

Is Gratitude Cliché?

Written by Vivian Bikulege



If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough. – Meister Eckhardt

As Sandy passed by the coast of South Carolina, crashing into the northern seaboard and clearing the way for her wintry, nor'easter sister Athena, I was awestruck by the damage the storms left in their wake, and yet grateful that our Lowcountry was spared once more. However, I am not proud of this kind of gratitude. All too often, my gratefulness is of the garden variety, "there but for the grace of God go I" type, and I wonder if that is really any form of gratitude at all.

Over the course of the last twenty years, I have moved away from the person I used to be to someone more attuned to what gratitude can do in my life. Gratitude can turn a sour day sunny. It brings difficulties into perspective. It gives me pause to sort through the muck of daily life, and slow down enough to look up through the leaves of palm trees and live oaks to a sky colored in eggshell blue, thanking God for every breath, for vision, for limbs that move, and ears that hear.

But these moments do not come easily and I think many of us tend to be cynical in our current stations in life. The job that was given to someone else, another bill deposited in our mailboxes at a time when funds are already tight, the washing machine that breaks down in the middle of a rinse cycle with sopping sheets and towels, the watch whose battery is dead, and the child who is sobbing and kicking the back of your middle seat on an airplane filled to capacity. These daily moments are the real-life stuff when one is asked to reach deep down inside, and pull up

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gratitude for what is instead of what did not happen. Real gratitude sees past the moment's inconveniences and struggles.

It is okay to have the occasional pity party, collapsing onto the family room Lazy Boy to have a good cry. It is okay to rant, to pout, or take issue with the lack of common decency we fail to give to one another in the little things – holding a door open, letting someone go first at the grocery store check-out line, or quietly picking up a discarded to-go cup inches away from the garbage can, laziness ignored.

America will be sitting down to her annual feast of cranberry sauce and turkey. Families will reach around tables for each other's hands as words of gratitude waft through the aroma of moist stuffing and steamy mashed potatoes and gravy. Pumpkin pie, bathing in tufts of whipped cream, will conclude celebrations of loving meals that took days to plan and prepare – minutes to consume – all in honor of thanksgiving.

Why is it that I have a job when others are unemployed? Why do I have a roof over my head when others are homeless? Why am I healthy when someone else battles cancer? The blessings that answer these questions and the mystery of never truly being able to understand our destiny is the soil where seeds of gratitude are meant to be planted for growth.

I posed the idea of gratitude to a total stranger seated beside me on a flight from Cleveland to Atlanta. He commented that gratitude is actually self-centered and I had to think about that for a minute before I realized he was right. When I say that I am grateful, I recognize my gifts. When I make a gratitude list, it moves me from a funk to an awareness of what is going well in my life. When I say thank you, it is apparent that someone has or will be doing something for me whether I am deserving or not.

Maybe the message is in our Thanksgiving leftovers. After the meal is the cleanup, a type of metaphor for knowing that after something good has come to us, there is still work to do. Someone has to scrub the roasting pan. Leftover mashed potatoes and stuffing have to be packaged and sealed. If there is any leftover pumpkin pie, it should probably find a place in the refrigerator, and it's probably a good idea to sweep up or vacuum under the dining room table where young children have accidentally dropped pieces of homemade biscuits that the family dog did not find.

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Gratitude is a cycle of doing, recognizing, saying thank you, and starting again. Being grateful becomes fully formed by giving – giving thanks, giving away, giving up and accepting. As 2012 draws to a close, there are a few weeks left to gather up the spoils of another year and reshape them into a happy ending. What is the little rhyme, the worn out cliché? An attitude of gratitude? Not an easy mantra for daily living but certainly worth a try. I cannot think of a better act of selfishness.

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