

Be Selfish: Give Thanks!

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AT VARIOUS TIMES OF THE YEAR, and frequently in Sunday sermons, we are all admonished to “give thanks.” It is, indeed, a holy and a wholesome thing to do. So, when it’s time to devote ourselves to the task, which has been strongly encouraged by those more great in spirit than ourselves, we run through a mental catalog of “things I should be—err, that is, am—grateful for.” And, of course, considering that many of us are fortunate to live in rather comfortable circumstances, it’s usually not that hard to come up with a decent list of things for which to express our thanks. I can be grateful to be alive. For being healthy. For the wonderful people in my life. For my home and possessions. For satisfying work.

THEN WE MOVE TO THE NEXT STEP: whom do we thank? If one believes in a Higher Power, one can thank God, by whatever name that all-powerful being is known, for our many blessings. Based on most surveys of the extent of religious beliefs, that works for the vast majority of people in most societies around the world.

But, what about the rest of the human race? Is there no way for “non-believers” to be thankful? Speaking as a psychologist, it seems to me that a person can be grateful without having to direct that gratitude to any particular receiver. “Thank my luck stars” is just one of the many ways that people can express gratitude, and really mean it, without directing it to the Almighty. Or “Thank heavens.” Or “Thank goodness.” Is that sacrilegious? It doesn’t seem so. The gratitude is still there.

THAT’S WHAT GETS US TO THE PARADOXICAL ASPECT of this matter. It seems as though the act of being grateful (whether or not one expresses it out loud) is good for the soul. Good for the psyche. Why is that? Well, for one thing, being grateful for something gets us outside ourselves, which has a benefit. We can see ourselves in the context of the human race, our community, the planet.

Another benefit of being thankful is that it makes us feel better about ourselves. If I can get in touch with my gratitude, I see myself in a more positive light. I can appreciate myself as a “bigger person.” I can admire my better perspective on things. And, this improved self-appreciation will probably lead me to take some action that will directly or

indirectly express my good feeling about being alive and being able to do things. Improve my outlook on life.

SO, SILLY AS IT SOUNDS, it might be a good idea, now and then, thinking selfishly, to be grateful. It can simply be an internal communication. To oneself.

ONE POSSIBILITY is to cultivate a practice of doing a simple meditation periodically on a set of things for which to be thankful. For example, one could daily or weekly, or whenever the urge comes on, turn one's attention to, say, "My 5 gratitudes." Each person can invent his or her own set.

Here's one possibility:

My Five Gratuities

1. For this day. Another free gift, to live as I wish. May I invest it wisely and well.
2. For existence. For this magnificent universe which—despite all the chaos and corruption we see portrayed in the media—functions according to immutable laws and is orderly, peaceful, beautiful and predictable in ways that we usually take for granted and hardly notice.
3. For loved ones. That one person, or several, who add such enrichment to my life.
4. For the human race. Of which I am a member. My extended family. My community. My peers and colleagues. All of the good people in the world who make it a satisfying place to live.
5. For my place. For my little spot in the universe where I can live my life. It's my home. I belong here.

IT MIGHT BE WORTH putting together your own special list. One important paradoxical payoff to you for the work of crafting your own "top five" is that the process of doing so puts you in touch with what things in your life that are really important to you. It can give you focus, and with a very positive spin, rather than starting your day focusing on problems, a perspective which can pull you down.

You may want to give this a try . . . selfishly!

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