

Practice Gratitude

by Pat Smith, December 13, 2009

These ideas are based on the article in UU World, Fall 2009, pp19-20, by Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins. Quotes from the book are in Italics and indented.

----- *Saying “Thank you” is practicing gratitude* -----

We all do it. Whenever we say, “Thank you,” we are practicing gratitude. I’m sure you’ve said, “Thank you.” So you’ve practiced gratitude.

The 4th grade boy I’m tutoring in math at Wheelock Elementary School practiced gratitude when he drew a picture of a micro-packy-cephala-saurus and gave it to me. I posted it on the bulletin board in the fellowship hall. The little girl I tutored in reading practiced gratitude when she hugged my leg after we got up from the table and I walked her back to her room.

And while these young children were practicing gratitude, I was experiencing gratitude. It was wonderful!

I experience gratitude when someone says “Thank you” to me. “Thank you. You didn’t have to do that,” as I sometimes hear. And I respond, “I know, that’s why I enjoyed it!” When I have to do something, it’s not nearly as much fun.

Saying “Thank you” is a simple example of gratitude.

- It reminds us that we are dependent on others.
- It reminds us of the web of relationships.
- And, it’s good for the soul to say it.

Sometimes, when things fall into place, I say, “Thank you! Thank you! There is a god!”

----- *gratitude not necessarily to a god* -----

But you don’t have to believe there is a Divine Someone out there collecting praise to experience gratitude.

My mother practices gratitude and experiences gratitude every Thanksgiving dinner and every Christmas dinner. She does this by asking everyone around the table to join hands and say what they are grateful for.

My parents lived on St. Croix in the Virgin Islands for 10 years. Every day, my father would wake up and say, “It’s another beautiful day in St. Croix!”

There may be nobody in particular to thank, but we can practice gratitude all the same, just like my parents.

----- *Gratitude in difficult times* -----

What about when we are going through a difficult time? It’s hard to be grateful, isn’t it? We don’t feel lucky to be alive. We don’t feel like celebrating.

One time when I spent all night in the ICU with my mother,

- I was grateful for the caring nurse who came in to check on her so frequently. He was so gentle with her.
- And the next morning, I was grateful for the nurse who took over not only my mother’s care but also my care, when she found a comfortable reclining chair for me to sit in and nap in.
- And I was grateful to my mother who ask politely for me to readjust her pillow when she was uncomfortable.
- And I was grateful to my sister, who came to relieve me, so I could take a break to go home, take a shower, change my clothes, get something to eat.
- AND, my mother was grateful to me, just for being there. My presence was helpful.

Sometimes things are more than difficult. Sometimes things are awful. And things are awful for a long time. Maybe for a very long time. What then?

We can feel the support of family and friends. We may not be able to express gratitude at the time. It may take us awhile, months, maybe years, to process what happened. Then we might be able to recognize those who helped us with a “Thank you”.

If we have a family member or friend going through a difficult time, we know we cannot fix it. Unfortunately. What we can do is listen with an open heart. We can let them know that we are thinking of them. We can ask them what we can do to help.

We have members of our congregation who are ill. We have others who are caring for loved ones. And several have stood up during Joys and Concerns and expressed their gratitude to this church community for the support they have received. Even in this difficult time, they have felt and expressed and practiced gratitude.

“Sometimes when things are hard, especially if they are awful for a long time, we [can] resolve to make a practice of gratitude – to really work at re-establishing our sense of thanksgiving. This is a very healing practice. In the midst of grieving for a loved one, we can be grateful for the care of friends, for the flowers that are still blooming, for the kindness of strangers, or even that the car still starts and the sun still rises. Being intentional about noticing things is a deep spiritual practice.”

“It has been said that religion is primarily an affair of gratitude. You may have always thought that religion is primarily an affair of believing, and if you were not sure how a person goes about ‘believing,’ you may have thought you were not a religious person. Gratitude, on the other hand, is something all of us can practice, and that makes us all religious.

Whatever...[our] beliefs about faith and grace, gratitude is basic. Like hope, trust, and love, gratitude is both a feeling and a spiritual practice. Though we have little control over our immediate feelings, we can decide to cultivate the ground in which those feelings thrive.”

We can choose to grow this gratefulness, this gratitude.

-----Gratitude in our church -----

Sometimes we hear people say, “Count your blessings.” You may or may not believe in blessings. But I’m sure you are grateful. What are you grateful for? Think about it. Can you name five things you are grateful for? If you can count those five things you are grateful for, you have just counted five of your blessings! The language is different, but the intent is the same.

What about this church? What are you grateful for in this church? Who are you grateful for in this church? Complete the sentence, “I am grateful for...”

Write on flip chart then ask others what they are grateful for.

At this church, I am grateful for...

- Community.
- ...

Let's count these blessings!

----- *Expecting Gratitude* -----

Now, should we expect gratitude? Should we get angry if someone does not say "Thank you" or recognize in some way what we've done or how we've helped them? If we do get angry, maybe that's an ego trip.

If I do something for a child, should I expect a "Thank you" from the parent? Probably. I if they are aware of my actions. But why should I? Did I do it for the child or for the parent? Did I do it for the child in hopes of getting a "Thank you" from the parent? Am I waiting to experience gratitude? Am I doing it for me, so I can experience gratitude when someone says "Thank you"? Or am I doing it for them, so they can experience gratitude?

How do we experience gratitude? Do we experience gratitude when we see how the child responds to our attention and interest? Or do we need them to draw a picture or hug our leg? Or do we have to wait for a "Thank you" from the teacher or parent to experience gratitude?

Does someone have to practice gratitude towards us for us to experience gratitude?

----- *Gratitude when we're busy* -----

Sometimes, we're too busy to practice gratitude.

We get too busy to notice all the wonderful things and people and relationships around us.

Too busy to notice. Maybe we can practice noticing! Just noticing.

- Noticing enhances the moment.
- Noticing is not passive.
- Noticing is participating.

That's practicing gratitude.

----- *Make gratitude routine* -----

So that's why we need to make it routine. We need to practice it. A child who says a prayer every night before going to bed is practicing gratitude...

God bless Mommy and Daddy and my brother, even though he's a pain.

If you have some photographs on your wall or on your desk, photographs of people you love, you are practicing gratitude. You are grateful for those people in your life, or people who used to be in your life. If you have pictures of places you've been, you are practicing gratitude. Every time you relive in your mind a happy experience you had, you are practicing gratitude.

W.H. Auden once wrote that on the dull days of life, we must practice our "scale of rejoicing." A musician practices...for many lonely hours so that when it comes time to perform, the music will flow naturally from the fingers. Likewise we can make a practice of our gratitude that will sustain us in both the wonderful and [also] the difficult times of our lives.

----- *Gratitude will make you happy.* -----

You know the song:

If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands.

If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands.

If you're happy and you know it, then your life will surely show it.

If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands.

If you're happy and you know it, stomp your feet.

If you're happy and you know it, stand up sit down.

Maybe, just maybe, if we make gratitude a practice, we will focus more on those things, those people, those experiences that we are grateful for. I read that those who have a positive attitude recover faster from illnesses. Those who have a positive attitude are happier people. And it's certainly more fun to be happy than to be sad!

So,

- Let us be grateful for the community we have in this church.
- Let us be grateful for the support we can give each other.

- Let us be grateful for the support we can receive from each other.

We all experience gratitude. Let us also practice gratitude. Let us make gratitude a daily practice.

Thank you for coming. I am grateful.