

A Gift to the Mystery
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The world's religious traditions and contemporary spiritual teachers all tell us that gratitude is an essential basic component of the spirited life. You don't have to have any particular understanding or image of the Sacred in order to be grateful. You don't have to be speaking to anyone or anything in particular in order to take a moment to say: thank you.

Thank you for life; thank you for the light of the sun; thank you for the great loves of my life and all the gifts of my human birthrights; thank you for the blessings I barely notice as the day streams past.

We know how powerful this practice can be. A ritual as simple as lighting a chalice and joining hands before a meal and inviting each person to name at least one thing from this day that we're thankful for has the capacity to transform my experience of an entire day.

Practicing intentional gratitude over time changes what we see when we look at the world. This simple discipline awakens us to the wonder and beauty in our lives, and in the awakening we reconnect with one another and with all of existence. As the poet David Whyte says, "Gratitude is not a passive response to something we have been given; gratitude arises from paying attention, from being awake in the presence of everything that lives within and without us. Gratitude is not necessarily something that is shown after the event, it is the deep, a-priori state of attention that shows we understand and are equal to the gifted nature of life."

What has gotten your attention, lately? Did you notice the clarity and crispness in the air as we experienced the first frosty touch of winter this week? What did you eat or drink this morning? Did someone smile at you as we gathered here? Did you happen to notice the fall-blooming flowers in our garden, or the voluptuous orange of the persimmons on our tree as you crossed the parking lot?

Has the world offered up something that you're grateful for today?

Perhaps you find it hard, this week, today, to notice anything like that. There may be tragedies and troubles on your mind and in your heart.

It's easy, in the rush and worry that fills so many of our days, to lose the sense of moment-to-moment wonder at the astonishing fact of our existence in this astonishing world. So much crowds our attention: The pressure of the clock; expectations to meet; promises to keep. The wider world asserts itself tormented and ominous every day, seeking our attention and our time and energy. And our own lives and relationships bring with them stresses and pains, from the irritation of a crabby morning at the breakfast table to the numbing sorrow of a great loss.

Yet there is also much to see and rejoice over. Uncountable small beauties quietly await our notice; gifts and blessings enrich our lives. In the midst of despair there may be a hand of comfort and companionship reaching toward us if we can see it; as people in California have been demonstrating again this week, even in the aftermath of catastrophe there are a multitude of small moments of kindness, restoration, and hope.

There is always a larger wonder, too: How amazing it is that we exist at all! After all, why is there something rather than nothing? As David Whyte says, “Even if that something is temporarily pain or despair, we inhabit a living world, with real faces, real voices, laughter, the color blue, the green of the fields, the freshness of a cold wind, or the tawny hue of a winter landscape.” Why is there life rather than an inanimate universe? It certainly didn’t have to be this way. An early Christian writer observed how odd it is that we will travel for days to wonder at the beauty of a great city or a magnificent coastline, but miss the wonder of our own life every time we pass by a mirror.

Well, if you’re feeling grateful, what do you do? In *Green Shadows, White Whale*, Ray Bradbury writes of meeting an old man in an Irish pub who wonders: “Who do you thank for sunsets?” He’s looking for “someone to grab and slap their backs and say thanks for the fine early light this morn, boyo, or much obliged for the look of them damn wee flowers by the road this day, and the grass lying about in the wind.”

The faiths of the world are clear and united on the question of who you thank, each in its own language: “O you who believe!” the Quran (2:172) says. “Eat of the good things that We have provided for you, and be grateful to God, if it is Him that you worship.” The 18th-century Shinto poet Morinaga Motoori writes: “The blessings of the/Gods of heaven and earth--/Without these/How could we exist/Even for a day, even for a night?”

Our gratitude belongs to the Source of our being, whether we think of that Source as a divine entity or as an animating force without a face. But I wonder—is it really just a matter of saying “thank you?” From the world’s religious writings, it might well seem as if the power that gave birth to the Universe, that pulls our atoms together out of the stardust of the Big Bang and sparks them into the dance of life, is paying very close attention to whether or not we remember to say the words. But I don’t think so.

I don’t think what Dylan Thomas so beautifully calls “the Force that through the green fuse drives the flower” is like a cosmic Miss Manners waiting to make sure we’ve written our bread-and-butter letters. Can’t you just imagine yourself sitting down over this one?

“Dear You, I’m having such a lovely stay on Your wonderful planet. Thank you so much for inviting me! And thanks especially for the delightful water you left out for me; it’s just what I needed. I love the way it tastes right after I wake up in the morning . . . I know I’m going to use it every day and I will think about You every time. Love, David”

When the religions of the world advise us to give thanks for our very lives, for all that makes them possible, for all that gives them beauty and wonder even in the hardest of moments, it isn't because the Divine needs thanks from us: It's because we need it. We need the shift of perspective that comes when our practice of gratitude changes what we see in the world, because the new vision helps to shape us into grateful and generous beings.

And yet. . . maybe it's not just for us. A friend once said to me that in her own spiritual understanding, gratitude is the only gift we can give to the Mystery which brings so much into our lives.

This kind of gratitude is more than saying "thank you." It's a practical gratitude, much more than just feeling grateful. I remember a period of my life when my family included someone who was very committed to expressing gratitude in a way that only *started* with thank-you notes. *Saying* "thank you" didn't really count for much; if you didn't write the note, you weren't grateful. The next steps, though, were even more important: If you're grateful for something, you wear it. You use it. You share it. You take good care of it. And when the appropriate time comes, you pass it on to someone who needs it, or someone who will appreciate it as you have. Feeling grateful is nice, "thank you" is necessary, but real gratitude, in this way of thinking, is action.

Of course, there can be snags in this process. If you've ever experienced the dilemma of the two shirts, you know what I mean. You receive two shirts for your birthday. The next time you see the person who gave them to you, you're careful to wear one of them, so you can say thank you again, with evidence of your appreciation. And the gift-giver says: "Oh, I knew you wouldn't like the other one. I kept the receipt; would you like me to take it back for you?"

That aside, though, the principle remains: If you're grateful for it, you wear it. You use it. You share it. You take care of it. You pass it on. I think the same principle applies, when we want to show gratitude for the gifts beyond measure that bring us into being and sustain us in every living moment.

How do you show gratitude for a life full of love, beauty, and possibility? You wear it every day.

How do you show gratitude for surviving a health crisis or a terrible accident, for escaping with your life out of the horrific crucible of war? You use your gift of life to create a better world, to heal and protect those who suffer as you have. You share your hard-won wisdom with anyone who needs to know how precious life is, and how fragile.

How do you show gratitude for the intricate, interwoven web of this planet of ours, which gives us life, nurtures us, showers us with blessings every moment of every day? You take care of it, you treat it with love and respect; you work to preserve its well-being. Maybe you plant an orchard to share its bounty with others.

How do you show gratitude for the privilege of a living in a land where, for the time being, our life is shaped more by our own choices than by oppressive laws, or for the right to participate in the democratic processes by which we govern ourselves? You pass it on, by working to secure those rights for all, and by acting in solidarity with those whose rights are denied.

How do you show gratitude for the love of friends and family that carried you through the darkest time of your life, through a season of loss and grief, through a time of physical or mental illness? You pass it on to someone in their own season of despair, who needs to know they are not alone.

Wear it every day. Use it to make something new and beautiful. Share it. Take care of it. Pass it on. That's how you show you're grateful, whether it's for an oddly patterned sweater or for the inestimable gift that is our one and precious life.

What possible gift can we give back to the Mystery that gives us so much? Another line from the Shinto poet Morinaga's poem offers this suggestion: "Assist the deities of/Marvelous spirit power/in their work."

When we act in gratitude for the gifts we have received from the Mystery, we assist it in its work. We increase its presence in the world. We expand the power of creativity, of compassion, of justice, of love; we become part of what James Luther Adams and Rebecca Parker call the sustaining, healing, transforming grace which is the Mystery in action around us, and in us and through us.

Intentional thankfulness changes what we see in the world, changes us, and gives us the power to transform even the worst of times into sources of meaning and understanding and strength. As we shape that thankfulness into a discipline of acting in gratitude, more and more we grow into magnanimity—a word that literally means "greatness of soul." Awakened to the abundance and joy of the Universe, we find our own increasing power to take actions of beauty and compassion and justice.

Our creativity, our imagination, our compassion add to the great store of creativity, imagination, and compassion that is the Mystery, whether you call that Mystery God, the Sacred, the Compassionate Community, or the Creative and Animating Principle of the Universe. Inspired and sustained by our own experience of an abiding Source of hope and strength, we become part of that very Source, giving inspiration and strength and hope to others.

That is our gift to the Mystery.