there was still a problem, they said. The little girl probably had a genetic disorder, most likely Down Syndrome, but possibly one or two others and termination had been advised. Once again Amy and Andrew had gone home to grieve, but decided against termination and instead went back the next day and asked for genetic testing to be done. Rosie did not have any of the disorders mentioned.

They went home again and, daring to hope, started to prepare the nursery for Rosie and her sister, Penelope Jane. At 20 weeks, they found a hole in Rosie's heart. After more testing, this time the little girl was found to have congenital heart disease – her heart was still beating in-utero but it was not performing any of its functions properly.

At 34 weeks, Rosie stopped growing. It was time, they told Amy, to get the babies out, and so here she was being prepped for a caesarean and repeating the same words ... whatever happens, I will be grateful.

"I was really panicking," recalls Amy, 31, a music and drama teacher. "We'd come so far and they were still telling me Rosie was not going to make it, and I was finding that extremely difficult to deal with."

Then Amy recalled a project she had read about some woman in Brisbane called Hailey who had decided that, no matter what life threw at her, she would be grateful. "I'm not sure why I remembered it, but right there and then I decided I would do the same, that

whatever outcome we had, I would be grateful."

On March 24, 2009, Penelope Jane Gill was born, weighing 2.5kg, and her sister Rosemary Kathleen arrived a few minutes later, weighing 1.5kg. Tiny Rosie had survived the birth, defying the odds once again. "They put her beside me, but I couldn't hold her because she was hooked up to all sorts of things in a humidicrib," says Amy. "So I put my hand in, to let her know I was there. Straightaway she reached up and curled her hand around it. I felt these tiny little fingers grab on, and I thought, yes, I am grateful, so grateful I got to meet you, and whatever happens I will always be grateful for this moment."

Over the Easter weekend, Andrew took their daughter Annabelle, then two, to visit his parents and Amy spent what she describes as a "perfect weekend" in hospital with her twins. "Rosie was great; I got to hold her, feed her, wash her ... it

was like washing an acorn, and Penny was so lovely too, and I felt like I really was the mother of twins, that maybe this would work out."

Just after Easter, it was decided Rosie was well enough to undergo a routine operation. "She had started going downhill; her arteries were tightening and she was not getting enough oxygen," Amy says. The solution was to insert a balloon catheter into her heart, which would expand the artery and allow the blood to flow. The cardiologist explained he had done hundreds of these operations, and was confident it would help the little girl he, like many others at the hospital, had come to dearly love. Rosie died during the operation.

"I don't know why, the doctor didn't know why, he was absolutely devastated about it," Amy says. "I went to her and held her. I told her I loved her, and how very, very grateful I was that she had been in our lives, that she had allowed us the privilege of meeting her." Then Amy went home to bed and wondered how she'd ever get out of it again. "It was like all the lights in the world went out. I didn't know how I was going to get through the next day and the day after that, and the day after that. I knew I had to, for my other children, but I couldn't see how I could rejoin the world without Rosie in it."

Then, once again, Amy remembered Hailey's project. Amy gave herself a week to grieve, really grieve, howl and cry and bang her fists against the wall, and then she too joined the project. For Amy, 365 Grateful was initially about the healing process, helping her to get through each day after Rosie's death. It gave her, she says, a focus, something to concentrate on other than missing her little girl.

"I think as human beings we tend to focus on the bad things, the things that stress us out every day, or make us feel anxious or people who make us uneasy, instead of all the good stuff – and there's so much good stuff. So for me, what it gave me was a new way of looking at life, and even though I don't take a photo a day any more, I still quite often stop and think: Hang on a minute, what am I grateful for? What's good about this day?"

"Sometimes, just to remind me of all the wonderful things I've had and have in my life, I take a look back at all the photos from my year of being grateful."

Her first photo, taken on April 21, 2009, was the day of Rosie's funeral. It is the only one she didn't take herself, instead asking her mother to take it for her, and it is the only photo Amy appears in. But it was important to her that this particular image be the starting point for her year of gratitude. It is an image of a family – Amy, Andrew and Annabelle about to release 24 butterflies into the sky, one for every day of Rosie's short but precious life. ■



Brighter side ... Amy Gill (left) and (above) with husband Andrew and daughter Annabelle, about to release the butterflies in 2009.

