

Hallelujah for it All

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While we were in California, Carl and I drove through the San Francisco Bay area to have lunch with a friend. In an area filled with close to 2 million people, you can imagine the kinds of traffic challenges. So, as we headed up the peninsula toward Berkeley, traffic got heavier and the freeway more crowded. Soon, our progress slowed to a crawl as we found ourselves among even more cars and trucks trying to get from somewhere to somewhere else.

Finally, we got to the intersection where we would head east to our destination. Traffic was still heavy, but now we were really moving. Merging onto the highway, negotiating the trucks and the traffic and the lanes to get to our exit, I realized I had a “death grip” on the rental car’s steering wheel. I was so focused on getting to our destination safely that I wasn’t paying any attention to things not immediately surrounding us.

In time, we arrived at the restaurant, and then had to spend a few minutes driving around the lot to find a parking space. Finally we found a space and walked to the restaurant door. But, looking around, all I could see was traffic backed up in both directions on the freeway, sitting at a complete stand-still. I wondered if our friend would make it.

Suddenly, I found my thoughts totally focused on one of the reasons I was delighted to move from the Bay Area last summer. High traffic and crazy driving make me nuts. Frenetic energy and constant noise feel tiring and unnerving. I hate when what should be a simple outing actually feels like a dash for my life. Every thought in that moment was a rehash of some unpleasantness plucked from over fifteen years of living in busy, crowded California.

I found myself feeling unsettled and critical and vaguely grumpy. Fortunately, our friend was already there. We hugged “hello,” went in and got seated.

It wasn’t until about 15 minutes later that I finally noticed we were sitting at a table with a wonderful view of the San Francisco Bay. Really, in all of that time of dealing with traffic and trying to get there, I hadn’t looked out and taken in the rippling water, gently stirred by the breeze on a bright blue, sunny day. I’d ignored the lovely green Berkeley hills, wrapped in loose blankets of billowy white clouds. I’d not seen the gulls flying into the wind and trying to find places to land. I’d missed the flowers and the trees, or anything lovely, and yes, there are flowers blooming in California in February.

And yet, all along, that loveliness was there. It reminded me of today’s sermon on being appreciative, grateful for life. As I was so vividly reminded in that restaurant, it matters where we focus our attention. What we see is often dictated by where we choose to look. I want to talk about that today, the spiritual practice of appreciation, about being grateful for all of life.

I’m not suggesting that all of life is lovely; we both know it’s not. I’m not suggesting you exchange your usual lenses for viewing the world to those that are exclusively rose-colored, perhaps to become a “Pollyanna of Positivity” and unbridled “aw shucks” enthusiasm. I know that would be very unrealistic for me, and perhaps, for you, as well.

I've mentioned author and cross-cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien, and her book **The Four-Fold Way**, before. In it, she discusses what she calls four universal addictions, or life-negating patterns of behavior. Included are our insatiable need to know, as well as our focus on intensity and striving for perfection. The fourth is the human propensity to fixate on what's not working instead of what is.

Even when, in truth, the majority of our life is going pretty well, our natural inclination is to focus in with laser-like clarity on what's not going according to our plan. Then, because our focus is on life's imperfections, we find it hard to express gratitude or thanks, to ourselves, to others, or to the Divine.

Of course, it is hard to be grateful when the circumstances we find ourselves in are not ones of our choosing. We become ill. The world is at war. We lose the ability to do something we used to enjoy. The environment is being polluted. We experience the loss of a loved one. In tough times, it's much harder to keep or maintain an appreciative outlook, to find the silver lining in life's gray clouds.

A part of us yearns to have life be perpetually comfortable, never demanding that we make hard sacrifices or face difficult choices. But, it doesn't always work like that and not all of life's blessings come in pretty packages. No life is spared tough times.

When I was in my early twenties, my then fiancé and I were planning a January wedding. In anticipation, I accepted a new job and moved to a new city. As the holidays approached, it became apparent this marriage simply should not happen. So we split up. Then, in the midst of that grief, my father died a couple of weeks into the New Year.

I was truly overwhelmed and definitely found it hard to be grateful for the situation unfolding in my life. I was angry – at my fiancé, at my Dad, at myself. “What's going on here?” Why me? Why do I have to go through this? I wanted answers and make it all right, right now!

Conventional wisdom says that time heals all wounds. I don't know if that's true, but I know you gain new perspectives over time. Finally, you can see a larger pattern and understand that your prayers were answered, but differently that you'd imagined. You see positive outcomes from those tough times. In hindsight, you may be glad you missed the “road not taken” as poet Robert Frost called it.

In my case, with time, I did develop new perspectives. I learned about wells of resilience and internal strength that I had no idea existed in me. I gained a deeper understanding of love, so when I met the right person, I could say “yes” and mean it. My Father's death created options I doubt I would have otherwise considered. All of these were gifts received through an experience of loss and despair.

How we look at life affects our mood and our health. It affects those around us and it also affects our spirit. We make choices about how we act and react to the circumstances of our lives. How we focus our minds and what we allow ourselves to think and experience as a result of those thoughts frames our ability to define ourselves as happy or not.

Because of the enormity of these effects, I think it's worthwhile to find ways to expand what nourishes and decrease what diminishes. Being and approaching life from an appreciative place is a spiritually-enhancing practice, especially in the face of the stuff of life that discourages, demeans, or disheartens.

One day, a grandmother was walking with her five year old grandson along the beach. Suddenly, without warning, a large wave rushed up onto the shore and swept her

grandson out to sea. Shocked and stunned, she turns her face to heaven, shakes her fist, and screams, “God, this is unacceptable! You cannot take an innocent child!” And, just then, another rogue wave comes and deposits the boy at her feet. Picking up the child in her arms, the woman again looks to the sky and says, “He had a hat!”

Today, I’m focused on one specific kind of spiritual practice: growing our ability to approach the world from a grateful and appreciative perspective. This is about developing our gratitude “muscles,” if you will, and allowing ourselves to connect and reconnect with life beyond problems, negativity, fear and cynicism. Living in gratitude is about finding joy in being and having enough. It’s about focusing on the good stuff - what’s working and what’s working us in a positive way and appreciating what we have.

What practices of the spirit expand us into seeing with more of a rose-colored tinge, of being more appreciative? Author Mike Robbins recently released a book, called “Focus on the Good Stuff,” that speaks to the power of appreciation. He outlines a set of five “principles of appreciation,” practices we can consciously engage in to become more appreciative. They are:

1. Be grateful
2. Choose positive thoughts and feelings
3. Use positive words
4. Acknowledge others, and
5. Appreciate yourself

Listening to this list I’m sure you realize Mr. Robbins hasn’t discovered some new “secret formula.” He’s simply articulated what most of us would describe as a common sense approach to becoming more positive, appreciative, and grateful.

Of course, at least at the outset, some of the hardest things to do in life can look like the simplest. Spiritual practice is called “practice” because it involves a focused, conscious effort, over time, to implement. We have to pay attention, to consciously engage, in order for our practice to become, if not perfect, at least more familiar and more effective.

I want to encourage you to engage in the spiritual practice of focusing on and appreciating your blessings, being grateful for where you find yourself, when you find yourself there, as you proceed on your life journey. Even in the face of difficulties and hardships, I encourage you to see it all as a miracle and choose to say “yes” to life, being conscious of what you appreciate every day.

All of us ponder the challenges and frustrations of life; it’s inevitable, our brains are wired for problem-solving. But I also encourage you to make sure to spend a few minutes each day recounting the bits that made you glad to be alive. It’s not always big or obvious things, but through this practice you’ll find that the blessings are there.

Each of us has the power to choose what we do with our thoughts and emotions. I’m not suggesting that you can entirely eliminate the negative, critical thoughts that sometimes pop up; nor do I believe we can convince our emotional responses to only be positive ones. And, those who are clinically depressed may need medical support.

But I do believe we can make conscious choices about what to do with our thoughts and feelings. Most of us can decide what we mentally feed and what we let die of starvation. Our spiritual practice of appreciation can let us acknowledge when our thoughts go to the “dark side,” then refocus us on positive thoughts and feeling, purposefully engaging in re-thinking and re-feeling our way to a more optimistic place.

Along with choosing positive thoughts and feelings, author Robbins' advocates incorporating positive language into our vocabulary, both in how we speak to others and how we speak to ourselves. It's simply not true that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Our words and how we say them have impact, not only on others, but on ourselves, as well.

Critical self-talk has an impact, just as being critical can swiftly empty the reserves of your "emotional bank account" with others. Make a commitment to stop complaining for a day or longer. Find ways to listen and speak positively to yourself and others. Share your vision and goals in positive language, focusing on your positive intent to what it is you want to create in your life.

Robbins last two practices are about acknowledging others and appreciating yourself.

When we genuinely appreciate something that someone else has done, we need to have the courage to let them know. Based on our own perspectives, we can choose to let others know when they positively impact our lives, and thus appreciatively build the relationship between us. Acts of gratitude and acknowledgement serve to inspire and empower, not only others, but ourselves, as well.

Which brings us to appreciating ourselves. We may have been well-trained to not want to be seen as "bragging." But, in fact, when we're simply gratefully acknowledging our unique and individual strengths, talents, skills, and abilities, we are not engaged in an ego trip. Arrogance is a cover-up for fear and insecurity. Genuine self-appreciation is an expression of our love for ourselves and gratitude for something we've been able to do or, more important, for who we are. In the words of Oscar Wilde, oft-quoted nineteenth century author, "Be yourself, everyone else is already taken."

So, back to sitting in that restaurant in on the San Francisco Bay. Back to the moment when I finally noticed the breaks in the clouds, the shimmers of bright sunlight on the water; to the moment when I remembered to pick my eyes up from what had caught and held my negative attention to take in a view of the bigger picture.

I made a choice for gratitude, for appreciation. While acknowledging how negatively I was experiencing the situation in that moment, I consciously chose to re-focus my attention and thoughts. Then, I could breathe in appreciation for being with my friend; feel grateful for a delicious lunch and an even more delicious time together in conversation and laughter. Suddenly I could see again the beauty of nature all around me. I felt thankful for the time, the place, the moment and all of the blessings that surround me.

I felt at peace. And while the traffic didn't go away, I was reminded of why I'm glad to be here, after all, living this life. I remembered to say "thank you" to whatever convergence of fate or faith has shared with me these many blessings. And the traffic didn't seem so bad when we left to go back to Monterey.

I was reminded to keep practicing, not to get it right, but to bring myself back to a place of appreciation, gratitude, and joy. May it be ever so.