



Gratefulness

Are You Thankful Or Are You Grateful?

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Could it be that the mystic gratefulness in the depth of every human heart sings with “a still, small voice,” and is easily drowned out by the noise we endure and the noise we make?

Remember a night when you stood outdoors looking up at the stars, countless in the high, silent dome of the sky, and saw them as if for the first time. What happened? Eugene O’Neill puts it this way: “For a moment I lost myself – actually lost my life. I was set free! I dissolved in the...high dim-starred sky! I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life...to Life itself! To God, if you want to put it that way.” [You may have good reasons for not putting it that way, for not using the G-word, but in any case you have caught a glimpse of “something greater” than your limited self.]“For a second you see – and seeing the secret, are the secret. For a second there is meaning!”

In the second that follows, you may hear your heart calling out, “Thank you, thank you!” – “to God, if you want to put it that way,” or to no one in particular. But let us steady our focus on the first second, the second of gratefulness before thankfulness. Why do I call that wild joy of belonging “gratefulness”? Because it is our full appreciation of something altogether unearned, utterly gratuitous — life, existence, ultimate belonging – and this is the literal meaning of grate-full-ness. In a moment of gratefulness, you do not discriminate. You fully accept the whole of this given universe, as you are fully one with the whole.

In the very next moment, when the fullness of gratitude overflows into thanksgiving, the oneness you were experiencing is breaking up. Now you are beginning to think in terms of giver, gift, and receiver. Gratefulness turns into thankfulness. This is a different fullness. A moment ago you were fully aware; now you are thoughtful. Gratefulness is full awareness; thankfulness is thoughtfulness.

The kinship that shows itself in kindness is simply one particular instance of that cosmic kinship which unites me with all humans, animals, and plants, with the very star dust out of which all is made, and with its secret Source.

The thought pattern of giver, gift, and receiver does not have its origin under the starry sky, but in a social setting. Under the night sky, "I lost myself" in gratefulness. In my exchange with people, I find myself cultivating thankfulness. I receive kindness from a giver who in turn becomes receiver, when I return kind thanks. The gift exchanged is always kindness. There need not be any tangible gift; kindness alone will make me thankful. Barter is an exchange in kind; thankfulness is an exchange in kindness.

Kindness implies mutual belonging. The word itself makes us aware of this; just as we like those who are like us, so we tend to be kind to our own kind. Even kindness to a stranger expresses some sort of kinship, some recognition that all human beings belong together. This awareness is only a mild ripple compared with the tidal wave that swept over me when I lost myself and realized that I belonged within something greater than my limited self. Yet, in every joy which kindness triggers, flashes a flicker of that wild joy of limitless belonging. After all, the kinship that shows itself in kindness is simply one particular instance of that cosmic kinship which unites me with all humans, animals, and plants, with the very star dust out of which all is made, and with its secret Source.

Since all gratitude celebrates belonging, we can understand the inclination of the human heart to project thankfulness back from social to cosmic belonging. But when we superimpose thankfulness on our primordial gratefulness, we have to be extremely careful not to press the conceptual framework of giver, gift, and recipient too far. Otherwise, we end up with a god who is just another person, and whose kindness is measured by the gifts we receive. This has landed not a few religious people into the trap of dualism, where they sit chewing on the old conundrum, How can God be kind, yet give us gifts which we cannot possibly recognize as tokens of kindness?

Remembrance of our moments of ultimate belonging determines to what extent we find ultimate meaning. Why do we so rarely step out through this door of remembrance into joyful aliveness?

In your grateful moment under the starry sky, you do not experience yourself as separate from a giver who may or may not be kind, but seeing the secret you are the secret. At that moment of meaning, "the world is accepted," as Abraham Maslow put it. Having quoted a

poet speaking of those “high spots in our memory,” let me now quote this pioneer psychologist who coined the term Peak Experience. “The cognition that comes in peak-experiences ... can best be described as non-evaluating, non-comparing, or non-judging cognition... Evil itself is accepted and understood and seen in its proper place in the whole, as belonging there, as unavoidable, as necessary, and, therefore, as proper... [Such] universal understanding would never blame or condemn or be disappointed or shocked. Our only possible emotions would be pity, charity, kindness, perhaps sadness or amusement. But this is precisely the way in which self-actualizing people do at times react to the world, and in which all of us react in our peak-experiences.”

Our conceptual framework will inevitably shape experience, but we must make every effort to correct our concepts in turn by ever-alert attention to experience. Within a given religion, the mystics play this role by their emphasis on experience. Gratefulness is the mystical dimension of gratitude, thankfulness its theological one. Thankfulness can, indeed, be grafted onto gratefulness; there it will thrive and bear rich fruit. The history of spirituality proves this fact. But mysticism must continually correct theology.

Something similar is true of our personal lives. Gratefulness must continually flow into our thanksgiving to make it full. Remembrance of our moments of ultimate belonging determines to what extent we find ultimate meaning. Why do we so rarely step out through this door of remembrance into joyful aliveness? Could it be that the mystic gratefulness in the depth of every human heart sings with “a still, small voice,” and is easily drowned out by the noise we endure and the noise we make? Maybe we need more silence. Maybe we simply need now and then to look up at the silent stars and lose ourselves to be set free.

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