

## Multigenerational Thanksgiving Sunday Reflection

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### Introductory Words

From The Secret of Saying Thanks by Douglas Wood

*Grace: Maybe you'll find the secret in your own home, sitting around a table with people you love, giving thanks for good food and the good earth that gave it, for the many hands that prepared it, and for family to share it.*

*Lucienne: Perhaps one day you'll feel the secret, when someone is holding your hand or kissing away your tears or hugging you close or reading you a story or tucking you into bed at night and reminding you to say your prayers.*

*Penny: Or it might be in your bedtime prayer itself, as you say thanks for sun and moon and stars and rocks and trees and flowers and waters and birds and animals and all those who love you, and the love you feel for them. In my experience gratitude comes in two varieties.*

### Reflection

In my experience gratitude comes in two varieties.

The first is obligatory gratitude. That social norm our parents or some other adult is charged with teaching us when we're young. To this day I can hear my mother's voice in my head, "Don't forget to say thanks." "Make sure you send a thank you card." And I find myself teaching this to my nieces and nephews, "Make sure you thank Uncle Kevin too.", I'll remind them.

It is worth noting however, because obligatory gratitude is..well, obligatory, it can feel inauthentic at times. I mean how many of us were made to send thank you cards as children for things that weren't what we wanted? Or as adults feigned gratitude for something as we plotted how or to whom we might regift whatever it was we'd been given? "Oh, you shouldn't have...really!" Here the expression of gratitude seems, above all, the fulfillment of social expectations.

So the secret would seem to be to give thanks because you should.

Doesn't sound like much of a secret!

Then there's the gratitude we've been reading and hearing about this morning in Douglas Wood's story The Secret of Saying Thanks offered by Grace, Lucienne, and Penny. Gratitude I call awakened gratitude. Awakened gratitude is not compelled by obligation but emerges through awareness.

Sometimes awareness comes on its own, but often it requires some cultivation. Shortly after I started I seminary I was asked by the Director of Faith Formation (DFF) at my church at the time to teach the Buddhism unit to the 6th graders in the faith formation (FF) program. In addition to the basics, I wanted the kids to leave with a sense of how Buddhism or Buddhist concepts might be applied to "real", which is to say, every day life.

It just so happens that one the most essential and impactful practices in Buddhism is the cultivation of awareness. And so during one the last sessions, after everyone had taken their seats, I asked the kids what they had had for breakfast. Many, if not most, of them said, "cereal."

Sticking with cereal, the conversation continued something like this...

Where did the cereal come from?

The cabinet.

And before that?

The store.

And before that?

A factory.

As you can imagine the conversation went on for some time.

We traced that cereal all the way back to the farm, plants, soil, rain and sun. We also spent some time filling in other connections, like the people who planted the seeds, tended and harvested the plants, processed the grains, drove the delivery trucks, stocked the shelves, and the adults who shopped for, bought, and put the cereal away in the cabinet. And there's certainly many more gaps we could have filled in. But even with the little bit we traced in that lesson, it was clear the kids had come into a new and deeper appreciation of that cereal and all that it took to get it to their table that morning. When asked how they felt after engaging in this exercise, many, if not most said, "grateful."

Because it is not forced or obligated from the outside, but rather surfaces from within, awakened gratitude feels more authentic. Further, it is often expansive...self-transcending...revealing the interconnectedness of life, both symbolically and literally.

The story we read together today is filled with wonderful images and experiences which no doubt resonate with many here today...the sunrise...the dawning of new day, or chance to start over. The feeling of the sun's warmth on our skin...the visual and olfactory delights of flowers...the grace of trees and their cooling shade, the sound of their leaves...and the way trees remind us of the importance of roots... and how rocks help us access stillness and stability in a volatile, ever changing world. Not to mention the animals...whether they fly, crawl, swim or slither...walk on hooves or run on paws, or are covered with feathers, scales or fur...and of course the waters...oceans, rivers, lakes and streams....all of which remind our own species of our blessings and responsibilities....and "save us from a great loneliness here on our small blue planet." A planet Wood describes as "sailing among the stars"... that speaks to our imagination, as does the moon...the "night sun" as Wood calls it...that reflects its silvery light on the surface of the oceans, lakes, rivers and streams...bringing a bit of visual magic to that colorless necessity we might otherwise too easily take for granted...water.

Here the expression of gratitude seems, above all, to be a natural or effortless effect of an increased awareness of our blessings and interconnection. The secret thus might seem to be to give thanks when we become aware of things that make us happy.

But, as it happens, that's not Wood's conclusion.

Instead he writes, "For here is the secret, if you've not already guessed it...The heart that gives thanks is a happy one, for we cannot feel thankful and unhappy at the same time. The more we say thanks, the more we find to be thankful for. And the more we find to be thankful for, the happier we become. We don't give thanks because we're happy. We are happy because we give thanks."

Wood's insight is strikingly similar to an observation the Unitarian Universalist minister Peter Fleck made some years ago.

Imagining the first, albeit idealized, Thanksgiving, Fleck said, "Maybe the pilgrims weren't thankful because they had survived. Maybe they had survived because they were thankful."

If that's true, they may well have had their awareness raised by those upon whose lands they had settled. As historians have long noted, "The idea of giving thanks is central to Native heritage and culture. Long before settlers arrived, Native tribes celebrated the autumn harvest and the gift of Mother Earth's abundance. Native American spirituality, traditionally and today, emphasizes gratitude for creation, care for the environment, and recognition of the human need for communion with nature and others."

Both Fleck and Wood remind us, as Native peoples long have recognized, expressing gratitude or being thankful is more than a social obligation or natural response to favorable events. Indeed, seeking, finding, discovering, and giving thanks for what is good, right, and worthy in moments of joy and disappointment, in times of ease and hardship, helps carries us through.

As Fleck also once said, in resonance with the wisdom gleaned and practiced by those living here long before the first Europeans arrived,

“Thankfulness, while it may relate to specifics, has an absolute character. To give thanks is a basic human need, an essential element in our relationship to the universe. Thankfulness is independent of specifics.”

And, as it turns out, it helps make us happy.

All the more reason to give thanks.

Amen and Blessed Be

Happy Thanksgiving!