



GRATITUDE

cultivating our awareness and response

Br. David Vryhof, SSJE

I have a memory of my 5th-grade teacher asking us to write a short paragraph describing the things in our lives for which we were thankful. I sat for the longest time just staring at that piece of paper. I couldn't think of a thing for which I was thankful.

I was surrounded by gifts, but I didn't *recognize* them as gifts, and so I couldn't begin to express my gratitude for them. I naively assumed that everyone had food and clothing, a loving family and a comfortable home. I was unaware of how privileged I was to enjoy these things on a daily basis, and simply took them for granted.

Gratitude springs from the *awareness* that we have been given a gift. Often this awareness comes upon us in sudden and unexpected ways. We are walking along and suddenly our breath is taken away by the beauty of the autumn leaves, or we are talking with a close friend and suddenly we realize what a gift this person has been to us. We've been given a gift: something has come to us from outside ourselves – something unexpected and even undeserved – and our lives have been enriched by it. We feel grateful. This awareness can rise in us suddenly and unexpectedly, but it can also be *cultivated*. We can *develop* our awareness, and learn to *practice* gratitude. Learning to see with eyes of gratitude, becoming more aware of the gifts that surround us on every side, is an ability that needs to be kept alive through constant practice. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Heschel, "*The insights of wonder must be constantly kept alive.*"

There is not much in our culture that encourages this sense of wonder or that leads us gratitude. More often, we are seduced into thinking that we need to *acquire more* in order to be truly happy and fulfilled. The advertising that assaults us each day encourages us to be greedy for more gifts. Our neighbors or co-workers describe to us their latest purchases with a sense of pride and satisfaction, as if these things were proof of their personal importance and worth. If we listen to these voices, we won't feel much *gratitude*. Instead, we'll start thinking we don't have enough and that we need to get more...and more...and more. To resist the lure of voices that tell us we don't have enough takes courage and determination.

We can nurture a spirit of gratitude by cultivating our *awareness* that we are surrounded by gifts. But to become *aware* of these gifts is not enough. Gratitude moves beyond the recognition of the *gift* to the recognition of the *giver*. In some ways, the gift itself is secondary in importance. What is more important is the exchange that takes place when we express our gratitude. The offering of the gift is only complete when we receive it with gratitude, and when that gratitude is *expressed*. Without the expression of gratitude, something is missing, for both the giver of the gift and the one who receives it.

Don Postema, author of a book entitled *Space for God*, tells of his experience of bringing a gift to a birthday party when he was a boy. "The birthday child met me at the door," he says, "grabbed the gift without a thank-you, ran into the room, and threw it among all the other gifts." "Why do I still remember that incident?" he asks. "Because the giving of that gift is not complete over all these years! *I never received the thank-you note needed to close the circle and establish a mutual exchange.*" True gratitude leads us *beyond* the gift itself and unites us with the giver, closing the circle and establishing a mutual exchange.

We Christians proclaim that God is the giver of all good gifts. We acknowledge that *all that we have* and *all that we are* is the result of God's divine goodness and love. God is the giver of every good gift: the gifts of nature, the gifts we receive in and through others, even the gift of our own selves.

"To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything He has given us," writes Thomas Merton, *"and (God) has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of (God's) love, every moment of existence a grace... Gratitude therefore takes nothing*

for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference...

"We live in constant dependence upon this merciful kindness of God and thus our whole life is a life of gratitude – a constant response to (God's) help which comes to us at every moment."

"Our *whole life* is a life of gratitude." Even in difficult times there are reasons to be grateful. We are alive. We are loved. We are surrounded by beauty and wonder. And God is near, loving us and supporting us and making a way for us. We know that nothing can separate us from God's love – no circumstance, no power on earth or in heaven, no trouble or hardship – *nothing!* We are and will be forever loved and held by God!

Can you look back on hard times you have known in your past with genuine gratitude for graces received? Perhaps you have become stronger through the trials; almost certainly you have learned from them something about yourself or about life that will help you going forward. Trials can make us more sensitive to the suffering of others, or help us to appreciate things we have taken for granted.

There is *always* reason for gratitude, which is why we say in our Eucharistic prayer, "*It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to You...*" It is why Saint Paul instructs the Thessalonians to "give thanks in *all* things." He does not ask them to give thanks *for* all things, but *in* all things. Even in darkness, difficulty or despair, Paul found reasons to give thanks and praise to God. Expressing gratitude in difficult times is an expression of trust in God, and an acknowledgment that God is present and at work in every time and place, always bringing life out of death, hope out of despair, joy out of sadness – even when we can't see it. I cannot stress enough how counter-cultural and how radical this practice of "giving thanks to God in all things" really is. Nor can I overstate how completely it will change our perspective on life. It will not take away every pain or sorrow, but it will transform us in the midst of them.

QUOTES *to ponder*

“What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?”
– Ps 116:12

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”
– I Thessalonians 5:16-18

“Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.”
– Sir Winston Churchill

“Embrace your life journey with gratitude, so that how you travel your path is more important than reaching your ultimate destination.”
– Rosalene Glickman, PhD.

PRACTICES *to try*

Give yourself a gift of five minutes of contemplation in awe of everything you see around you. Go outside and turn your attention to the many miracles around you. This five-minute-a-day regimen of appreciation and gratitude will help you to focus your life in awe. – Wayne Dyer

Pray the “General Thanksgiving” on page 101 of The Book of Common Prayer, naming specific things for which you are thankful (e.g. What comes to mind when you thank God for “the blessings of this life”? What have been the ‘means of grace’ in your life? etc.)

To practice **gratitude reflection**, follow these steps:

1. Settle yourself in a relaxed posture. Take a few deep, calming breaths to relax and center. Let your awareness move to your immediate environment: all the things you can smell, taste, touch, see, hear. Say to yourself: "For this, I am grateful."
2. Next, bring to mind those people in your life to whom you are close: your friends, family, partner.... Say to yourself, "For this, I am grateful."
3. Next, turn your attention onto yourself: you are a unique individual, blessed with imagination, the ability to communicate, to learn from the past and plan for the future, to overcome any pain you may be experiencing. Say to yourself: "For this, I am grateful."
4. Finally, rest in the realization that life is a precious gift. That you have been born into a period of immense prosperity, that you have the gift of health, culture, and access to spiritual teachings. Say to yourself: "For this, I am grateful."

– *Still Mind* (2014)

The Book of Common Prayer tells us that "the Eucharist is the central act of worship" in the Episcopal Church, and rightly so, because the word eucharist literally means "to give thanks." In the Eucharist, we recall all that God has given us and all that God has done for us as a people. We recall God's mercies in creation, in the calling of ancient Israel, in the history of our salvation, in the life of Christ and his Church. And we give thanks, we offer "our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving," holding up before God our lives and our work, along with this bread and wine, to be taken up into the mystery of God's plan for the whole creation. When you next attend a celebration of the Eucharist, try approaching it as an opportunity to renew and express your gratitude to God. Offer to God, the Giver of all good gifts, your "sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving."

QUESTIONS *to consider*

Are you aware of the gifts that surround you on every side? Is your heart so full of the wonder of life that you want to cry out with the psalmist,

“What shall I render to the Lord, for all his bounty to me?” What might help you to cultivate a spirit of gratitude?

What do you think is the connection between gratitude and humility?

In what ways is gratitude “counter-cultural”? What forces or experiences or emotions work against gratitude in your own experience? Think of some concrete examples. How could you lessen their power, to experience instead the transformative power of gratitude?

RESOURCES *to explore*

Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer* (Paulist Press, 1984).

Video: A Grateful Day (Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB)
https://youtu.be/zSt7k_q_qRU

A PRAYER *for gratitude*

God of all blessings,
source of all life,
giver of all grace:

We thank you for the gift of life:
for the breath
that sustains life,
for the food of this earth
that nurtures life,
for the love of family and friends
without which there would be no life.

We thank you for the mystery of creation:
for the beauty
that the eye can see,
for the joy
that the ear may hear,

for the unknown
that we cannot behold filling the universe with wonder,
for the expanse of space
that draws us beyond the definitions of our selves.

We thank you for setting us in communities:
for families
who nurture our becoming,
for friends
who love us by choice,
for companions at work,
who share our burdens and daily tasks,
for strangers
who welcome us into their midst,
for people from other lands
who call us to grow in understanding,
for children
who lighten our moments with delight,
for the unborn,
who offer us hope for the future.

We thank you for this day:
for life
and one more day to love,
for opportunity
and one more day to work for justice and peace,
for neighbors
and one more person to love
and by whom be loved,
for your grace
and one more experience of your presence,
for your promise:
to be with us,
to be our God,
and to give salvation.

For these, and all blessings,
we give you thanks, eternal, loving God,
through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

– Vienna Cobb Anderson

Br. David Vryhof lives at the Monastery in Cambridge where he serves as Communication Brother. He loves that his day is grounded in the Daily Office (while his actual office is grounded in plenty of post-it notes and to-do lists!). He is the community's sole sports fan.

The Brothers of SSJE are a community of men giving our whole selves over to living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Rooted in the ancient monastic traditions of prayer and community life, and critically engaged with contemporary culture, we seek to know and share an authentic experience of God's love and mercy. We live a common life shaped by worship, prayer, and our Rule of Life.

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