

SAYING GRACE

When I was growing up, Thanksgiving was not a large, extended family event. My parents had moved to Spokane, Washington from the Northeast and all their siblings were on the East Coast. I don't remember ever including friends or neighbors at our family dinners. Thanksgiving in those days was a family holiday, and everyone we knew spent it at home or visiting their aunts or uncles or grandparents somewhere else. We moved back East when I was 14, and while we had a few big Thanksgiving get-togethers with relatives, usually our turkey dinner was at home, just the four of us, after the high school football games. My dad was director of music for a large Boston suburb's school district and my sister and I both played in our high school's marching band, so the Thanksgiving Day games were compulsory.

After I was out of college, this changed. I worked for two years at an answering service and later on, for ten years in a battered women's shelter. I worked on almost every holiday both for the extra pay, and to give my co-workers with partners and kids the day off. My parents sometimes traveled for the holiday without me—out to Chicago to be with my sister, or spending the weekend with their own siblings, my aunts and uncles.

As a result of this, I enjoyed some very interesting and different Thanksgiving dinners, especially in the shelter. One year, my friend Mary invited me to an "orphan's Thanksgiving" potluck feast she was throwing for around twenty-five people, of all ages and backgrounds. The only thing the guests had in common was that they couldn't travel to be with families, or had no families, and they knew Mary from somewhere—school or one of her very diverse jobs or one of her constantly changing living situations. For the most part, we were meeting each other for the first time.

Despite our widely disparate origins and ages, we were amused to find how many Thanksgiving dinner traditions and customs we had in common. For example, everyone seemed to have gone out for the post-dinner, pre-pumpkin-pie stroll; it was almost a universal habit. So after dinner, most of us went out in a big crowd to walk happily around the mixed residential neighborhood, looking Bohemian enough that we attracted a little attention. It was one of the most amazing Thanksgivings I ever took part in.

Another custom is almost universal on Thanksgiving: saying grace before the meal. Everyone seems to do it, in some way, regardless of their belief or lack thereof. For many people, Thanksgiving is the only meal of the year that begins with a prayer, and for some, the only day of the year when they say thanks at all. Perhaps it's because that's what "Thanksgiving" is supposed to be for, after all. Even confirmed atheists will take a moment to acknowledge their gratitude for family, food and good fortune. "Saying grace," or giving a prayer of thanks before the Thanksgiving meal, unites us across cultures, classes, faiths, generations and genders. We rarely stop to ask ourselves why even the least religious of us seem to find this important.

Speaking words of thanks before beginning a meal is described numerous times in the Bible; Jesus does so repeatedly. He may have been drawing on the Jewish custom, or *mitzvah*, of speaking a blessing before eating, with specific words for specific foods. Blessing food before a meal is a tradition common to many human societies around the world. But Jesus' prayers are described as directly giving thanks for the food before eating or sharing it.

Thanking God for something as essential to our well-being as food is obvious. But what do we mean when we call this prayer of thanks, "grace?"

The words "grace" and "gratitude" are closely related and come from the same root, the Latin word *gratus*. But the concept of "grace" in Christian theology is both complicated and controversial. Entire schisms have erupted over disagreements about who was given grace by God, when it was given, whether it could be refused, and what happened to those who didn't receive it.

In the simplest terms, "grace" refers to those blessings which are given to us without our doing anything to earn or "deserve" them in any way. Grace is bestowed on us by God without any consideration of merit. The heated theological debates focused on the "grace" of salvation, but God's grace goes far beyond that. Everything that makes our lives enjoyable, wondrous or even possible is a form of Grace. It is a gift, something we didn't earn, make or buy, which no one can earn, make, or buy, something without which none of us could earn, make or buy anything at all.

Life itself is a Grace given to us. The entire natural world and everything in it is a Grace given to us. Other people—their companionship, nurturing, love, help, comfort,

entertainment and teaching—are a Grace given to us. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the light of day, the resources and materials from which we make our shelter, tools, and art—every bit of it a gift, given to us freely and unconditionally, impossible for us to create for ourselves. The things in our lives which we “earn” or “pay for” or “work for” are such a tiny sliver of the whole bounty of good things we enjoy every day, they’re almost insignificant.

Moreover, we're graced with far more unearned blessings than those which flow directly from God and Nature. James Harvey Robinson writes,

"One cannot but wonder at this constantly recurring phrase "getting something for nothing," as if it were the peculiar and perverse ambition of disturbers of society. Except for our animal outfit, practically all we have is handed to us gratis. Can the most complacent reactionary flatter himself that he invented the art of writing, or the printing press, or discovered his religious, economic and moral convictions, or any of the devices which supply him with meat and raiment or any of the sources of pleasure as he may derive from literature or the fine arts? In short, civilization is little else than getting something for nothing."

So our very existence, everything which supports it, and everything that has been done by our ancestors to build our social order from the raw elements of life, all this is handed to us at our birth, free of charge or obligation. All we need to do is accept the gifts and put them to good use.

If we keep this awareness in our minds, we realize that the only response to all of this Grace, all of this bounty of blessings and wonders that fill every moment of our lives, is gratitude. That's why Grace, the power which gives, is directly related to the words gratitude and grateful, the reactions we have to receiving gifts. At the same time, consciously feeling and expressing gratitude opens our minds to all the unearned blessings that fill our lives, but which so often we take for granted or can't see.

Gratitude has been honored as the highest of all virtues for millennia. The Greek fable writer Aesop wrote, "Gratitude is the sign of noble souls." The Roman philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero wrote, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others." Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians, "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus toward you." Second century Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher

Marcus Aurelius wrote, "Do not indulge in dreams of having what you have not, but reckon up the chief of the blessings you do possess, and then thankfully remember how you would crave for them if they were not yours."

Many modern-day writers and teachers urge us to practice gratitude as a spiritual discipline. There are "Gratitude Challenges" in which people are encouraged to write down several things they feel thankful for each day for a set number of days—twenty-one, or one hundred, or three hundred and sixty-five, a full year. Oprah Winfrey popularized the idea of a daily gratitude journal when she described having kept one herself for many years. There are gratitude meditations, in which practitioners take some quiet time each day to count their blessings and appreciate what they have.

There are quite a few people, in our cynical and snarky world, who discount such ideas as twee New Age self-indulgence. It's easy to see why. American society right now has never been so deeply mired in the polar opposite of gratitude: entitlement. When you feel entitled, you feel thankful for nothing, because why would you feel thankful for something that's only your right to have? Americans treat their privileges and blessings as their just deserts, because they've worked hard or paid taxes or simply have a sense of moral superiority. Along with this sense of entitlement comes suspicion, jealousy, envy, resentment, and miserliness. America, which once called herself the breadbasket of the world, can't afford to share her bounty with immigrants and the poor. There's not enough to go around. Those people don't deserve free handouts.

The entitled never truly examine the pure illogic of their attitudes, or stop to think how little of what they enjoy was really earned, or ask what makes them so special that they deserve what another person doesn't have. Entitlement feeds the ego, and it's like an addiction. It's a perverse pleasure that is very difficult to let go of. To the entitled, Grace is something they created themselves and own, not something bestowed upon them as a gift. This is an arrogance which kills the soul. Elie Wiesel wrote, "When a person doesn't have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity. A person can almost be defined by his or her attitude toward gratitude."

Gratitude requires humility, and to practice gratitude is to learn humility. When we practice gratitude, we stop seeing the Grace in our lives as our personal possession, but rather as a gift that we are called to share with others. This is what Cicero meant when he

said gratitude is the parent of all virtues. Humility, generosity, courage, resilience, optimism, compassion, and love toward other people and other living things—they all start with gratitude. Virtues are the gifts of Grace.

This is why the most memorable Thanksgivings in my life aren't the ones spent only with my family, the people who I might expect to feel an obligation to me because we are related by blood. What I think of when I think of Thanksgiving, what truly brings out how this holiday embodies the meaning of Grace, are those holidays I spent getting to know strangers, or helping to create a safe and warm place with people who ultimately would go their separate ways and never meet again. The incredible multi-cultural feast one year at the shelter, when Hispanic families, young mothers and a middle-aged grandmother from the Midwest cooked and shared a meal I'll dream about to the end of my days. The orphan's Thanksgiving my friend Mary hosted, simply because she couldn't bear that anyone she loved would spend the holiday alone, and because everyone she loved should at least be friends with each other. Each person that day brought a gift of food to share with everyone, but I wouldn't exaggerate when I say that meal was far greater than the sum of its parts.

That's Grace. It's a power so strong, we don't have to be reminded to be thankful for it, because gratitude and thankfulness well up out of our hearts uncontrollably when we experience such love and generosity. Thanksgiving isn't a time when we need to be reminded of Grace, or prompted to feel gratitude. To carry the feelings and lessons of this day all through the rest of the year—that is truly a Gratitude Challenge. A. J. Cronin writes, "Gratitude is something of which none of us can give too much. For on the smiles, the thanks we give, our little gestures of appreciation, our neighbors build their philosophy of life." This year, as we say Grace, let's resolve to meet that challenge.