

“Practicing Gratitude”

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The words Happy Thanksgiving – were heard from every corner of our country last week. Pictures proliferated on all forms of media - of people’s homes, teeming with loved ones and a seeming abundance of food. It was virtually inescapable. People everywhere offering up the things for which they are most grateful. All of this is lovely and, for me, makes me feel warm and blessed. But I would be remiss to not acknowledge the less visible side of this holiday - the loneliness, the fearfulness, the wounds that reopen this time of year. We also lift up and remember those who are hungry, oppressed, or living in poverty. And there are those native to this country who struggle, perhaps wanting to support family and friends in their thanksgiving celebrations but also wanting to honor their ancestors whose true story has been buried.

Given how heavy this can be to try to carry and process, practicing gratitude can seem difficult – even overwhelming to so many of us for whom the holiday season carries both great joy and great sorrow. It can feel rather antithetical or even hypocritical, to begin a gratitude practice. In reality, I have found that it is one of the most powerful acts I can take to turn my world around.

Helen Russell in her *tiny buddha* blog post writes about a personal rough patch that she endured and how a gratitude practice changed her life.

(<https://tinybuddha.com/blog/how-to-start-a-gratitude-practice-to-change-your-life/>)

She writes that she remembers someone saying, when she was a little girl in the 1950s in New Zealand, to be grateful for small mercies. That meant being grateful for the simple things that bring joy both large and small. She acknowledges forgetting that advice over time but remembering it when things got hard in her adult life. She writes “Like so many people in the world in 2010, troubles were crowding in on me. My American same-sex partner and I had not been able to see each other for over a year, due to both the usual constraints—American immigration law does not recognize our relationship—and the not so usual – the recession, joblessness, bankruptcy, and threatened foreclosure on our American home. In July my father died in New Zealand and it was at that point I threw in the towel. Life was beyond me. Life was too big for me.” “At that moment I fired off an email to the great love of my life in New York. “Darling, I am beginning a gratitude list. Here are five things I am grateful for. Now you add to that and let's start letting the universe know we love its small mercies!” And so we did.”

Helen and her partner began to shift their focus away from their pain at being apart and the heartbreaking loss of people they loved and the home that they built together. They began to both be grateful for the small mercies – like birdsong and tea and toast, for a cozy bed. After a while, they stopped feeling alone. They learned the true power of gratitude. She continues “Slowly, over time we awoke to the true value of our health, our deeply comforting long-distance love, the air we breathed, and the hot water that flowed in our homes. Slowly over time we came to see that, even amidst the loss and seeming deprivation, we were actually rich beyond words.”

After Helen describes her story, she shares some helpful tips for getting a gratitude practice started. Some of these steps we will try ourselves in a moment.

Steps for a healthy gratitude practice:

1. Commit. This is a spiritual practice that gains momentum over time and with practice. There will be days you just don't want to do it – that's okay. Gratitude doesn't seem to come as easily as grumbling does, and you will likely resist this exercise – but be persistent. There is power in this practice even if you have to summon untold depths of energy to do it.

2. Begin. Sit down with pen and paper or at your computer and start, “I am grateful for ...” It may not come right away. But just wait. Surrender to the moment. Something inside you will shift. The words will come. Helen says that “your gratitude list is a bridge across those troubled waters to a resting place on the other side.”

3. Write it down. Having it written allows for reflection later – it can last that much longer.

4. Feel it. Some days you will write without feeling a shred of gratitude. Just do it anyway. And when you can summon up the feeling of gratitude in your heart, let it percolate through every cell in your body. Move into the feeling. Dance it. Sing it. Aspire to a fullness of heart, no matter what is going on around you.

5. Choose a set time of day. You may want to do this when you first wake in the morning or late at night before you go to sleep.

6. Practice present-moment gratitude. As you move through your day, pause now and then when you remember, and think as you do something “I am grateful.”

7. Share the gratitude. Partner with someone if you are able. It helps to ensure accountability that you will maintain your practice. And then you have the support you need on the harder days.

8. Don't stop once you start to see results. Momentum is maintained by continuity.

9. Allow yourself to be human. Grumble if you must. Miss the odd day here and there. Write "I am grateful I am writing my gratitude list" five times if you can think of nothing else. It's okay to miss a few days – you can pick up where you left off. "Beware the little voice that says "You've missed a day. You've failed miserably at being grateful!" Let yourself be without judgment.

We are going to partake in our own gratitude practice this morning. With your order of service, you should have received a slip of colored paper. I invite you now to take that piece of paper out and to sit with it for a moment. I invite you to consider just one thing for which you feel truly thankful. I ask that what you write down is something that you feel comfortable sharing with the congregation. I will come around with a small bag that you can place your gratitude in, if you so choose. Then, only for those who are comfortable doing so, I will ask a handful of people to draw a gratitude from the bag and to share a gratitude with the congregation. I will ask it to be read as if you are reading your own – to embrace the spirit of thanks in which it was written.

(Conduct grab bag part of service)

Thank you all for sharing in this small gratitude grab bag exercise this morning. May we continue our service in the spirit of thanks and generosity.