

Defiant Gratitude

by Jim Detjen

June 23, 2019

Good morning.

It really is a beautiful morning. It finally has stopped raining and blue skies are forecast for this afternoon. It's a day to rejoice for the arrival of summer, the long days of sunlight and the beauty of the Earth. It's a day to be grateful for being alive.

I'm going to start with a personal story of gratitude.

My wife, Connie, and I were traveling in Ecuador in 1983. It was our first international adventure together. We had been married for less than two years. We were staying at a hotel in Quito, Ecuador's capital. One morning over breakfast we talked about our travel plans with another young couple. They were planning to take a flight later that day to Cuenca, 300 miles to the south. They asked us if we'd like to join them.

We pondered the idea and seriously considered taking the flight with them. But finally we decided there was more to do in Quito and said "no."

Later that day we heard news reports that an Ecuadorean plane going to Cuenca had crashed into a mountain in the Andes. All 119 people on that flight were killed. We realized we could have been on that plane.

Was our decision not to fly to Cuenca a fluke, a lucky accident? Perhaps.

Why did we live and others die?

I don't know.

But I do know that I am incredibly grateful for our decision NOT to board that flight in July 1983. Thirty six years later we have raised two sons, had fulfilling careers and are now enjoying retirement.

I also know that whether you believe in God a little, a lot or you're not sure what you believe – that gratitude is a powerful attitude and a powerful practice. It's beneficial in many ways – physically, emotionally, spiritually.

It's a practice that has grown on me as I've made my journey through the ups and downs of life.

The psychologist Robert Emmons has said that gratitude is "literally one of the few things that can measurably change" one's life. He has been doing research on gratitude most of his career. He cites studies that have found that people who cultivate gratitude are happier, have

better health, sleep better, deal better with stress, feel better about their lives, are more relaxed and are more optimistic about the future.

When people feel more grateful, they also feel more loving, forgiving, joyful and enthusiastic. And they are more likely to reach out -- to help others. In addition, people who cultivate gratitude are more resilient when bad things happen.

For decades psychologists have known that you cannot be grateful and anxious at the same time.

Gratitude is an important teaching in Christianity – as well as most of the world’s other religions. Martin Luther said gratitude is the “basic Christian attitude.” Gratitude is an acknowledgement of God’s gifts and generosity. It’s a recognition that these gifts come from outside of our self. An aspect of gratitude is the notion of undeserved merit, a free gift that is unearned. The theological term is grace.

The word “thanks” appear more than 150 times in the Bible. The imperative to “give thanks” appears 33 times. Many of us say grace before meals and express gratitude in worship services and through prayer.

The Psalms are filled with expressions of gratitude. Verse seven of the 106th Psalm says “Praise the Lord. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his love endures forever.”

Expressing gratitude is an important teaching in many of the world’s religions – Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Native American religions, too.

Now, it’s easy to be thankful when life is going well.

But how can you be grateful when life is tough?

Into everyone’s life there are challenges and hardships. We get sick. We experience pain. We feel anxious and depressed. Loved ones die. Relationships break up. We face financial difficulties. We experience fires and floods. We suffer. It’s part of the human experience. Life can be random, unfair and sometimes cruel.

It’s tempting NOT to be grateful when we’re going through hard times. We grieve. We despair. We ask, “Why me?”

But both psychologists and religious leaders say that gratitude is often deepened and strengthened through confrontation with adversity. When we emerge from the other side of despair, we are grateful. We are thankful for feeling healthy, after we’ve endured sickness or pain. We are thankful for life itself after we’ve witnessed death or disaster.

Painful experiences can lead to growth. They can make us more empathetic. They can make us kinder. And they can make us more resilient when hard times come again – as they inevitably do.

There are many stories of people who have faced dire circumstances and not only survived -- but thrived.

Elie Wiesel, (el-ee vee-ZEL) a Romanian Jew and his family were sent to the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps in 1944. His mother, father and sister were all murdered there. Following World War II he spent his life campaigning for victims of oppression in South Africa, Nicaragua, Sudan and elsewhere. He helped establish the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986.

During an interview he was asked whether there was still a place in his heart for gratitude after all he had witnessed. "Absolutely," he said. "For me every hour is grace. I feel gratitude in my heart each time I meet someone and look at his or her smile."

Wiesel (veeZEL) said it's important to stay grateful in spite of whatever life throws at you. He said there is a need for "defiant gratitude."

Defiant gratitude.

It's a powerful outlook and stance towards life.

I asked Edgewood members to tell me personal anecdotes of how suffering has led to gratitude and I heard remarkable stories filled with insight and wisdom.

One member told how she was working in a job she disliked. "It was sapping my soul," she said. Then, she and several of her colleagues were laid off. This led to feelings of despair and concern that she might never find another job. "I thought it was the worst day of my life," she recalls.

But ultimately she did find a job – a much better job than the one she had lost. "I cannot be more grateful," she said. "Things spiraled up. People valued my opinions. It turned my life around."

Another talked about an unexpected breakup just as the couple was preparing for marriage. "It triggered all sorts of reflections," he said. "It forced me to become involved with new activities and to volunteer with new groups. I became engaged in a long-deferred writing project and connected to new people. I realized the truth in the saying, 'When God closes a door he opens a window.'"

Another grieved at the reoccurrence of cancer of a long-time partner and the partner's premature death. "I was devastated," she said. "I asked 'Why?' My partner said before she died that you have to quit asking 'why?' A better question is 'what now?'" After her partner's death, the Edgewood member learned to look for hidden blessings. "There are a million things to be grateful for," she said. "You have to learn to move forward. I learned that I am resilient. If I face difficulties, I have the resources to pull through."

One member told how her sister, a surgeon, was imprisoned in China for 14 years for political reasons. The sister was assigned to thatch roofs. When she was finally released, the Edgewood member asked her sister how she had remained so beautiful while serving time in prison. Her sister said that every morning when she saw the sun, she smiled and said “Thank you, Jesus.” “My sister was grateful,” the Edgewood member recalls. “She was present in the moment and thankful to be alive. It made a real difference.”

Perhaps, one of the most remarkable stories came from an Edgewood member who many of you know. She agreed to let me use her name.

When Roberta McCall was in her mid-20s she found out she was going blind. She wondered what she would be able to do with her life when she could no longer see. She underwent 12 weeks of training in Kalamazoo to adjust to life without sight. While there she found out about a little known state agency called the Commission for the Blind.

Roberta said, “This experience changed my life so much that I decided then and there that I wanted to give back to the system that had helped me understand that there are no doors I could not open when I was blind.”

She earned a master’s degree in “blind rehabilitation teaching” at Western Michigan University and then embarked on a career helping others adjust to life without vision. Working at the Commission for the Blind, she taught many others.

Being blind gave her credibility with her students. “I was in a unique position to help others and I had something to offer,” she said.

Blindness has created many challenges for Roberta and accompanying them have been frustration and sometimes anger. But she has chosen to view blindness through the lens of gratitude.

“If I have to identify one thing (besides being born) that has brought me more reward, joy, excitement, challenge and sense of accomplishment – it is going blind,” Roberta says. “I gained a calling, a career, a job that paid me to do something so fun I would have done it even if I were independently wealthy and didn’t need a job.”

“I’m like anyone else who has faced an obstacle in life and has worked to overcome it,” she says. “Gratitude doesn’t make the bad stuff go away, but it allows you to say that no matter what happens -- I can see the positive in it.”

I believe we can make a conscious choice to be grateful. Often, it isn’t easy. But, the more we work at it, the easier it becomes.

For me it’s a matter of consciously changing my outlook and reframing the way I look at a situation. I can dwell on past hurts or future worries -- and feel anxious.

Or I can choose to focus on all that is good in my life – and feel grateful.

The first step, is something we've all heard many times. "Count your blessings."

But how do you do that?

For many -- prayer helps. Thank God for the many good things in your life – for friends, for the beauty of nature, for the supportive community at Edgewood. "If you want to sleep more soundly," Dr. Emmons says. "Count your blessings, not sheep."

For me, going outdoors and experiencing nature often helps a lot. In the morning I put a leash on Clara, our standard poodle, and we go outside. I walk around the block and often take her to woodland trails near our home. I breathe in fresh air. I feel the sun's rays on my face. I listen to the birds sing. I smell the flowers. I feel awe as I witness the incredible beauty of the natural world. I feel grateful to be alive.

It helps, if the day is warm and sunny. But even if it's not, going outside helps me get my mind off past regrets or future worries. Nature thrusts me into the present. I feel awe. I feel grateful. I realize that at that moment, I have all that I need.

Keeping a gratitude journal also helps me. As a journalist, I've always enjoyed writing. Writing helps me make sense of the world. Almost every day I write down something I am grateful for. It could be something relatively minor, such as gratitude for a friend who loaned me garden equipment. Or it could be hearing the song of a chickadee, smelling the fragrance of a hyacinth, observing the beauty of a sunset or feeling the love of our pet dog.

I find that if I pause and reflect on the good things in my life, I sleep better and feel happier.

The author Janice Kaplan made a resolution in 2012 to be more grateful to her husband. She spent a month only finding positive things to say to him. "It started out as a joke, but ended up being dramatic and wonderful," she said.

She decided to extend her resolution to a full year and turned her experience into a book, "The Gratitude Diaries." "It ended up being one of the best years of my life," she said. "If you look at it from the outside, nothing particularly happened – I didn't win the lottery.... But by reframing the situation into a place of gratitude, I was able to change how I felt about things."

There are many other ways to increase gratitude. It can be by studying the Bible, listening to music, exercising, meditating or reaching out to friends.

A powerful way to increase gratitude is through volunteer work or helping others. Gratitude is a noun but it's also a verb. If you are grateful for a kindness someone has shown you, give it back. Help someone else. Create a cycle of giving and receiving, an endless waterfall of gratefulness.

For some, suffering has given them a new purpose in life. I think of James Brady, the press secretary of President Reagan, who was badly wounded in an assassination attempt on President Reagan in 1981. He spent the rest of his life as a strong advocate for gun safety and helped pass the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act in 1993.

But giving back doesn't have to be a big thing. It can be as simple as writing a thank you letter, cooking a meal or offering a ride to someone who needs one. It can be smiling and waving to a neighbor. It can be telling a friend how much their friendship means to you. Helping others helps you, too.

The more we cultivate gratitude, the easier it becomes. It becomes a habit. It changes the way we look at life. Gratitude fosters our health and enables us to recover more quickly from illness. If we build up a well of gratitude, we have something to draw on in times of trouble.

The author, Diana Butler Bass, says, "Gratitude is like tending a garden. It takes planting and watering and weeding. It takes learning. It takes routine. But eventually, the ground yields, shoots come forth, and thankfulness blooms."

Gratitude begins in our hearts and spreads outwards like ripples on a pond. Grateful people are more likely to be loving and giving of themselves.

I know that each day is a gift.

I am grateful for NOT boarding the Ecuadorian airplane that crashed into a mountain 36 years ago. I am grateful for being alive, for living on this beautiful planet. I am grateful for my friends, many of whom are part of the Edgewood community.

When life is most challenging, remember what Elie Wiesel (el-ee vee-ZEL) advised: Be defiantly grateful.

And think of what the Buddha told his followers:

"Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so let us be thankful."

Amen

Meditation:

"If you must look back, do so forgivingly.

If you must look forward, do so prayerfully.

However, the wisest thing you can do is to be in the present...gratefully."

■ Maya Angelou

Scripture:

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” – Philippians 4:6-7

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster to give you a future with hope.” Jeremiah 29:11