

Grateful Even For The Hard Stuff

November 21, 2004

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READING: *from "The Prophet," by Kahlil Gibran*

Then a woman said, "Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow."
 And he answered:
 Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.
 And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled
 with your tears.
 And how else can it be?
 The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can
 contain.
 Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the
 potter's oven?
 And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was
 hollowed with knives?
 When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only
 that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.
 When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in
 truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.
 Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay,
 sorrow is the greater."
 But I say unto you, they are inseparable.
 Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board,
 remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.

SERMON: *"Grateful Even For The Hard Stuff"*

Last year, we fixed Thanksgiving dinner at our house and invited a good friend to share it with us. One of the great benefits of this was not only his company, but also that we could send about half of the left-over feast home with him. But even so, after a week, our refrigerator still sheltered the usual array of leftovers – half a pumpkin pie, a plastic container full of rapidly-drying turkey odds and ends, and a large container of the spicy squash soup our guest brought.

And yes, we were grateful for this bounty – these seasonal delights that filled our bellies and lingered in our refrigerator – just as we were thankful for the cheerful presence of our friend. But I also think we pretty much took the whole thing for granted. Just another Thanksgiving holiday gone by, yawn, yawn, ho-hum, yawn.

On the surface, the rituals of Thanksgiving are simple – gathering with people we care about, sharing food, and giving thanks. In a life full of blessings, full of good health and interesting work and satisfying relationships; a life where “too much to do and not enough time” is often the most difficult problem we face, it is easy to skip lightly through Thanksgiving and remain unmoved. But those simple rituals are intended, I believe, to craft a deeper meaning in us.

What am I talking about? Gratitude. Gratitude, practiced with awareness and intention; gratitude employed as a spiritual practice, has the power to transform our lives.

Where does gratitude come from? It would seem to make sense that having many blessings would help us feel more grateful. But having comfortable external circumstances does not necessarily lead to gratitude. “Robert Coles, who has studied children of wealth and poverty, observed ‘that since wealthy children are treated as if they were the center of the universe they tend ultimately to believe it. In the self-portraits of rich American children, for example, the figure of the child fills up the whole page, while in those of Hopi children, the figure is merely a dot in a rich landscape.’ Rather than feeling grateful for all that they have, children of wealth ... tend to grow up with a sense of ‘entitlement’ – a feeling that the world and its bounties belong to them by right.” (*Rev. Dick Gilbert, quoting Atlantic Monthly, Sept 1977, p. 55*)

By way of contrast, listen to Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk. He writes, “The less you have, the more you appreciate what you've got. ... When your needs are limited, your vessel is easily filled, and you can delight in the overflow... (For example) if you normally have just soup for your meal, and all of a sudden you get a second course of potatoes, that feels like a wonderful gift, a blessing,...” (*In "Music of Silence," co-written with Sharon Lebell, p. 26*)

In our materialistic culture, though, I do not think it is quite that simple. In a social system where having more goods and wealth means you have more power and respect, having less engenders not gratitude but resentment. This is America, after all, and aren't we all supposed to have opportunities to better ourselves, to achieve the American dream?

M.J. Ryan, author of a sweet little book called “Attitudes of Gratitude,” found in her research that for many people, it took a brush with death to awaken them to a sense of gratitude. As an example, she quotes theology professor Lewis Smedes, who tells the story of collapsing in his Minnesota apartment on a cold December morning. Smedes wrote, “My lungs it turned out had been spattered by a buckshot of blood clots; and for a couple of days at the hospital I tilted in death's direction. On the fourth day a benign Norwegian physician ... leaned over my bed and congratulated me on surviving the twenty-to-one odds that medical statistics had stacked up against me....”

“A couple of nights later – in the moody hush that settles on a hospital room at two o’clock in the morning, alone, with no drugs in me to set me up for it – I was seized with a frenzy of gratitude.... I blessed the Lord above for the almost unbearable goodness of being alive on this good earth in this good body at this present time.” (pp. 89-90)

Brother David Steindl-Rast names gratitude “the full response of the human heart to the gratuitousness of all that is.” He calls it a great fullness. Gratitude is when we become aware of beauty in our lives, of goodness, and our hearts joyously reply “thank you!” even if we do not know whom to thank. Gratitude is what we feel when we recognize that somehow, someway, against all odds, we have been given the gift of life. Gratitude connects us profoundly with all that is, with the whole of life, with the great fullness of all existence.

This kind of gratitude – born in conscious awareness of the goodness of our lives, and expressed in that sense of greater connection with the All -- breaks down our sense of entitlement. When we acknowledge what we are grateful for, we start to see the world differently. More and more blessings present themselves to our growing awareness, and we do experience that "great fullness" that puts a graceful and natural hold on our need for more, more, more.

And truly, when we take a little time for it, gratitude for our blessings comes easily. When our lives are in order, when our health is good and our bills are paid, when the children are behaving, when we feel appreciated – it is easy to feel blessed and thankful.

But gratitude is not just about the things that make us happy. Being glad and being grateful are not the same thing. Remember the song we sang earlier, “For all that is our life/ we sing our thanks and praise/ for all life is a gift/ which we are called to use.... Gratitude means extending our growing openness to all that life brings us.

This is, for me, deeper meaning of Thanksgiving: being grateful even for the hard stuff in our lives.

When I think of being grateful for the hard stuff, I think of a story I read not long after my daughter was born, when I was in that very vulnerable place new parents often are – wondering and worrying and hoping about my child. The story was about a woman from Indiana, named Renee Collier. (*Parents magazine, December 2000 p. 148*)

Renee's second son, Brian, was born with brain damage and a serious heart defect and wasn't expected to live very long. After his third heart surgery, at age 4, the outlook was more dismal than ever, and Renee was told that Brian's

IQ was in the low 50s and that he'd never walk, read, or live independently. The doctors encouraged her to send him to a long-term care facility, instead of taking him home.

Renee wrote, "I put Brian in a wagon and took him out into a small courtyard at the hospital. It was a gorgeous spring day, and as we sat there, I thought about what the doctors had said. I looked down at Brian, and he turned his face up toward the sun and smiled as a breeze ruffled his hair. That was my turning point. We decided to forgo the doctors' advice and take him home.

"Four years later," she continued, "this child not only walks, he chases his sisters and our cat around the house. He dresses himself, ... reads at a first-grade level, and tells the corniest knock-knock jokes you've ever heard. Yes, he occasionally has seizures and will never have the use of his right arm, but that doesn't stop him from being happy."

"Before Brian was born," Renee wrote, "I always worried about the wrong things – getting a raise, buying this, upgrading that. Now I know that sometimes all a person needs to feel content is a little sunshine and a warm breeze."

Grateful, even for the hard stuff. How can this be possible? How are we to be grateful for the things that have hurt us? For the times when we, or someone we love, is diagnosed with cancer. For the times when a relationship suddenly ends, or we lose a job. For the times when a child dies, or is terribly ill. For the times when the very universe seems slanted against us. For some of us, the holidays – with their focus on family and togetherness – are a hurting time. How are we to be grateful, as the song says, "for failures, pain and loss?"

First let me say this: we are not expected to be grateful when we are in pain. And gratitude does not come as a result of tasking ourselves with "finding the lesson" or finding something to be thankful for when tragedy or difficulty has hit our lives. But later, when the shock has passed, when the pain has lessened and the tears are gone, when acceptance and healing have begun, gratitude may creep in. We may begin to see that the experience has brought us something like a gift. The gift is rarely an explanation why something awful has happened, because most often there is no reason why. But we can come to an acceptance and an understanding of how the difficulties in our lives have helped shape who we are now, and who we are becoming. When the pain has faded, we may find we can look back in gratitude for how the experience schooled us in resilience and refined our character.

This is a long process. In my own life, I see it through the lens of the car accident I had twenty years ago, which left one of my hands permanently crushed and disabled. About ten years ago I stopped trying to figure out why the

accident happened to me. And a few years after that, most of my self-pity over being disfigured faded away.

When I look at my hand now, it is almost as though I can trace in its scars and lumps a map of the twists and turns my life's road has taken over the past 20 years. It's a road that has led me to today, to a life that truly overflows with blessings – and challenges. It reminds me that it is during our deepest pain that the seeds of our most powerful gratitude are planted. Kahlil Gibran said it well, "the deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain." Let me be clear that I am not glad that my hand was hurt, but I am grateful for that the hurt has helped me have sympathy and compassion for others. I am not happy that I had the accident, but I am grateful that it put my feet on the path that has led me into the great joys of ministry, of my marriage, and of motherhood.

Let me pause here for a moment. We've been talking about gratitude for personal, individual "hard stuff," but I can't help but wonder about the bigger "hard stuff" in our wider world. War, poverty, racism, environmental devastation, religious bigotry, and a government that seems committed to keeping these firmly institutionalized and flourishing, to name a few things. How are we to be grateful for this kind of hard stuff?

I do not think that we can be. However, if we find ourselves grateful for the abundance of goods we own, it could be said that contained within our gratitude is gratitude for the poverty-level wages paid to the factory workers who made our stuff and the store clerks who sold it to us. If "stuff" is what we are most grateful for, it could also be said that contained within our gratitude, too, is gratitude for the big bucks paid to the CEOs of the corporations that own the factories and the stores, and for the juicy dividends paid to their shareholders.

It's one big web, gratitude is, if you follow its strands back far enough.

But that's why we also have to follow those strands forward.

And by that I mean that our gratitude must become the engine that powers us to work for social and political and environmental change, locally and globally. We have to let the strands of the web of gratitude guide us and pull us into action. As Brother David Steindl-Rast puts it, "The gift in every gift is always opportunity. Most of the time, it is the opportunity to rejoice and to delight in the moment...." But regarding life's larger miseries and despair, he says, "We cannot be grateful for (them) in and of themselves, but we can be thankful for the opportunity to do something about them." (p. 34)

A wise person once said, "Gratitude is like a flashlight. If you go out into your yard at night and turn on a flashlight, you suddenly can see what's there. It

was always there, but you couldn't see it in the dark." (*Dawna Markova, in "Attitudes of Gratitude," p. 60*)

Shining the light that gratitude brings on our lives, we don't necessarily change anything, but we are given the chance to clearly see our blessings. We are given the chance to see the depth of the well that pain has hollowed out in us, the well that can fill with our joy, our love, and our hope. We are given the chance to feel the strength of the cup that was hardened in the fire, and to hear the rich, resonant note of the lute that was hollowed out by knives. Practicing gratitude – beginning with the easy things, the good things, will gradually result in a deep awareness of the opportunity for blessedness in every thing, in every moment, every experience – and a deep awareness of our own power and responsibility for bringing blessing into being.

Thanksgiving is soon upon us, bringing, as it does, our annual opportunity to remember that the time for gratitude is always here, always now. Today and every day we can begin with open hearts to accept whatever is going on in our lives right now – and to use it with gratitude, as the song says, "to build the common good – and make our own days glad".

Amen.