

“Thank You”
Is My Prayer

*Reflections, Prayers and Blessings
For a Grateful Heart*

Janice Lynne Lundy



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Traverse City, Michigan

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I am a being of beauty and light.
My mind is strong, pure and clear.
I focus my attention on what is good, right and true.
I cherish my life and my loves,
And give thanks for all I have been given.

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INTRODUCTION

We all know gratitude is a desirable virtue to possess yet it is one that is not easy to cultivate. Our current culture, for the most part, is focused on acquisition and achievement. Better is more. We tend to want what we do not have and the satisfaction we experience once we acquire what we desire is often short-lived.

Perhaps things have always been this way. How are we to know what life was truly like in the 13th century when German philosopher, theologian and mystic, Meister Eckhart, penned his thoughts on prayer and gratitude? An innovative thinker, he invited us to look deeply into the nature of our spiritual lives and practices. What a radical notion was his! “If the only prayer you ever offer is ‘Thank You,’ that will suffice.”

Could a statement like this really be true? Would a two-word prayer be enough to land us in the lap of the Divine? A great teacher from another tradition, Buddha, invited us to validate the truth of anything by bringing such a claim to our personal experience. This is what many of us today are doing when we take on gratitude as a spiritual practice. Indeed, we are trusting, ardently hoping, that if we turn our attention toward what is good, right and true, we will be transformed—and our lives will change for the better.

A spiritual practice is a unique opportunity to experience sacred time and space; to remove ourselves from the distractions and noise of a too busy world, and to remember our spiritual connection. Spiritual practices, properly cultivated, help us access all of the virtues of the Spirit: inner calm, joy, compassion, and gratitude.

Our inner landscape can shift dramatically when we have the diligence to root our spiritual practice in the cultivation of just one virtue of the Spirit. Focusing our intention and attention on just one thing allows us to deepen our understanding and experience of it. This deeper experience reveals previously hidden truths, even, a truer reality. Gratitude can be this one focal point, and, in Eckhart-like fashion, it can be enough. I know this from my own experience and from gathering up the success stories of similar seekers.

For many years, I was not particularly attuned to the generosity of the Divine One and the natural abundance available to us on a day-to-day basis. In fact, when I discovered gratitude as a spiritual practice, I was at a low point in my life. I was stressed, sick and overwhelmed. I had no clarity about how to reverse my situation. A friend suggested the daily gratitude practice espoused by Sarah Ban Breathnach in her book, *Simple Abundance*. I chortled at her premise that recording five things you were grateful for each day could transform your life. But I gave the practice a go. I was desperate for inner change. (continued)

I vividly recall the day I chose to begin the practice. I was lying in bed in the wee hours of the morning. Five things, I thought to myself. Just five. And this is what I came up with: Birds singing outside my window, the smell of coffee brewing in the kitchen, the sounds of my children's laughter in the next room. Wait, I thought to myself, that's only three. Despite earnest effort, a trio of "Gratitudes" was all I could come up with. Heaven knows why (after that failed beginning) I stuck with the practice, but I did. By week's end, I was up to five Gratitudes, and I was feeling noticeably better.

What I realized was that by "looking for the good", my way of perceiving the world was changed. Instead of focusing on what was wrong or missing in my life, I began to see with the eyes of my heart. And what I saw when I looked was a cornucopia of things that did not cost money or require effort. Things that helped me acknowledge the generosity of the Creator, particularly through nature. Things that were beautiful, timeless and true. Surprisingly, at the end of one month of gratitude practice, I felt truly happy again. Hallelujah! I believe the same can hold true for any of us.

With an ongoing practice of thankfulness (one that has now spanned twenty years), I've witnessed how gratitude gives rise to all of the virtues of the Spirit. A grateful heart is a joyous heart because there is nothing perceived as lacking. A grateful heart is a peaceful heart because we are satisfied with what is here, now, with life just as it is. A grateful heart is a loving heart because we are supremely aware of how fortunate we are to be givers and receivers of love, both human and Divine.

With intention, attention and practice over time, gratitude delivers us into the arms of Presence: a profound awareness that the Divine is always here, within us and around us, showering us with invitations to look more deeply and to see the inherent blessings in everything. Even when life is difficult, blessings are present.

The reflections, prayers, blessings and affirmations you will discover within these pages can support your journey of gratitude as a spiritual practice, especially during challenging times. These are not easy days in which to live. Perhaps Meister Eckhart was attuned more than we know to humanity's perpetual struggle to feel safe and be happy. He must have known personally the power of these two little words to re-shape one's inner landscape and, thereby, the scope of our lives. Today, "Thank You" can be our strength and our refuge, just as it was his.

May it be so for you. May it be so for all beings everywhere.

Janice Lynne Lundy
December 2016

HOW SHALL WE PRAY?



*It is the inner silence that finally matters—
but words do point us there.*

~ Richard Rohr, OSF

SAY A LITTLE PRAYER

I am a sixties and seventies sort of gal, and one of the songs that always touched my heart was sung by Dionne Warwick, "I Say a Little Prayer for You." It's a sweet song about holding someone in your heart as you go through the day. I believe in prayer in all its forms. And there certainly are many them!

A few years ago, I spoke about prayer with my friend and mentor, Sylvia Boorstein. I asked her if there was one best way to pray. She reminded me that every time we turn ourselves toward the Sacred we are engaged in prayer. This is also what she said to me: "Whatever particular meditation practice we do, we are ardently hoping, indeed praying, for a peaceful and compassionate heart, for our own well-being and for the well-being of others. The very act of stopping to reorient ourselves—which is central to all meditation and prayer practices—and to focus our intention for the good, is a prayer."

I know this to be true. Yet, sometimes I feel the need for petitionary prayer, a real *asking* for guidance or assistance, or for help shifting my energy when I am out-of-sorts. Do you do this? What's so puzzling to me is that if we believe wholeheartedly in prayer and know that it works, how is it we forget to do it? I call this forgetting phenomenon "spiritual amnesia."

Often, when I converse with someone in a spiritual guidance situation, and we're discussing a pressing issue in his or her life, I'll ask if they've taken it to prayer. Nine times out of ten, they'll pause and say, "I guess I forgot all about that." I understand, because I do, too.

Sometimes prayer is the only thing that we *can* do. It is our singular course of action when we are in a difficult situation, or when we've received bad news. Sometimes the best thing I can do at times like these is to surrender to life as it is and say, "Help me."

Who am I asking for help? I'm not always sure. More often than not it's God as I understand It. Or a wise, enlightened being—someone who is "God" personified. (Mary, Jesus, the Buddha—even the spirit of a deceased loved one.) I pray to align myself with divine wisdom, with the Universal Heart. These personifications are, for me, representations of living in perfect alignment, with Love, with all that is right and true. Though at other times when I pray, I am aware of trying to connect with my sacred self (my wiser self) to re-ignite my inner spark of knowing, especially when it's grown dim.

Today, I'm singing and praying right along with Dionne Warwick, offering a little prayer for you, for me, for all of us.

The German mystic, Meister Eckhart, wrote,
“If the only prayer you ever offer is
‘Thank you,’ that will suffice.”
So often our prayers are supplications.
We ask Spirit for things, people, opportunities.
Our needs naturally bring us to the act of prayer.
Yet, prayers of gratitude, of thankfulness, are important acts
that deepen the connection between ourselves and Spirit.
To offer a heartfelt, “Thank you, God!”
delivers us to the realm of unseen abundance.
We view life as blessed and fruitful instead of scarce;
we begin to live from a place of fullness in our lives.
We are and have enough.

Ω

How shall we pray? We can speak or remain in silence. We can sit or walk or pray lying down. We can be still or dance. We can be alone or with others. It does not matter which prayer form we use only that we engage it, for when we do, our spirit is enduringly connected to the spirit of the universe and to all beings everywhere. Breathing can be a prayer too.

Breathe in deeply, evenly, and allow any tension you feel to dissipate.
Breathe in this way as long as you need to feel a sense of greater calm.

Select one virtue of the Spirit you would like to experience right now.
Peace? Patience? Love? Kindness? Courage? Breathe it into you on the inhale.

Hold that virtue in your heart. Let it settle in and find a place there.
Breathe it out on the exhale. Send it out into the world for a blessing upon others.

Breathing in, breathing out, with intention and compassion, we benefit all living beings.

Ω

When you rise in the morning give thanks. When you go to bed at night give thanks. No daily worries or nighttime fears can weaken a mind focused on what is good, right and true. A heart filled with gratitude is a peaceful heart.

THE POWER OF AN EARTH PRAYER

“A new day needs to be honored.
People have always known that.
Didn't they chant at dawn in the sun temples of Peru?
And leap and sway to Aztec flutes in Mexico?
And drum sunrise songs in the Congo?
And ring a thousand small gold bells in China?”

~ Byrd Baylor*

One of my favorite books of prayers is *Earth Prayers From Around the World: 365 Prayers, Poems, and Invocations Honoring the Earth*, edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon. I like it because it serves as a great equalizer. On the spiritual path, when we are dedicated to and focused on our own growth, there is always the danger that we may become too self-focused, prone to navel-gazing, as some might say. The ego has a way of making our life all about us.

In truth, if we are faithful to the path of self-knowledge and creating a nourishing relationship with the Divine, we come to realize it's not all about us; it's all about the collective—the US. As our spiritual awareness deepens, we begin to make the shift from “me” to “we.” For me, this has manifested in how I organically bring others into my personal prayer practice. Years of study and Loving-kindness practice have shaped my mind and heart in this direction. When I ask something for myself in prayer, my heart naturally inclines to make this same request on the behalf of others. If I pray for improved health, for example, my mind turns toward, “And may all beings be healthy.”

This, according to Elizabeth Roberts is an “Earth Prayer.” It is not a prayer for the Earth as one might suspect. As she explains it, “Earth Prayer is about relationship, about returning to a vivid, nourishing relation with the cosmos ... Our own daily Earth Prayers may have no words, just a prayer of the heart as we dedicate a piece of work, or bless the beings that gave us food or our water. It is not the words, but the state of mind evoked by our praying, which is potent.”

An Earth Prayer is a prayer that balances us, reminds us that even while we may focus on the state of our inner being and our relationship with the Divine, we are part of a universal collective of hearts and souls who are doing the same worldwide. Knowing this, we can easily include others in our prayers, if not by actual words, simply by thinking of them, and inviting their essence to sit with us in the silence. (continued)

This kind of prayer can truly enliven us. It can diminish our egocentrism. It can quell feelings of loneliness or isolation. It can open our hearts to include all beings everywhere who, just like you and me, struggle daily with what it means to be human. An Earth Prayer has the power to heal us, to bring more light into the world.

You may wish to create your own Earth Prayers. Keeping the collective well-being of all in mind, consider beginning each phrase with the words, "Let us ..." or "May we ...".

A model for this can be found in the offerings of Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. Here are a few examples:

"Let us pray that all living beings realize they are brothers and sisters."

"Let us be aware of the Source of Being common to us all and to all living beings."

"With humility, with awareness, of the existence of the sufferings that are going on around us, let us pray for the establishment of peace in our hearts and on earth." *

You may wish to incorporate your Earth Prayer phrases into a regular prayer practice for a certain period of time (one to two weeks) and see where this takes you; how it shifts your thinking or opens your heart in new directions.

May we hold each other in thought, heart and prayer as we do.

*Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon (editors), *Earth Prayers From Around the World: 365 Prayers, Poems, and Invocations Honoring the Earth* (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1991).

Every spiritual tradition has its own forms of prayer: ways in which we connect our essence with the "Divine Essence" as we understand it. There is no one set way to pray.

Ω

We can relinquish the need to be in control of our prayers,
praying instead for the Divine One to guide us toward
our greatest good, the highest outcome for all involved.
In asking for specific results, we deny ourselves access
to a deeper wellspring of wisdom found in the Divine Mind.
Pray for guidance. Let God handle the details.

Ω

Wherever we go, God is.
Whatever path we choose,
whatever twists and turns we encounter,
the Divine Presence can be felt if we are but aware.
We are never alone.
Our personal connection to Spirit is amazingly evident,
surprisingly simple,
if we can only attune ourselves to It.

Ω

"Ask and it shall be given to you."
Many spiritual traditions teach this belief about prayer.
It illustrates how we believe that a Higher Power
is ever present and receptive to our needs and desires.

The power of prayer is in the asking.
In petitioning Spirit (or Love or the Universe or the All) for assistance,
we open ourselves to greater goodness, to flow.

In surrendering control and admitting we need sacred support
to guide us, heal us, sustain us,
we expand our own capabilities to let go
and receive the gifts of the spirit.

Sometimes I just don't know how to pray.
Life feels too difficult
and even thoughts are too much.

How do I tell you what is in my heart,
Beloved Friend,
when I can't even find the words?
My mind is too burdened to form them.

"Breathe," You tell me, "just breathe.
This is enough."

I can do that.
I can sit here and rest.
I can breathe.
I don't have to say anything
or do anything.

I can let You breathe me,
hold me, carry me.
I can rest in your Love.

You are right.
You are always right.

This sitting, this resting,
this breathing,
is enough.

This is my prayer.

Ω

Prayer is an outpouring of the substance of our souls.
As we petition Source,
our words flow,
pouring out our heart's desire,
the water of our being.
We empty our vessel and in so doing,
allow the Divine to fill it again with sweet nectar
to quench our spiritual thirst.

ESSENTIAL PRAYERS

A writer I deeply admire, Anne Lamott, wrote the most enticing book on prayer. Its title reflects what is so often in my heart, “Help, Thanks, Wow.” She names these as the three essential prayers. They *are* essential, and I find that this truth-telling trio is the very nature of my prayer these days.

I ask for help quite often. I simply cannot manage my life as it is all by myself. Many days, I don’t even have the words to formulate a hearty prayer. “Help” is the only word that comes, and it has to be enough. This is an emptying-of-self sort of prayer because, in the moment it’s offered, I feel pretty darn help-less, fragile or weak. “Help” works to reorient me, to re-align me with Grace. I then await its appearance.

“Thanks” is the prayer that is often in my heart when I am able to rise above my small self to see the glory of what is here, what is always here. Abundance is present and ever-flowing. Life is ripe with opportunity. Gifts are being given all the time. When my eyes are open, my heart too, “goodness and mercy follow me all the days of my life.” The invitation is to look at life through the eyes of my heart.

“Wow” is the result of “Thanks.” The grateful heart is an inner reservoir of awe and wonder. Simple wonders—the butterfly emerging from its cocoon, the cry of a newborn babe, the wind whistling through the reeds. Complex, mind-blowing, miraculous wonders—the cure, the windfall, the long-held dream come true. With “Thanks” we bow our head. With “Wow” comes a full body prostration, bowing down to the One who makes all things possible.

Ω

Ernest Holmes, creator of Science of Mind, wrote,
“Our prayer is answered before it is uttered.”
This can be a tremendous source of comfort to us,
knowing that every unspoken thought and intention
has already been heard by divine ears.
Instead of stumbling and struggling,
we can move confidently forward, secure in the knowledge
that even if our words fail us,
God has heard the murmurings of our heart.

AFFIRMATIONS

Today, I trust that I am enough,
that my prayer is enough.
Many gifted people fashion beautiful prayers.
I do not need to compare myself to anyone else.
All are good enough in Your sight.
May I trust the prayers of my heart
and offer them without reservation.
All are welcomed by You.
May I rest in “good enough.”

Ω

Prayer and meditation, engaged in regularly,
help me stay in touch with my good wise heart,
with my innate peace and love.
I have the freedom to use whatever form lands me back in the lap of the Divine.
Inner knowing and comfort are mine.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do you pray? Do you have a favorite prayer form?
2. Reflect on “to whom you pray.” Who are your prayer partners? Write their names in your journal to keep them close in heart, especially during times of need.
3. Do you believe prayers are answered before they are uttered, as Ernest Holmes claimed?
4. What are your “essential prayers”?

THE PRACTICE OF GRATITUDE



Gratitude is the memory of the heart.

~ St. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier

GET YOUR GRATITUDE ON

Gratitude is one of the most powerful “virtues of the Spirit” that we can cultivate. Why? Because it has such a “high vibration.” We can think of vibration like this: to what extent we are feeling the presence of Spirit and the positive qualities associated with it, including peace, joy, compassion and love. The definitive word here is “feeling.”

When we can actually *feel*—with our body, mind, and heart—the spiritual quality of something, we can embody it. Because we are energetic beings, this will naturally flow out toward others. The quality serves us first by aligning us with our true nature (basic goodness, soul, etc.) and, then, of its own accord, moves into the world for the benefit of others.

A *Course in Miracles* teaches that there are just two emotions—love and fear—and all other human emotions rise from one or the other. Gratitude arises from love. Its opposite (stinginess, lack or resentment) arises from fear. It seems like a no brainer to want to cultivate one over the other, right? A grateful body-mind-heart is so appealing, so healing, and helpful in a world that is often plagued by bitterness and acts of greed.

I’ve found that if I begin the day with a grateful heart, everything shows up differently. I learned this many years ago while reading the book *Simple Abundance* by Sarah Ban Breathnach. She encouraged her readers to keep a gratitude journal—write down five things each day that you were grateful for—then watch what happens. I kept the journal. She was right. My life was transformed and I no longer saw my life as half-empty, but as half-full, and, in time, full-to-overflowing.

The Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, wrote: “If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is “Thank you”, it will be enough.” Do you have a sense that this could be true? Consider that a “Thank you” prayer could serve as a new spiritual practice for you this week.

Begin by setting an intention to say “Thank you” to God, the Universe, Love, Truth, Nature, or divine beings whom you reverence. Not just during your morning or evening practice, but throughout the day. Use “Thank you” as a breath prayer. Stop, pause. inhale. Exhale a “Thank you.” And mean it!

Do this whenever you think of it, and hold the intention to do it often so your thankfulness increases, your vibration rises, and you feel the glow of appreciation for All-That-Is coursing through your veins. Plug into your true self and Spirit by getting your gratitude on and feel a shift occurring in you. And as you do, know beyond a doubt that “Thank you” is the most sufficient prayer. *It can be enough.*

What an abundant life we would have
if every beat of our heart was a reminder to whisper
"Thank you."

Ω

Cultivating a "Gratitude Attitude" is one of the best things you can do to gain a better perspective in your life.

When we are grateful, it seems that blessings abound. Love flows. The reverse is also true. When we are bitter, resentful, angry, jealous or thankless, the flow of good seems to stop. By being appreciative for what we do have, we strengthen our connection to prosperity, opening the door for more good to come.

How can you grow in gratitude today to see your life as rich and blessed?

Ω

What if you took pauses throughout the day to remember your "Gratitudes"?
How would this change the tone of your day?
Consider taking a sacred pause right now—
and more throughout the day—
a time of stopping, breathing, and infusing each breath with thankfulness.

Ω

One of my favorite moment-to-moment practices is to look around me, especially when life feels challenging, and focus my attention on something that is "good," beautiful, meaningful or wondrous. This can be a comfortable chair, a beam of light coming through a window, the smile of a stranger, and the like. By focusing on what is good, right and true, we sustain clarity and resilience during the difficult times.

Today, practice focusing on the good and relish the results.

PRACTICE MAKES PROGRESS

We all know people who see their lives as rich and full. They awake with a smile on their face and greet the day with a song in their heart. My friend Donna is like that. Despite past adversity and current health or familial challenges, she harbors a gratitude attitude. At any given moment in her presence, you would not be surprised to hear her say, "I am just so grateful ...". She knows the blessings with which she has been bestowed and lets the world know it.

Donna did not get that way by happenstance. Many of us come to feelings of gratitude through loss and adversity. "Not having" seems to open up avenues of appreciation. Though, I believe there are easier ways to grow in gratitude, less painful ways, ways that soften and open us to life as it is.

The phrase, "Practice makes progress," is a good one to keep. If we take the time daily to express our gratitude, we become more comfortable with it, better at it, and, as time passes, find it has become a welcome part of our daily routine. We can practice gratitude in three specific ways.

1. Say it. Speak your gratitude aloud to others. Thank and verbally acknowledge people throughout your day. Tell the people in your life how much you appreciate them and all that they do. From the postal carrier who conscientiously keeps your mail dry on the rainiest of days, to the butcher who always cuts your meat just the way you like it, offer each a hearty "Thank you, so much!" Tell others what you love about them. Look your family members in the eyes and tell them you are grateful to have them in your life.

2. Write it. Pen notes or send cards to those people in your life who bring you joy. A simple note of appreciation, from a tiny note tucked into a lunchbox, to a Hallmark greeting card, each can say what our voices may not be able to express: "I love you," "I need you," "I am so grateful for your friendship." The written word has tremendous power to heal and transform.

I love giving and receiving written notes. I have a drawer full of cards, stationery and little gifts I enjoy sending to others. My friends and family tell me it means so much to them to receive an expression like this because it is not only a physical gesture of my feelings for them, an indicator of their importance to me, but because I took the time to hand write it and mail it with a real stamp! I also have a "treasure box" full of the cards and letters my loved ones have given to me over the years. They bring a smile on a rainy day, a hug on a lonely one, and are an ever-present reminder of the many blessings in my life. (continued)

3. Act on it. Ritual can be an important tool for expressing gratitude. I enjoy lighting a candle at any given time of the day as a symbolic act of appreciation. I can do this in the kitchen, bedroom or office. It takes only a few intentional moments to light a candle and offer a prayer of thankfulness.

Gestures as simple as these can make a significant difference in how we view our lives. It doesn't take any time at all to reflect on the blessings at hand. Gratitude can be expressed in our thoughts anywhere we go. While driving in the car to work, preparing a meal, or taking a walk, we can mentally offer up our thankfulness.

When it comes to gratitude (as with any spiritual practice), some of us are faster learners than others, and we may be wise to take guidance from this maxim, "Fake it until you make it." Doing so is quite all right. It takes practice to create and implement any new habit. Be patient with yourself. Progress not perfection, remember?

Within moments of solitude are abundant gifts.
Slow down, take a few precious moments
for yourself without interruption
so your thoughts can become clear.
Drop into your personal reservoir of insight and
recollect abundance, remember thankfulness.

Your solitude will serve you well,
helping you recall a myriad of blessings
that may have been forgotten.
This period of sacred rest and remembering will replenish you,
nourish you, for the remainder of the day.
Gratitude is the great enlivener!

Begin your day by offering a "Gratitude," acknowledging one thing for which you are supremely grateful. End your day in the same way. Beginning and ending your day with thoughts of what is "right" will, eventually, enable everything in-between to take on a brighter hue.

Ω

Savor the day.
Remember that this day, this string of wonder-laden moments,
will never come again. It is one-of-a-kind.
Be present as it unfolds so you can fully receive its bounty.
We can choose to enter our day with pessimism
or we can enter with vision, hope, and dreams of the highest caliber.
The choice is ours.

Ω

Stop. Look. Listen. This is sage advice we were given as children when it came to crossing the street. It applies in adulthood as well.

In the midst of your busy day, no matter where you are, stop. Look around. Attune your eyes to the natural beauty of this planet. Listen. Attune your hearing to the sweet refrains of nature. Allow your senses to expand and greet the day with gratitude for the great blessing of being here ... just here.

Ω

Turn off your thoughts
and relish the beautiful physicality of the this planet,
so alive with color and wondrous sights
which delight the senses.
A world that allows itself to just "BE"
for it can do nothing else.
Can we follow the most perfect example of Mother Earth
and simply BE in and of this world,
day by day, moment by moment, as she does?
She just IS, and we can be too.

Do you have a grateful heart? Are you someone who sees life as full and blessed, rather than lacking or unfortunate? Are you the purveyor of a positive attitude? The wearer of a smile? Do you say “Thank you”?

Offering sentiments or tokens of appreciation can help both the giver and receiver feel better in a world that is often challenging to face. Everyone wants to be appreciated. Our everyday lives are ripe with situations that are difficult to bear. We can all use a boost of kindness now and then. One thought, offered by the Buddha, can remind us to offer words of thanks and appreciation to those around us. “Life is so very difficult. How can we be anything but kind?” Heaven knows we can all use more kindness.

Ω

Acknowledge what is here, what is challenging you,
but ultimately turn yourself toward the richness of “being”—
loving the simple things in life and focusing on those.
A flower, a loved one’s smile, the look of loyalty in your dog’s eyes.
Each one can bring you back to what matters most—*being here, now.*

Ω

When gratitude truly lives in your heart, when it naturally rises into your consciousness on a moment-to-moment basis, you become different. You live intentionally. The world and its phenomenon no longer seem lacking or “half-empty,” but rich to overflowing.

What I’ve noticed by consciously growing gratitude is that you simultaneously grow joy. You simply feel happier when you’re grateful. You also feel more connected to people as they are. The rough edges soften. You begin to view others and life with sacred vision.

On a higher level yet, *living* gratitude expands into boundless awareness. I am enough. Life is enough. You are here. I am here—living with awareness, present and open to our experience. We have a sense that we can be one with how life is unfolding. And when we are able to step into this sacred space, as one of my mentors Ram Dass would say, “Wow.”

GROUNDING IN GRATITUDE

Most of us spend plenty of time in our heads. We tend to wander around in our grey matter a whole lot more than we do spending companionable time with the rest of our body. We tend to believe that our thoughts are us; that the emotions we experience define the kind of person we are. Generally, we over-identify with them.

This can lead to a sense of not being “grounded.” What does this mean? Ungrounded, your body may feel ill at ease, like something is out of balance. Your chakras could be off kilter. Your thoughts might be in the clouds or focused on something other than the peace and power of the present moment. Most of us feel ungrounded because we are hounded by difficult thoughts or emotions like anxiety, fear and worry.

Think of it like this. If we are ungrounded, we are not connected to the “Ground of Our Being,” as theologian Paul Tillich put it. We are disconnected from Source, from our inner wisdom.

One way we can get grounded is to crawl back into our body, to exit the mind and focus on our physicality; to bring our attention back to being *in* our body. If we are largely ungrounded, connecting with our breath to do so may not be enough. We may have to deepen our attention, taking actual pleasure and joy in our body. Contrary to what you may have been taught, or what religious “authorities” have said for eons, your body is very, sacred. Very!

Here is a powerful grounding practice. Begin by bringing awareness to your feet. Hold your attention there and actually feel them, either with your hands, or by allowing one foot to feel the other. Once physical awareness has been established, recite the ways (mentally) that your feet serve you well.

What do your feet allow you to do? When I think of my feet I think of all the places in the world they have carried me. They allow me to take lovely, mindful walks through my town. How do your feet serve as a blessing for you? Bless your feet. Give thanks for them.

Move your awareness up to your knees and do the same process. Touch them. Think of what your knees allow you to do in the world. Give thanks for that.

Continue moving your awareness up your body. Include all your limbs and organs. Do this “blessing” process for each one, ending at the top of your head. Be sure to include your hands, mouth, nose, eyes and ears. If your mind wanders during this process, simply bring your attention back to the part of your body where you left off. Go with the flow. Let your intuition tell you where to go next. If there is a body part with which you struggle, stay with it, and give it extra attention. You may wish to rub or caress it. Indeed, follow your inner guidance and let Love lead. Love will never fail you.

AFFIRMATIONS

Today, I wish to pray.
Divine One, guide me, be present,
and show me the way,
with silence or with words
how to connect with the gratitude in my heart,
with the beauty of this world,
with You, the Source of All Being.
I am listening.

Ω

I arise with the dawn and greet the day with gladness.
I am a blessed being.
I have this one precious day to live fully, to love fully, and to serve.
May I remember my highest purpose all throughout the day
and be a blessing to others.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is your “Gratitude Quotient,” your current level of gratitude and appreciation for life?
2. Does connection with nature align you with gratitude? How?
3. When you look for the good, how does your life feel different?
4. Which gratitude practice are you willing to try, make a commitment to, so your inner cup of gratitude feels full rather than empty?

HOLDING OTHERS IN YOUR HEART



Let the one great aim and ideal be to lift up and universalize our affection ...

~ N. Sri Ram

YOUR WELL-BEING IS MINE

Our spiritual well-being is intrinsically tied to the well-being of others. We feel the best when we know that those we love are doing well. When our dear ones are having difficulties, naturally their plight weighs on us. If we are emotionally healthy, we'll hope that they will be free of struggle because it is difficult being human.

Bringing others into our experience of prayer or meditation is a powerful practice. When we are new to the spiritual path, we may naturally focus our attention on our personal needs and desires. As we mature spiritually, it will feel just as natural to bring others into our prayerful embrace. This doesn't diminish our practice one bit, in fact, it nourishes it. .

This is one of the reasons I enjoy doing Metta—Loving-kindness practice. For many years, I did it as a formal sitting meditation practice, focused specifically on blessing myself as well as others, using a series of four phrases of blessing or goodwill.

May you be safe. May you strong. May you be happy. May you live with ease.

Today, I find myself doing this practice in a more relaxed way. I simply think of those whom I wish well and offer a phrase of blessing that is less formal—more in tune with what I *really* want for them in the moment. Some examples would be:

May you be free from pain. May you know relief.

May you feel relaxed and safe. May you be free of worry.

May you know that you are loved.

May you find peace today, even in this difficult situation.

What I notice is this: when I can send good thoughts like these towards someone I care about, I feel as if I have done something good, and that helps me feel better about my own life. This practice also helps me feel that at least I have done *something* for another that might be helpful, because sometimes we can feel quite powerless when others are lost in difficulty or pain. When something terrible happens in the world and people are hurt or suffering, we can transcend feelings of powerlessness by offering phrases of goodwill in their direction—even toward people we don't know or will never meet.

Indeed, our spiritual well-being—possessing a calm, clear mind and wise, compassionate heart—is intrinsically tied to the well-being of others. Let us continue to heal ourselves by extending our goodwill to others. Heart to heart we grow.

Give thanks today.
Acknowledge someone who has played a significant role in your life.
In truth, you would not be who you are today
without their love, attention or generosity.
We are molded and made from the kindnesses that others have shown us.

Ω

Vocalizing thankfulness seems to shift something inside of us.

The next time you are speaking to a friend notice something sincerely wonderful about him or her and tell them so. Watch what happens. Their inner glow will begin to kindle and shine. Yours will too, knowing you are responsible for this little flicker. And as result, gratitude for the gift of your friendship can bloom.

Ω

Bless those who give you a difficult time. Silently thank them for being who they are—a teacher, an opportunity—for you to take a closer look at how you react to others.

When cantankerous people do what they do, what do *you* do? Do you react in anger or frustration? Do you seethe or speak with ire?

Refrain and retrain yourself. Pause. Take a breath. See this person for who they are in this moment: your gateway to patience, kindness and compassion.

Ω

When we offer blessings to others (loved ones, strangers, even enemies) we are subconsciously asked to look at all of the ways we may not be open to them. We get to notice our stories, shed light on our wounds, engage forgiveness and healing, and build up storehouses of love and regard for anyone who crosses our path.

SO MANY WAYS TO BLESS!

“Blessings” is the sign-off I use in my e-mail correspondence. It was a conscious choice to do so. I was at a stage in my life when “Sincerely” was just too cold; “Love” a bit too warm for a general farewell to anyone I might be writing to, especially business associates. Like Goldilocks testing the porridge, chairs and beds of the Three Bears, I had to find the one that fit me best. “Blessings” felt just right.

E-mail is but one of the many opportunities we have each day to send our best wishes to another. It's the way we say hello or goodbye, with fondness and warmth in our heart, or with firmness and coolness of spirit. I prefer to use the word “Blessings” because it tells the receiver exactly how I feel about them, which is, “You are special to me and I wish you happiness.” When I close my e-mails, “Blessings, Jan,” I imagine a glittery shower of all good things falling lightly upon them.

Besides wishing them happiness, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary reminds us we can also extol wishes of prosperity or gratitude upon them, or, another of my personal favorites, invoke divine care for them. Bestowing blessings can usher in a host of celestial support or protection for a receiver. As you scan the horizon of your day, you might be surprised to find many opportunities to bless others. To whom would you like to send a shower of goodwill? Who touches your heart so much that you'd like to see them surrounded with a heavenly host for a fortuitous day?

It's easy to bless the people we love, much harder to confer a blessing of peace and happiness upon a thorny other. Blessing somebody that irks us, or, worse yet, a person who has hurt or betrayed us, moves it into another category altogether. Blessing then becomes spiritual practice. I view someone's difficult presence in my day (or throughout my life) as an opportunity for me to move from hardheartedness to openheartedness. From expectation-holding to letting go. From grudge-holding to forgiveness.

I take my e-mail blessing business seriously. In fact, it's safe to say it is one of my primary spiritual practices. Here's why. If I can't move into a place of love and compassion for the person with whom I am corresponding, I don't send the e-mail. An e-mail in my Inbox may go unanswered for a few hours (sometimes a few days, if I am honest), until I can formulate a loving response, genuinely signing off with “Blessings.” In the period of time it has taken me to respond, I've noted the feelings I have for this person, and assess if there is inner work to be done there. I allow time to reveal how I might let go of any negative emotions I could be holding. I might pray or meditate upon this. Then, when the time is right, and my heart feels open, I send the e-mail, wrapped in blessings of affection or appreciation.

There are more ways we can bless others throughout our day, too. (continued)

Go Undercover

I've always loved those Valentines that said, "From your secret admirer." They hold a sweet and playful energy about underground affection. How fun to bestow our goodwill on an unsuspecting other! Consider the people who move rather invisibly through your day: the woman who scanned your groceries at the checkout, the groundskeeper at your condo, the janitor at your children's school. Countless others too many to name. What if you sent a silent "Bless you" as you passed them by? "Bless you for your hard work." "Bless you for doing your job so I can live comfortably in my world." "Bless you for caring for my children." And so on. I guarantee after you engage in this practice for a while you'll feel like you're floating on angels' wings.

Send a "Body Blessing"

With dear ones, you might want to try another form of blessing. I call this practice "Body Blessing." Some of us are reluctant huggers. We give those quick "I am going through the motions" sorts of hugs, hugging out of formality or expectation. There is no real warmth in one of those. What if you took this body-to-body opportunity to hug a blessing into them, instead? As you quickly press your cheek or shoulder to theirs, silently offer them a blessing of health, inner peace or joy.

As for those bear-hugging friends or relations, just imagine how far your blessing might sink in if you embraced each one with all the gusto you could muster. Your blessing might imprint itself right on their heart, a tattoo of the brightest hue that says, "I cherish you and your presence in my life."

Just Say It

Sometimes the direct path of blessing is best. We need to speak our blessing out loud, face to face. This is difficult for those of us raised in more stoic families who frowned upon such outward expressions. Or perhaps we are shy about speaking our blessings to another for fear of their response. In any case, a verbal expression of our gratitude or well wishes might be exactly what is needed to deepen our relationship with that special someone. A whisper in the ear works wonders; an eye-to-eye confession is even better. Effuse, and be prepared to reap the results of sharing your heartfelt blessing with them. I bet you'll both be walking on clouds when the deed is done.

The practice of blessing is good for what ails us, not just at holiday times, but all the time. It reminds us to recognize the goodness in others. It invites us to express gratitude for someone's unique presence in our lives. And it is so very simple to do—two words, not even three—that can change how we perceive our world and how we relate to it. "Bless you" is all it takes.

The open heart knows no one is perfect. It allows other people to make mistakes and to learn from them. It does not hold grudges or shut down in judgment. The open heart stays open, no matter what, for it knows that every person is doing the best he or she can in this very moment—or they would be doing things differently.

Ω

Mindful speech is one of the most powerful spiritual practices we can embrace.

What emerges from our lips transparently conveys what is in our heart.

Today set the intention to speak only words
that are kind, generous, tender and wise.

May your words fall upon others as gently as rain.

Ω

Savor your memories.

Take time to remember when things were good and pleasant for you.

Honor and give thanks for the special people
with whom you have shared special times.

These experiences with these particular people shaped you
and helped you become the beautiful being you are today.

Ω

It is important to remember to give thanks for the love that comes to us each and every day. May we find guidance for doing so from poet Kahlil Gibran: "I awake at dawn with a winged heart and give thanks for another day of loving."

Love as he expresses it is a two-way street. It is important for us to give love—unconditionally. It is equally important for us to receive love—unconditionally. Loving stirs us to open ourselves to both and, in so doing, the circle of love is complete. We are full.

Our heart rises up in thankfulness.

Harness the power of your own voice to release what holds you tight.
Comfort comes when we hear the sound of relief pass across our lips.
The pleasure of being is ours.

Ω

Today, remember not to take sides in challenging family situations. Lean into compassion knowing that the situation is difficult for everyone. Set the intention to be an impartial and loving supporter by offering loving-kindness to all involved. Indeed, in this difficult moment, everyone is suffering. Be sure to include yourself in this circle of care.

Ω

How will your heart rise up in thankfulness for love given and received today? In the morning when you rise ask yourself, "What simple thing can I do to make the world a lighter place for another?" This can be something as simple as a courtesy to a fellow driver, opening the door for a co-worker, or sending an e-mail or text to a friend that says, "I'm thinking of you today."

Your thoughtfulness, given in small portions, can extend the aura of humanity. Your generosity matters.

Ω

What would it mean to you to live with a welcoming heart, one that is ever open to others with warmth and kindness? One that does not easily shut down, harboring feelings of self-doubt, worries about being hurt, or fears rejection? If you could give this wide-open heart of yours an image, what would it look like?

I often view my heart like a many-petaled flower—a rose or a lotus. I can sometimes feel it cower or begin to close its petals. I can also feel it open to love's invitation and expand. When we carry an image like this inside of us, we can learn to feel when our heart petals are open or closing inward.

Take some time today to connect with your heart center in a new way and find an image that works for you. Practice expanding your flower heart with breath, compassion and thoughts of thankfulness.

THANKING YOUR LOVES

Sometimes when happiness or peace of mind eludes us, we seem to be entertaining the same thoughts over and over again, most of them negative. Thoughts about what's not right. What's missing. What we wish was different. This may happen because we have become overly focused on ourselves or just plain stuck in a rut of negative thinking. The result may be a listless body that lacks energy, a negative, "poor me" attitude, or even feelings of hopelessness.

We can get unstuck from a mucked-up mind by turning our attention outward—toward others. When we begin to focus on "the other," especially those we love, or to whom we are grateful, our depressive mood can lift. The biology of gratitude is quite miraculous, actually, for once we abandon our own pity party, the cortisol stream of stress-induced hormones will shut down to a trickle, and life-affirming oxytocin ("the love hormone") will begin to flow. Loving thoughts, buoyed by gratitude, can, literally, change our chemistry and general well-being.

Begin by thinking about a particular person and how grateful you are to have him or her in your life. Who comes to mind? I might think of my steadfast and supportive 86-year-old mother, the check-out clerk at my local food co-op who always has a smile ready for me, or a wise teacher who has companioned me over the years. Anyone can be the recipient of your heartfelt "Thank you."

If you're feeling effusive, offer your thanks aloud, face to face. If you're feeling a bit shy, simply offer your heartfelt thanks silently. Either way, your heart will be warmed and opened.

Consider doing this practice with some prayer beads and counting your thanks. I have a lovely jade green, 108-bead mala, and when I'm in need of a good reality check—and want to make the shift from grumpy to grateful—I pull out my mala beads and hold them in my hands. You can do the same with prayer beads.

For every bead, try to think of one person in your life for whom you are grateful. Touch each bead—one bead, one person. Imagine him or her in your mind's eye and offer a thank you. Conjure up feelings of warmth and appreciation for this person as you name them.

Notice how much better you feel after expressing your gratitude, more connected to your fellow human beings, pleased and easily satisfied with your life—just as it is.

AFFIRMATIONS

I align my heart with the hearts of others.
I feel kindred to them in their moments of difficulty.
I offer my goodwill to them, and, in doing so,
I kindle flames of love and blessing
whose warmth can be felt around the world.
I am you and you are me.
We journey into the heart and mind of God together.

Ω

I am a being of love.
I am here to bear the beams of love for the healing of all people.
In so doing, I choose to treat others as kindly and lovingly as I treat myself.
Nothing holds me back from expressing this love.
I release all hesitation,
all feelings of self-consciousness or fear about doing so.
Divine Presence will hold me and guide me
as I live out this sacred mission.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Whom could you bless today? How would blessing this person build up your personal storehouse of love?
2. Who in your life do you have a difficult time loving? Do you have a sense of what the Spirit is inviting you to in this relationship?
3. How do you express your thankfulness to others for the gift of their love?
4. What person from your past needs a note of thanks today because their presence made a difference in your life?

BLESSINGS ALL AROUND



What seems to us as bitter trials are often blessings in disguise.

~ Oscar Wilde

BLESSINGS IN DISGUISE

I confess that I'm a cock-eyed optimist. The way I view and live my life may, to some, be a mish mash of cute aphorisms. Yes, I do seem to look for the silver lining in all things. And I do believe the "sun will come out tomorrow," as little orphan Annie sang. I know beyond a doubt that much of what happens to us and to our loved ones end up as "blessings in disguise."

Like you, my life has had its share of ups and downs. Things happened I never dreamed could. The point, it seems, is not to dwell on our suffering, but to rise above the anguish and make something meaningful of it for our lives.

Sometimes, however, we can't see beyond our immediate experience. It takes time to allow the ashes of any disruption to settle so we can more clearly see what's left in the aftermath. It takes time and space to heal; to see the situation from a higher perspective.

At the tender age of twenty-five, I suffered my first great loss. I became pregnant and was overjoyed at the thought of becoming a mother. And, yet, within weeks I knew something was quite wrong. A diagnostic ultrasound revealed no fetal heartbeat and, instead, the presence of a rare hormonal disorder that had accelerated placental growth and disallowed the baby's growth. Four months into the pregnancy, my dreams of becoming a mother died. I was devastated.

As if that were not enough, the condition persisted in my non-pregnant condition. There was no cure for this, no other way for my hormones to return to a pre-pregnant state except through a dramatic course of treatment—chemotherapy. It was the only thing doctors knew worked. For the next four months, instead of caring for an infant, I was in and out of the hospital receiving extensive treatment.

Those were the most hellish months of my life. I will never forget the sensations that characterized those days: loneliness paired with grief, hair loss and mouth ulcerations, nausea and exhaustion. And yet, to this day, I am amazed at the blessings that continue to reveal themselves as a result of having survived this chapter of my life.

Some of the blessings are quite obvious: true appreciation for other babies when they came along, gratitude for good health, thankfulness for loving friends and family, and a general zest for life. Others seem synchronistic and fated. Who would have known that years later I would offer workshops and write books for women who were on healing journeys of their own, many of them living with cancer? How else could I have been able to understand on a very deep level their concerns, as well as the effects of treatment that can be so devastating if I had not gone through something similar? Only years later would many of these blessings be known. (continued)

This is the human drama. This is the journey we are each asked to walk. If we can “be in the moment” with our pain, accept it for the brief blip in time that it is, good can come from it. With time and perspective, we will notice powerful invitations being offered to us: to let go, to heal, to trust, to love more fully, even in the midst of uncertainty.

My friend and mentor, Sue Patton Thoele, in her book, *Growing Hope: Sowing Seeds of Positive Change in Your Life and in the World*, writes, “Many gifts can eventually be found among the tattered wrappings of distress.” I believe this to be true because I have lived it, not just in 1978, but many times after that, as I imagine you have too.

Life is, indeed, full of blessings in disguise. We simply have to welcome them in.

Ω

Even in negativity, abundance is present.
Every less-than-desirable situation,
heartbreak, or loss is accompanied by a lesson.

Negative experiences may be a universal call
to wake up or take notice.
When we look for the greater lesson to be learned,
we can see much abundance,
though, at first glance, it may not seem to be so.

Ask yourself, "What lesson am I supposed to learn here?"

Seek the gift in each situation.
Buried treasure may lie beneath the compost of life.
Seek to unearth the blessings within.

Ω

Everything I experience in life is sacred because everything that happens to me is laden with holy purpose: to help me take a deeper look at how I am living in the world.

THE GIFT AND BLESSING OF BREATH

When I think of all the things I am grateful for, the gift of my breath is at the top of the list. This breath of which I speak is not your everyday, stress-releasing breath, not yoga breath, or Lamaze breath. It is a holy breath, one that is sourced in the creation stories of many religious traditions.

In Creek (American Indian) mythology, there was a being who lived on a hill, Esaugeteh Emisee, “the master of breath,” and he created humanity. The Creator in the Hebrew/Christian tradition breathed man into existence. The breath has long been associated with the One who gives life. And that it does. With every breath we take, we are mysteriously enlivened, gently carried into the next precious moment of our lives.

Our breath is often an under-appreciated gift. The wise ones of the past have told us for eons that the first sign of divine presence is a feeling of deep inner peace. Connecting with your breath in a sacred manner is the effortless practice that can take you there.

I think connecting with my breath as “portable peace,” an on-the-go spiritual practice. We can set the intention to take peaceful pauses throughout the day to plug back into our inner calm and the Sacred using our breath.

When breathing, take slow measured inhaleds and exhaleds. Don't focus on the breath per se, but on *being breathed*—feeling the breath move effortlessly through you. Breath by gentle breath, you are being restored and welcomed “home” by Source. Say silently to yourself, “I am being breathed.” How does this feel?

You may wish to take this practice one step further, breathing slowly and evenly, matching your inhaleds and exhaleds with the words, “God is breathing me.” Feel the blessing of this.

When life feels difficult and we're tense, it is challenging to remember that good things are possible and that blessings surround us. We may hold our breath waiting for the next shoe to drop or for the phone to ring delivering bad news. We may breathe shallowly and unevenly causing our body to create symptoms of anxiety. This is the best time to remember to use the gift of your breath to bring you back to center.

It's good to inhale, gently and evenly, but it's even better to focus on the exhale when we are overwhelmed. It is through the act of exhaling that true relief can be felt. As we exhale, carbon dioxide is released from our body. Pent-up carbon dioxide can cause stress, increased tension. (continued)

So here's a helpful hint: when you breathe, make sure that the exhalation is longer than the inhalation. This ensures balanced breathing. And while you're at it, breathe deeply. Breathe deeply from your diaphragm (lower abdomen). Relax the midsection of your body when you breathe and you'll be doing yourself a favor in terms of muscle tension and potential pain, including digestive issues, with which so many of us are plagued.

Give voice to it. Take an "Ahhh Breath," a breath with sound behind it. The sound "Ahhh ..." has two main purposes. First, it brings immediate physical, mental and emotional release. It helps us let go of what we might be holding too tightly.

Secondly, "Ahhh" is the sound of delight, pure pleasure. It's the sound we make when we taste something delicious or when we witness a beautiful sight. It can even bring a tingle of appreciation to our heart and a smile to our face.

Try using an Ahhh Breath right now, wherever you are. Bring your attention to the tip of your nose and breathe in (mouth closed). Exhale by dropping your attention to your throat and say "Ahhh" (mouth open).

Do it again, a little louder this time, and put some oomph into it: "Ahhh." Do it again, expelling more air, and making a bit more noise, too: "AHHH." Three times is a charm.

Bring your awareness back to your whole self and feel the relief that has arrived in your belly and chest—throughout your whole body, in fact. Feel the pleasure of that. Experience the satisfaction of having taken good care of yourself in this moment by taking three deep, intentional breaths and letting go of all that you were holding so tightly.

"Ahhh" spells relief. It calms the body, the mind and the emotions and opens the heart all at the same time. Isn't that wonderful?

Reframed and utilized this way, we can easily see how our breath is a great gift from a bountiful Universe, a form of grace that is immediately available to us if we have the mind to perceive it and the heart to receive it. Let us give thanks for the blessing of breath.

Our breath is sourced in the Divine. It is natural and wise to harness its power for personal healing. A breath-based prayer practice is a gentle and useful way to release what ails us, to welcome in the good. With a breath prayer, our body-mind relaxes, releases its burdens, and comes back to center.

Breathing in, I welcome in calm.
Breathing out, I release concern.
Breathing in, I embrace understanding.
Breathing out, I let go of worry.
Breathing in, I focus on what is right and true.
Breathing out, I rest into goodness.

Ω

In the complexity of life, may we remember the joy of simple pleasures: the beauty of a flower, the smell of an ocean breeze, the gentle touch of a friend's hand. These things matter. They connect us to All-That-Is.

Ω

Blessings abound when we slow down enough to see them clearly. They can be the simplest of things: a green sprout rising from loamy soil, a ray of sunshine on a cloudy day, a stranger who holds the door open for us, an unexpected phone call from a friend. In the era of "bigger is better," let us be aware of the little things that touch our heart and make our days a bit brighter. Let us give thanks for those.

Ω

Have you ever given thanks for unanswered prayers?
Jean Ingelow wrote, "I have lived to thank God
that all my prayers have not been answered."
In times of desperation, we implore Spirit to come to our aid,
beseeching intervention, healing, deliverance.
We beg for the relationship, the job, more money, the cure,
confident that we alone know what is best for us.
We can relinquish the need to be in control of our prayers,
praying instead for the Divine One to guide us toward
our greatest good, the highest outcome for all involved.
In asking for specific results, we deny ourselves access
to a deeper wellspring of wisdom found in the Divine Mind.
Pray for guidance. Let God handle the details.

It is difficult to see the good in any tragic situation.
Our unceasing cries of "Why?" ring out in the night.
We can intellectualize why, we can guess, and offer an answer,
but it is only a feeble attempt
to assuage the pain of our broken hearts.
And, yet, in the greater scheme of things,
such tragic events can provide untold blessings.

It is the result of such incidents, whether they be global disasters
or personal devastation, which often surprise us
with bounteous blessings beyond our wildest imaginings.
As we experience these events, we develop a greater awareness of
our personal courage and strength, of our capacity
to show love, compassion, and support to others.
Such trials do indeed show us
what we are made of and the goodness within.

Each one of us, if given the opportunity,
could deliver a litany of personal injustices, betrayals and losses.
Cruel blows of fate like cancer, miscarriage, divorce, or joblessness
find their way into our lives.
When they visit, we mourn their arrival
and work through their agonies.

Yet, Providence gives us the fortitude
to deal with their blows and, as a result,
shape ourselves into finer people.
This is precisely how life works.

With bad, comes good. With light, comes dark.
With tears, come laughter. With sorrow, comes joy.
With pain, comes healing.
We cannot have one without the other.

The results of trauma may be blessings in disguise.

CAN WE EVER BE GRATEFUL FOR SUFFERING?

Each of us had had our share of ups and downs. As Buddha himself taught, life, by its very nature, is difficult. Each one of us will experience sickness, old age and death, and in between there will be multiple challenges to face. The point of acknowledging this is not to commiserate over the suffering, but to rise above the anguish and make something meaningful of it for our lives.

Often, we can't see beyond what our eyes and ears perceive. It helps to have a "spiritual friend" to help you navigate such stormy seas. Spiritual companionship can serve as the midwife for the birth of awareness of blessings. If we can sit with someone in companionable silence, we can receive their "litany of sorrows" and hold them gently. We can begin to clear the thorny brambles of trauma so they can learn how to tend to their hurt more kindly. Between spiritual friends, self-compassion is most often the path we walk together, especially in times of great difficulty.

Self-compassion allows us to let go of the dismissive stories we may be conditioned to tell ourselves when times are tough. "Just get over it." "Don't be so weak." "Other people are much worse off than you." This ego-perpetuated advice is not helpful. Acknowledging our pain is important. Cradling it and ourselves ever so gently is key. Doing so with a trusted companion is nothing short of transformational.

In support and friendship, we sit together, fully aware of the pain and struggle, and we place our hands over our hearts. We breathe and say, "This is difficult." We allow the Sacred Breath of Presence to enter us, wash over us, and begin the process of acknowledging what is here. It is amazing to me how this brief extension of kindness will open and broaden the path to deeper insight and, ultimately, healing.

When we invite those whom we love to be gentle with themselves, we grant them a powerful permission: to be present with life just as it is. To not run, hide or turn away from what's difficult, but to sit with it in a soft place of welcome. A self-compassionate stance is a "thin place"; open space within the cavern of the heart where Spirit can move in to do its grace-filled work.

I trust this tender place. It is a landscape of kindness and merciful understanding. Self-compassion is not self-pity or self-absorption. Well cultivated, self-compassion allows us to be fully present with ourselves as we are, so we can be fully present to others just as they are. And, truly, what is more important than that?

When we can surround our suffering with self-compassion, we welcome in the possibility that all of our suffering can be transformed into wisdom and blessings. And for that, we can be supremely grateful.

AFFIRMATIONS

I bring myself to this moment just past.
I allow myself to receive its blessing.
Every experience has a Divine handprint upon it,
some holy invitation for me to answer.
May I look and listen to all my experiences
with my sacred senses,
so I am more fully aware of the presence of Spirit
in all that is unfolding around me.

Ω

I am here, now,
fully present in my precious body.
I am fully alive and aware
of the beauty and blessings
all around me
and within me.
I am home.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Reflect on a time in your life that was difficult. In hindsight, what were the blessings in disguise?
2. What do you do when life feels difficult? How do you care for and comfort yourself?
3. Do you take the opportunity in the midst of challenging situations to look for and focus on the good?
4. Have you ever given thanks for unanswered prayers?

TRUST AND LETTING GO



*Nothing in the universe can stop you
from letting go and starting over.*

~ Guy Finley

OPENING UP AND LETTING GO

Sometimes our minds feel rigid and tight, too full of conversation, input and chatter. As our technology-based society continues to pick up pace, offering us unlimited data and boundless opportunities to do more, life can begin to feel overwhelming. I call this feeling the “too-muchness of life.”

When we feel that life is too much, we know that it would be good for us to turn inward—get still, pray or meditate—but our mind and body are moving too quickly to do so. It is wise at times like these to give ourselves time and space to settle down. When the mind feels tight like a steel band, the body responding with tension, consider taking yourself to the edge, literally, to a place whose geography is spacious—vast, boundless and open.

When we are feeling shut down, it is up to us to open wide. Brain Gym experts tell us that every twenty minutes we should shift our focus from what we are concentrating on up close to that of a visual landscape. This reboots the brain, balances its functions, and brings the body-mind back into good working order.

You can do this by placing yourself in the healing hands of Mother Nature. Stand on the top of a hill or mountain so you have a wide view. Go to the shore and stand at the ocean’s edge. No mountain, no shore? Gaze at a rolling landscape. Focus on the horizon and locate the place where the sky meets the land. Turn your face to the sweeping blue sky. Allow the vastness of the universe to open you to feelings of interior spaciousness.

To open up: The Creator has placed within our glance the perfect tools for opening to inner peace through spaciousness: sky, mountains, shore and horizon. Place yourself in one of these and stand tall. Close your eyes. Open your arms wide, bend back a little, and open some more. Expand your heart center. Turn your face to the sky. Breathe.

To let go: Prayerfully invite the Divine One to enter your heart. Release what constrains or burdens you. Let it all go. Allow waves of release to wash over you. Give thanks for the bounty of nature, for the power of open spaces to restore and rejuvenate you.

Let us remember that it is good and wise to stop ourselves when we are feeling overwhelmed by life. The natural landscape of the earth is at our service, ever present, to soothe us, and to help us return to feelings of gratitude and ease.

We get caught up in the little details of life.
Surrender them to Spirit
and see what few morsels of worry remain,
insignificant crumbs that they are.

Ω

We get endless second chances in this lifetime on earth.
Every day we have the opportunity to forgive,
to let go, and move on.
We can give up the bad habit, the unfulfilling job,
the loveless relationship,
and create the life we dream of and deserve.
As the sun rises, bringing the dawn of a new day,
celebrate and give thanks for the blessing of second chances.

Ω

As humans, we long to control
and be in charge of our lives.
Instead, could we intuit and sense through inward reflection
how to best deal with each peak and valley?
How do we best balance ourselves
to receive the next onslaught gracefully?
With Spirit at the helm,
we begin to sense how and when
to climb, to rest, to persevere or to let go.
If we can lessen our grip,
give up some modicum of control
and put the expedition in Spirit's hands,
we just might be amazed at the outcome.

Ω

When it is time to be done, let go and do it gracefully. There is no need to struggle or hold on tight. Bow down, flow, the next phase of your life is calling and there is dignity in surrender. Future growth awaits.

FORGIVE, LET GO, MOVE ON

One of the greatest barriers to letting go is lack of forgiveness.

We tend to associate forgiveness with giving in, relinquishing some hurt or source of anger for the sake of peacemaking. In doing so, it may feel like, in the forgiving, we are giving up a part of ourselves to rectify the situation, or turning a blind eye to injustice. Nothing could be further from the truth. The ability to forgive is a potent spiritual virtue and one that, harnessed properly, can reveal a wondrous gift: inner freedom.

Forgiveness, in my view, has nothing to do with giving in or giving up, which is a common perception. Forgiveness is an act of letting go. Letting go of our need to be right. Letting go of our need to have the last word. Letting go of our need to convince someone of our point of view.

What seems to be the primary roadblock to an enlightened understanding of forgiveness? It is the false perception that this onerous act is about letting someone off the hook. We believe on some level that by forgiving someone we will diminish what happened. They have hurt us or committed what we perceive to be a wrongful act. If we forgive them, we are condoning what they did.

Author Eldonna Edwards describes the act of forgiving this way. In her book, *Loose Ends: A Journaling Tool for Tying Up the Incomplete Details of Your Life and Heart*, she writes: "Imagine the person that you cannot forgive as someone who once held a fishing pole. They've set down the pole and gone on to other things, perhaps even hurting others. In the meantime, you are still floundering in the murky waters of the past, snagged on their hook. As long as you are spending precious energy resenting, hating and being angry, you will be unable to swim freely. What I am asking you to do is gently remove the hook that keeps you entangled in the past."

In this way, forgiveness is not about letting someone else off the hook, it is letting *yourself* off the hook. What an empowering perspective! If the situation in question is not about being right, or even retribution, but, instead, about personal freedom, wouldn't that make all the difference in our choice of response?

Today, when I find myself experiencing a difference of opinion with someone, or am stewing about a perceived hurt, I know I have a choice about how to look at it. I can expend emotional energy trying to prove myself right, to make someone else see the error of their ways, or I can let the situation go, thereby releasing myself from its emotional intensity, and re-engaging my life in heart-healthy fashion. (continued)

This is not to say that in many situations it is quite right (and necessary) to stand up for what we know to be good and true. Or, that justice should be served and wrongdoing brought to light. This goes without saying. But in many situations, we perpetuate emotional duress by attempting to make someone look at or atone for their “woeful ways”. Ultimately, the only person we have any control over, or have a chance of changing, is ourself. As much as we’d like to think otherwise, we truly cannot change another person by our will alone.

When we forgive, let go, and move on we give ourselves the gift of personal freedom. We take ourselves off that baited hook which Ms. Edwards writes about. This freedom allows us to move on to the next enlightening life experience. Seen in an even broader light, an act of forgiveness is an act of healing. Granting forgiveness to another may just be the greatest act of self-love and self-healing we can perform.

Forgiveness is not an easy thing by any means. But by not forgiving, we continue to add to the sack of pain we carry around with us from day to day. Why not lighten the load and lay down those grudges and resentments of great weight to walk more lightly through life? There is relief and joy to be found in letting go and we can be thankful for that.

Release what's holding you back.
Name it, acknowledge it,
be with that feeling for just a moment or two,
then breathe it out.
Send it on its way, on the wings of breath.
Let it dissipate into the atmosphere.
Visualize it being carried far, far away.
Continue to breathe with ease, with spaciousness,
knowing that you have the power
to let go
and live into Ultimate Possibility.

As we hike through the hilly terrain of life,
we may stumble along the path,
striking our feet
against deeply embedded roots
or immovable boulders.
Unsure of how to carry on, we cry out in prayer.
We beg Source for assistance,
to reveal a way in which we can maneuver
around these obstacles.
Struggling for the correct words,
we implore the Divine to do our work for us,
sever the roots, move the boulders, and ease our burden.
Trust that your prayers will be answered.
Spirit may not provide what you ask for,
but will give you what you need to move forward.

Ω

When we begin to believe that the universe is a friendly and supportive place, one that acknowledges each individual is special, deserving of abundance and an excellent quality of life, we align ourselves with positive intent, thoughts, and actions. In doing so, we can expect the best to come to us.

Ω

Sometimes we have to practice letting go. A coffee or tea ritual can help us do this.

Visualize yourself drinking a steaming cup of coffee or tea. You sip it over the period of many minutes, even an hour. You realize it is lukewarm so you go to the kitchen to add more hot liquid to freshen your cup. The problem is, when you take a new sip, it's not really hot. It's warmer because you've added new liquid, and it's not as potent as it could be. It's been diluted with the cold coffee or tea that remained in the cup.

This is what letting go is like. We don't completely let go. We hold onto remnants of what keeps us feeling safe and secure. We hesitate to release completely, so, instead, we pour new stuff into the old, and get a convoluted mixture that's not very satisfying. In order to truly let go, we have to dump the whole thing out and begin again.

With a heavy heart
I come to You today.
I am troubled, burdened.

She is fragile.
My dear one, this precious one,
has been through so much.

My woeful mind wants to cry out and ask,
“Why?”

But Your mind intersects with mine,
to calm me and say,
“Let it be.

Trust that she is being held
as tightly as you are, my child.
She is precious to me.
She is not alone.
I have her in my care.”

And there it is once again,
the invitation to trust,
to lay down this burden and
lean into Your care.

Thank you.
I feel Your hand upon my heart,
comforting me in my hour of need.

I feel Your breath mingling with mine
and it is helping me let go
of this worry, this concern,
about my dearest one.

Thank you.
Thank you.
Thank you is my prayer.

LIGHT A CANDLE, DISPEL THE DARKNESS

Today, in the wee hours, I was reminded once again of how easy it can be to plug back into the Light. How important it is that we help one another reorient toward the good, the higher emotion, the life-affirming virtues that we carry within us, especially during challenging times.

Today, I am also grateful for a few dear ones who have asked for prayers because they are facing adverse situations right now. I am honored that they ask me to do this as a spiritual companion and friend.

So this morning I pulled out my "heavy duty prayer candle," for there was much to be prayed about. It is a perpetual candle, like those that are forever lit in the back of churches. I purchased it from a little Catholic store in my hometown. It has a purple glass casing and wax inserts that go inside and burns (safely) for seven days.

Then I retrieved a small prayer jar that I acquired from the Sisters of Saint Joseph. I cut rectangular strips of paper and wrote each person's name upon one, then placed each in the jar by the candle. Just their name, not what I may wish for them.

I refrain from putting my personal spin on their needs because I do not know what important life lessons they may need to learn right now through the disadvantage of their plight. Or what the Divine One is guiding them to, inviting them toward. I don't "ask" for a specific outcome for the prayer. That is not "my job" in this co-creative life. By lighting the candle and placing his or her name in the jar, I hold each one in thought, heart and prayer. This is enough.

I also add a phrase of well-wishing: "May your heart be at ease," a line from the Metta (Loving-kindness) blessing sourced in Buddhism that serves as the capstone of my inter-spiritual life.

The lovely thing about this particular prayer ritual is that each time I walk by the room where the candle burns, I catch its glow, and remember my friends and the prayers they've requested. My own heart is lifted. I especially love seeing its warm glow in the dark of my house in the middle of the night. It reminds me that Spirit is ever-present.

These are not times to tarry long in the darkness. The world needs all the light we can provide. I often encourage you to light a candle. Light one regularly, every day if you can. Allow its glow to elevate any heaviness of heart you may feel. Let it help you lean into the Light once again.

And lest we forget, let us reach out to another and help him or her light theirs as well.

AFFIRMATIONS

Enter me, Divine One, and take me deeper.
Inhabit my mind today.
Dwell in my heart.
With your guiding presence, I can make the wisest of choices.
I have faith that I will be shown how to choose love over fear.
How to live moment-by-moment with courage and grace.
May it be so for me.
May it be so for all beings everywhere.

Ω

I take a breath,
a long, loving breath,
and I let go.
I release what impairs me, imprisons me.
I let go with love.
I receive love back
from a bountiful universe.
I take this love in and let it heal me,
returning me to holy newness.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What can you let go of this week so you can start over with a sense of holy newness and hope in your life?
2. Is there someone you need to entrust into Divine care?
3. Do you have a difficult time “letting go and letting God”? Why or why not?
4. For whom could you light a candle today?

PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING



My whole heart rises up in thankfulness.

~ Robert Browning

BEING GRATEFUL FOR “WHAT IS”

It was winter in Michigan. The snow was piled high. Weeks of freezing temperatures and chilling winds were taking their toll on me and I was beginning to feel the effects of Seasonal Affective Disorder. The mornings bode dark and heavy. I felt the same way within myself.

One morning, lying in bed, listening to the wind whistle through the trees, I simply could not muster any enthusiasm for the day ahead. I knew I should feel grateful for the many blessings in my life, for I was one of the “lucky ones.” I had a good and bountiful life. Logically, I had so much to be thankful for, but, on an ever-growing number of “blue” days, I couldn’t seem to access much gratitude.

Through what I can only call an act of grace, a knowing rose up in me of how I could make the shift from grumbling to grateful. Intuitively, I reached over and felt my husband lying next to me. I could be grateful for his warm body close to mine. I continued to follow the trail of my senses. I brought my awareness to the mattress beneath my body. I felt its comfort and softness. I could be grateful for that. Soft blankets on top of me, I was grateful for those too. Our bedroom was warm and cozy. I suddenly remembered that there were many people around the world who did not have circumstances like mine. They slept on dirt floors or straw mats. Aware of the need of others, I felt a deeper shift taking place, and, like a sunbeam from behind the clouds, gratitude peeked through.

I continued to expand my scope of gratitude. My awareness traveled to the kitchen where I could smell coffee brewing. A refrigerator full of food stood nearby. I would be eating soon. I thought of all the people in the world who did not have refrigerators—who might not have food to eat this morning. So many people in the world are hungry, I thought to myself. My gratitude climbed another notch.

My circle of gratitude organically expanded; an airwave of appreciation rose up and floated away from my house and over my neighborhood. From a bird’s eye view, I could see my friends and loved ones near and far. My awareness hovered over my town, my state, my country, the earth, and beyond into countless galaxies. I sipped on its beauty. I traveled to the All, to the One that endlessly permeates and embraces everything. By this time, my heart was full to overflowing with gratitude, for the wonder of this world, for all creatures great and small, and for the gift of life itself.

Eventually, my awareness returned, back to our yellow bedroom in northern Michigan. In the course of a few minutes, I’d traveled through the cosmos, my heart filled with stardust and appreciation for everything—just as it was.

Any of us can engage a gratitude practice such as this. We begin where we are, with “what is,” and expand out from there. We can organically feel our way through the practice and let wisdom show us the way. Indeed, we can grow gratitude anytime, anywhere, with life exactly as it is, because, in truth, there is so much to be grateful for.

Why do we want to express gratitude for our blessings?
Because the laws of the universe tell us
that the more grateful we are,
the more abundance we will receive.
When we offer prayers of thanks for all that has been given us,
we complete the cycle of giving.
We give thanks and appreciation for what we received,
demonstrating the law of reciprocity,
an energetic force within the universe that works in circles.
Spirit gives. We give back.
The circle is complete and ready to begin again.

Ω

As you find yourself enjoying nature,
give thanks for its beauty.
Allow your spirit to soar as you witness its everyday miracles.
Whether you notice a seagull flying high above the ground
or stroke the velvety soft petals of a blossoming rose,
allow yourself to be nurtured, fed and enriched
by our first and forever Mother—the Earth.

Ω

The sheer magnitude of beauty found on this fair planet
is testament alone to the power of Spirit.
From a loving Source, we have been gifted a home
of unparalleled loveliness and brilliance.
From sun-drenched beaches
to snow-capped mountains,
we can pause and give thanks
for the generosity of the One who loves us enough
to surround us with sacred handiwork
each and every day.

THE GRATITUDE BOWL: A HOLIDAY RITUAL

Many years ago, to ensure that my young family was aware of the many blessings in our life, I intended to find a way to deepen our Thanksgiving experience with some type of gratitude ceremony. This is what I came up with. I call it "The Gratitude Bowl," and here is how you can create your own.

Choose a large wooden bowl and fill it with clean sand. Place it in the middle of your holiday table. Place votive candles into the bowl, one for each person at the table. One-by-one, invite each to light his or her candle and say aloud something for which they are grateful. This is the story about what transpired at our family table the first time we performed this little ritual.

Once all were seated and grace had been said, I informed my family what we were about to do. Upon hearing they would have to say something they were grateful for, the usual reactions set in. My two daughters (ages 5 and 12) loved it, and excitedly began to chatter about what they would say. My son (10-years-old) did the expected: a deep sigh of exasperation accompanied by a dramatic roll of the eyes. I could hear his mental wheels turning: "Oh, no! Another one of Mom's weird things." Other relatives looked uncertain.

My daughters went first, thinking it great fun. Each one lit her candle and offered a sweet token of verbal gratitude: one for the presence of our loyal, loving dog, the other for friends and family. When it was my son's turn, he remained eerily silent. "I can't think of anything I'm grateful for," he said, and continued to stare into the bowl. I reassured him that this was alright and that something might come to him to share later.

Mine went something like this: "I am so grateful to have each of you to love." Other relatives chimed in with grateful thoughts of health, employment, and so on.

As we ate our meal, the candles burned brightly. I occasionally glanced at my son as he continued to gaze into the flickering flames. I knew he was still pondering what he could possibly be grateful for.

Our dinner came to an end and it was time to begin the monumental task of clearing and washing the dishes. My son halted our movements mid-stream with his proclamation, "I've got one! I've got a gratitude!" He voiced how thankful he was for the dinner and for all of us being together. His final comment took me by surprise. "I really liked this Mom, this candle thing, I mean. Can we do it again next year?" A chorus of concurring voices chimed in. (continued)

Someone then asked if we could repeat the scenario at Christmas. Of course, I agreed. A deep sense of love and appreciation washed over me. And, I must admit, I felt like doing a little happy dance. I was able to get them to do one of those “woo-woo things” where we make a special memory and deepen our intimacy. Chalk one up for the Gratitude Bowl!

This holiday season, or anytime you gather with dear ones at your table, I invite you to explore unique ways in which you and yours can proclaim your thankfulness and acknowledge life’s blessings to one another. The Gratitude Bowl does work wonders, but it is just a prop. Each one of us can learn to find creative ways to express the blessings that enfold us. An attitude of gratitude can be ours, moment by moment, not just at holiday times, but every day of the year.

The saying, "Live well. Laugh often. Love much," is a popular one these days.

In its unique way, it is a three-part mantra.

Repeating it to yourself invites you to remember

what is most important in life.

Who doesn't want to live healthfully, love more, and have a light spirit?

Try it on for size

and see how it opens you to the bounty of life.

Today, give thanks for your body.
Even though it might ache or groan,
it serves your soul well—
a solid home, a resting place,
a welcome recipient of divine graces.
Vow to treat your body well,
to give it all that it needs to be healthy and at ease.
Bow to the Sacred in you.

Ω

Praise for the Earth:

Bring awareness to your feet upon the Earth.
Feel its healing energy moving through you. Feel its blessing.
Think of all the beings who inhabit it:
those that crawl, swim, walk or fly,
two-leggeds, four-leggeds, and winged ones.
Place your heart in alignment with theirs and wish them well.
All creatures great and small, bless them all.
Include yourself in this blessing, for, like them, you are one with all that is.

Ω

The practice of “savoring”, I believe, is a form of thankfulness. It allows us to connect with the web of life, to the magic and wonder woven through our days. Sometimes we must “work” at savoring because a constant daily barrage of noise and images may overshadow the most beautiful and simplest of things: the delicacy of a flower, the song of a bird, the soft giggle of a child.

To savor, fully immerse yourself in your current experience. Begin by amplifying your senses, then *indulging*. Let yourself go fully into the experience, feel into it with your whole self, holding nothing back. Appreciate, with a sense of awe and wonder. Wonder gives rise to gratitude and gratitude gives rise to joy.

Stop, look, listen and bask with delight, for time waits for no one. Savor, and give thanks for this one-of-a-kind day.

The food that we put into our body is a true blessing. If we have the privilege of eating three meals a day, we are indeed fortunate, and can bring this remembrance into our daily experience. As we begin to eat, let us pause, and give thanks for our food and its ability to keep us healthy and strong.

There are so many hungry people in the world. May we never take the presence of food for granted!

Ω

If we stop and take a good look around us,
we'll discover that goodness is always here.
When we can see—really see with the eyes of our heart—
this is what we might notice:
a loving friend, the beauty of nature,
the smiles and laughter of children,
delicious food on the table, a warm home,
good health, work that satisfies, and so much more.
Author Sarah Ban Breathnach calls these "Simple Abundances," and they are.
The simple pleasures of life are valuable treasures.
When we acknowledge them, we return to the arms of comfort and joy.

Ω

When our Thanksgiving table (or any table for that matter) overflows with delicious concoctions, instead of gobbling our food, consider eating "mindfully." Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, describes how in his lovely book, *Peace is Every Step*.

Eat slowly. Take a bite and chew each forkful 8-10 times. Don't chatter through the meal. Eating with silence, or in positive conversation, allows us to connect, not only to the food, but also to those around us. "Having the opportunity to sit with our family and friends and enjoy wonderful food is something precious, something not everyone has," he writes. Many people in the world are hungry.

Eating mindfully, with compassion, connects us to a global family, and a bigger picture of life.

GRATEFUL FOR LOVE

Come autumn, the “season of gratefulness” is upon us. In the blink of an eye, we have made the shift from enjoying the lazy, fun-filled days of summer to rushing headlong into shopping, decorating, entertaining, and all that the holidays bring. It often feels to me that in doing so, we have missed an important time of the year, the one our forefathers and mothers deeply honored—the time of harvest—time to reflect on the bounty of the season and give thanks appropriately.

Granted, we may set aside one day of the year to do this—Thanksgiving. But I question if this is enough; enough to honor all of this abundance. Instead, I propose a consistent and regular time to reflect upon our daily blessings. We could call this “thanks-giving as a spiritual practice.”

We could jumpstart our practice with questions like these: “What am I most thankful for? Where can my bounty be found this year? What great gifts have I been given to celebrate?”

When I answer these questions for myself, one phrase more than any other comes to mind. I am grateful for love. All of my life I have known love. I’ve considered myself one of the lucky ones to be surrounded since childhood with a troupe of loving family and friends. The years have been good to me. And as I’ve matured, I have come to understand what love truly is, especially how to give it, and how to receive it.

How to give love? Unconditionally, of course, is the phrase we commonly hear. But what does this really mean? Over the years, I’ve learned that this means giving love from the deepest wellspring of my heart with no strings attached. It means giving with no thought of receiving anything back. It means offering my love up like a leaf to the wind, allowing it to be picked up or cast away as the universe deems appropriate.

To be unattached to one’s offering of love is a great thing. If I am not worried about how to adapt my love to the wishes or needs of others, I am free to give all that I can. If I am not caught up in worry about how I am going to be perceived (or my love accepted or rejected), I can give from the fullness of who I am, and not from a forced expression based on the expectations of others. Loving in this way brings freedom to all involved.

How to receive love? With arms wide open. This means accepting the love that others give, no matter how small or large, and taking it into the core of my being. It means soaking it all in, however it shows up. Most importantly, it means having no expectations or preconceived ideas of how love should be, what it should look like, or how it should be offered. If I hold onto pictures (expectations) of how I want or need to be loved, as well as how others should show it to me, I restrict the love coming towards me. I may even push love away if others feel they have to love me in certain ways. (continued)

By freeing ourselves from these pictures of how love should be, we become sponge-like, absorbing the water of love, letting it soak into every pore. As we are filled, we can outpour our love to others, and the cycle continues. We give, receive and give. Endlessly loving.

I am Love.
I came from Love.
I will return to Love.
May every day in between be emboldened by Love.
May I love myself as I am.
May I love all beings as they are.
May we live in Love together, forever.
Amen.

AFFIRMATIONS

Oh, Sacred Breath,
I honor you.
I welcome you into my body, mind, heart and soul.
Thank you for the gift of holy nourishment.
Oh, Divine One,
I welcome you into the all of me.
Thank you for the gift of this life.
I am in You and You are in me
for eternity.

Ω

I take a deep breath and commit to savoring life.
I return to the NOW, the precious present,
and allow myself to sink into its deliciousness.
I look, hear, touch, taste and smell with Joy!
With a grateful heart, I savor the brilliance of this world.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. Assess your ability to be grateful for “what is.” Are you able to accept and lean into the present moment just as it is? Or do you tend to resist it, wishing it were different?
2. As you look around you, what can you offer up as a prayer of praise for Mother Earth and her bounty?
3. Consider crafting a morning ritual to “rise, and give thanks for another day of loving.” What would this ritual look like? Do you have a sense of how a practice like this could impact your day?

Thank you for this breath,
for this life,
this beingness that is me, that is You,
that is the breath of all beings everywhere.
Root me in kindness.
Grow me with love.
Let "Thank you" be my refuge and my joy.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since 1994, Janice Lynne Lundy has been helping people around the globe transform their inner lives, gently guiding them to deepen their relationship with the Sacred as they understand it. She does this professionally as an interfaith spiritual director and mentor, educator, and retreat leader.

Passionate about the written word, Jan is the author of several spiritual growth books, including *Your Truest Self: Embracing the Woman You Are Meant to Be*, *My Deepest Me* and *Portable Peace*. She has been described as “practical and poetic, possessing deep and gentle wisdom.” Her most recent book (2018) is *Living Gently with Myself: A 30-Day Guidebook*. Each of her books supports our universal journey to live with calm, clear minds and wise, compassionate hearts.

Jan is an educator and spiritual director/guide with an interfaith/interspiritual focus. Today, she teaches and leads retreats throughout the U. S. In keeping with today’s technology, she also offers online seminars and provides long-distance spiritual companionship. Her private practice of spiritual direction specializes in women, professionals in the caring fields, and guides of all spiritual traditions.

Additionally, Jan is the co-founder and co-director of The Spiritual Guidance Training Institute, leading edge organization engaging in education, experiences, and relationships for practical, integrative, unitive living. SGTI specializes in the art and training of spiritual guides (directors) with an interfaith/interspiritual focus. She is currently Visiting Professor of Spiritual Direction at The Graduate Theological Foundation.

Jan resides on the shores of Grand Traverse Bay in northern Michigan with her husband, Brad. She is the mother of three, stepmother to four, and grandmother to seven. Her life motto is “Believe, breathe, and be well.” She wishes the same for you and for all beings.

You are invited to visit the author’s website to learn more about her books and offerings. Jan enjoys hearing from her readers. You may contact her at JanLundy.com.

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