

June 23, 2019

Finding Gratitude, by Laura McBride

Reading:

This excerpt from Br. David Steindl-Rast's original article "Awake, Aware, and Alert".

To be awake, aware, and alert are the beginning, middle, and end of gratitude. This gives us the clue to what the three basic steps of practicing gratitude must be.

Step One: Wake Up

To begin with, we never start to be grateful unless we wake up. Wake up to what? To surprise. As long as nothing surprises us, we walk through life in a daze. We need to practice waking up to surprise. I suggest using this simple question as a kind of alarm clock: "Isn't this surprising?" "Yes, indeed!" will be the correct answer, no matter when and where and under what circumstances you ask this question. After all, isn't it surprising that there is anything at all, rather than nothing? **Ask yourself at least twice a day, "Isn't this surprising?"** and you will soon be more awake to the surprising world in which we live.

Surprise may provide a jolt, enough to wake us up and to stop taking everything for granted. But we may not at all like that surprise. "How can I be grateful for something like this?" we may howl in the midst of a sudden calamity. And why? Because we are not aware of the real gift in this given situation: opportunity.

Step Two: Be Aware of Opportunities

There is a simple question that helps me **to practice the second step of gratitude:** **"What's my opportunity here?"** You will find that most of the time, the opportunity that a given moment offers you is an opportunity to enjoy—to enjoy sounds, smells, tastes, texture, colors, and, with still deeper joy, friendliness, kindness, patience, faithfulness, honesty, and all those gifts that soften the soil of our heart like warm spring rain. The more we practice awareness of the countless opportunities to simply enjoy, the easier it becomes to recognize difficult or painful experiences as opportunities, as gifts.

But while awareness of opportunities inherent in life events and circumstances is the core of gratefulness, awareness alone is not enough. What good is it to be aware of an opportunity, unless we avail ourselves of it? How grateful we are shows itself by the alertness with which we respond to the opportunity.

Step Three: Respond Alertly

Once we are in practice for being awake to surprise and being aware of the opportunity at hand, we will spontaneously **be alert in our response, especially when we are offered an opportunity** to enjoy something. When a sudden rain shower is no longer just an inconvenience but a surprise gift, you will spontaneously rise to the opportunity for enjoyment. You will enjoy it as much as you did in your kindergarten days, even if you are no longer trying to catch raindrops in your wide-open mouth. Only when the opportunity demands more from you than spontaneous enjoyment will you have to give yourself a bit of an extra push as part of Step Three.

The Review Process

It helps me to review my own practice of gratefulness by applying to these three basic steps the rule I learned as a boy for crossing an intersection: “Stop, look, go.” Before going to bed, I glance back over the day and ask myself: **Did I stop and allow myself to be surprised? Or did I trudge on in a daze? Was I too busy to wake up to surprise? And once I stopped, did I look for the opportunity of that moment? Or did I allow the circumstances to distract me from the gift within the gift?** (This tends to happen when the gift’s wrappings are not attractive.) **And finally, was I alert enough to go after it, to avail myself fully of the opportunity offered to me?**

Sermon

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As I was putting together the Order of Service Tuesday evening, I found that excerpt by Brother David Steindl-Rast. It succinctly captured a process I found helpful to me. Please enjoy my stories and lessons in gratitude.

During my first two years as a newly minted speech language therapist working in a small rural school district nestled between Grand Rapids and Lansing, I had a lengthy period of emotional adjustment to becoming a career woman.

Earning my master's degree from MSU was a blur. I finished in 4 terms instead of 5 because I was running out of money. Between undergrad and graduate school in August and September, I returned home and took care of a young man who had started my babysitting career when I was 12 and he was 6 years old. He had brain cancer at 17 years of age and all the brilliance and medical advances at that time couldn't save him, but he did outlive the predictions on his life expectancy. That was Troy. He was born with a partial esophagus and spent the first 18 months of his life in and out of hospitals. He had scars from his neck to his belly. He showed me where to touch to feel a piece of metal in his abdomen. The kid was remarkable. I loved babysitting him. Returning to the job when he was in his late teens was not the way it was supposed to work. He needed help doing everything such as toileting, walking, and changing his clothes. We spent our days working on puzzles and word problems, me running up and down the steps of his bi-level home, and he shared his dreams that were changing quite dramatically as he was using a hospital bed in the family room situated in the lower level of the home. When graduate school started, I left Troy, grateful for the time we spent together, and headed to MSU determined to finish my studies as quickly as possible.

Nearly a year later, I am walking in graduation early, attending Troy's funeral, and studying for my oral and written exams that were specially arranged for me so I may leave in a few weeks for my overseas program in London,

England where I would finish my last two graduate classes. Upon my return, I secured a job, Dad helped me buy my first car, and I moved into a little town I had never heard of before where I obtained a job in the school system. I loved the children, my colleagues, started a relationship with another teacher and we moved in together. For privacy, we lived in Grand Rapids and commuted to work. Most mornings during the drive, we chatted and then I burst into tears. My boyfriend was baffled. He would ask if I felt sick, NO, upset? No. Wanted to go home? No. What did I want? I didn't know. I would leave him at his school and drive still crying to my school, dry my tears and start my day. I was living paycheck to paycheck, in a satisfying relationship, but struggled with getting through my misery. I was in therapy at the time dealing with understanding my dad's alcoholism, it's impact on me in my family, and sorting out issues about myself that I wanted to resolve.

One day, I decided that each night I needed to write down 5-10 moments that I noticed, I was grateful for, or made me feel something warm or positive from the day. This desperate practice was my own idea and happened before good old Oprah Winfrey co-opted it. I was dubious that I could come up with three let alone five or ten moments. As we sat in bed, I would think back on my day and recall the brief moment when the sun rays broke through the heavy clouds or I felt a sweet connection with a student, or the hike in the state park with the only sound being the wind through the trees. I did this every night. During the day, when the moment happened, I enjoyed it and thought, "Oh, I need to remember this for my journal." Over time, my thinking changed and while I continued in therapy for nearly five years, my day to day outlook improved.

When I moved to MP in 1991, I ended that relationship, grieved it, and developed a wonderful friendship with a woman I worked with at the university. She and her little two-year old daughter and I would run the roads, shop, laugh, and carry on. Her husband thought we were nuts. She became my best friend. I had not had a person I called my "best friend" since third grade. Back then, Dawn Chapman and I were besties from 1st to 3rd grades. Our parents were best friends and her younger sisters were friends with my sisters, too. We lived around the block and across the street from them. The problem was, Dawn was not nice. She was a bully. She would say awful things to me, order me around, and once when

we were in her room, I got down on the floor to retrieve a toy that had fallen under the bed and when I bent over to look for the toy, she slammed my head to the floor with her foot. I couldn't believe it. I ran downstairs bawling and her mom asked me what happened. I told her and ran to my home. I could hear her mother screaming up the stairs at Dawn behind me. At that moment, I decided that having a best friend was not in my best interest.

So, having a change of heart about a best friend in my mid 20s was a big deal for me. We spent time with one another's family members, camped together, and she was my birth coach when I was pregnant. We worked and played well together. It was a great friendship for several years, until it wasn't. She divorced her husband and started dating a man and we spent very little time together. It was so sad. At that time, I was working in Midland County, Elliott was 5 or 6 years old, and her daughter was 13 years old. Our traditions and rituals crumbled, we never spent any time alone like we had, and I was so miserable. I wrote her a letter via email and shared how much I missed her and said that minimally I wanted us to spend an hour together alone visiting without our kids or significant others once every 4-5 weeks. I asked her to let me know if she was willing to do this for our friendship. After not hearing back from her, I wrote her another letter. It was clear that she didn't want to maintain our friendship. I let her know that I wanted to continue my relationship with her daughter who recently turned 30 years old! I hoped I would be included in celebrations for her daughter like graduation open house, family news, etc. I assured her that if we bumped into one another socially or professionally, she could expect me to be friendly and kind. Then I said, "So long". It was sad as I had a son who didn't understand the loss of this woman's presence in our lives. It was tough to explain. However, I am grateful to being included in celebrations with her daughter, seeing her family at the funerals of both her parents and even at her retirement party from CMU last summer. I was so grateful to enjoy such heartfelt interactions with her family. I was proud that I could be present for these interactions instead of nursing the wounds of our abandoned friendship.

Watching the aging process in some friends and family members has been very painful for me. So, when my friend Bob, the founding minister of this fellowship started having significant short-term memory issues, I worked hard to

find something to be grateful. During our long-distance phone calls, I realized I could share good news about this fellowship that he established about three different times. He was so happy to hear when the membership numbers increased or an anniversary celebration of founding the fellowship was being planned, or we purchased this building without a mortgage, to name a few, I shared it a couple more times to hear his great delight. The true gift was to hear his genuine happiness every time I shared news of our fellowship. Instead of focusing on the erosion of his short-term memory, I celebrated in the enjoyment he felt with every recycled church item, news of congregants, and his news of his own family who I knew well. I find that I can do a similar maneuver with my dad. The biggest challenge, however, is that I can't recycle news about his grandson Elliott, the crown prince of the McBride Dynasty. Dad seems to hold on to all updates told to him about Elliott. While he enjoys hearing news items about other friends and family repeated, he always finishes my stories about Elliott, much to my chagrin.

At the times when I find that I feel overwhelmed, rudderless, or restless, these are times when I am not noticing and grateful for the many wonderful moments in my life. While Marie Kondo is a delicate Japanese woman who has perfected the art of sorting through a lifetime of accumulation by asking yourself, "Does this spark joy?" when holding the item in your hands, I want to roll my eyes and groan loudly. I have a houseful of stuff that I am sorting through, thanking, tossing, or folding in a such a way that I can put three times as many items back into the same space. Watching that sweet little lady help the hoarders on her TV show gives me a headache. I do realize that when I find comfort in the many ways my friends have demonstrated loving kindness with me, I begin to find my way back to gratitude. I am a fortunate woman who forgets that occasionally. I find my way back to my core of gratitude after flailing about in misery for a few days or weeks.

An example of finding gratitude occurred several times during Elliott's adolescence. He was working hard at separating from me, finding his own path, and in so doing, was very unpleasant to be around. Friends tried to console me with comments like, "It won't last forever" or "He will become that kind loving person you know again" but those comments were no comfort when I followed up with my questions, "When will it happen?" and they replied that full maturation of

the frontal lobe in males occurs in their mid-twenties. Knowing that Elliott was still years away from that neurological maturation caused me to arm myself with ways to deal with the unpleasantness. I liked to tell him that kids at work think I am cool. Or that my students would rather eat lunch with me than choose a toy from my prize box. When he caught me dancing in the kitchen while cooking dinner and made fun of me, I reminded him that all the special needs' children and adults I worked with over the years thought I was a fabulous dancer. During those times, I was grateful that other people appreciated me even when the person I loved more than any other in the world did not.

I do like to count my blessings. My family will indulge me on Thanksgiving with sharing what each is grateful for in their life. Elliott and I use to do this as a daily practice at dinner when he was young, but whenever I try to reinstate this rite as he grew older, he refuses.

Now when I find myself full of longing, I find writing a letter to be a wonderful way for me to connect with the good in my life as I try to share those things with my son who is in the military and a couple of thousand miles away. I don't want to unload my burden on him, so I recall and write about the tender or funny moments with patients, friends, and his grandparents. These are honest stories and I feel better by the time I am done writing.

I am grateful that you all are here today listening to me. It is cheaper than therapy and if there are too many negative comments about this sermon, I may respond that another congregation recently heard it and really loved my message...

May it be so and so be it.