

Gratitude at last

by [Kathleen Norris](#) in the [June 3, 1998](#) issue

I have come to see gratitude as primary among the spiritual virtues, the wellspring, as it were. I also think it makes a suitable subject for my last column in the Faith Matters series.

Gratitude is very much a part of the writing process, but unfortunately much of it is hidden from the reader, who encounters a finished poem or story but not all the pages full of false starts and scribbled revisions. Once, as an instructional tool, I read from *Dakota* to a group of high schoolers as I stood next to a pile of manuscript pages that came almost to my waist. I showed them pages marked with sharp comments from my editor (“this sounds fatuous,” “this doesn’t go anywhere”) and also the intense, line-by-line workings of a copy editor. My audience was fascinated but appalled. All of a sudden writing, which had seemed so romantic, came to look far worse than English class.

Whenever I am subjected to a long introduction listing my “successes” as a writer, particularly when facing an audience of writing students, I try to add the other side of the story--the fact that for 22 years, from the mid-1970s until the early 1990s, I was unable to get any kind of grant to support my writing. And I mention that I still get form rejection slips from magazines--surely the one constant for any writer amid the vagaries of the literary world. During those lean years, long before I had returned to church, I recognized that coping with my failures was a spiritual discipline, and that when other writers I knew received the grants I had applied for, I had to congratulate them. And I had to mean it.

I had an advantage in all this. Working at the Academy of American Poets right out of college gave me a firsthand view of the sort of damage that vanity and envy can do a writer when they work in tandem. One acquaintance was a poet manqué whose life had come to express the Latin root of that word: “maimed.” His poetry seemed incurably shallow, but he thought it grand, and nearly every night he would get drunk and listen to tapes of himself reading his work. He had given up reading other poets, as he didn’t want to be “influenced,” but tolerated me as an ingenue, at least

until I won a contest and had my first book of poems published. Then his attitude toward me soured noticeably. I had become one of the successful writers who was crowding him out, denying him his due.

Sour sentiments can mask themselves as gratitude. Underneath the Pharisee's prayer of thanks to God is gratitude that he is not like those other people. That "other people" is what writing is all about has been made abundantly clear to me now that I have something I never anticipated in my many years as a poet: a multitude of readers. It is a gift beyond measure to me that so many people have connected with my writing, everyone from the truck driver who scrawled a note on the flap of a cigarette carton to an eminent theologian I have long admired who composed an eloquent letter on seminary letterhead.

And there have been gifts I've been able to share with my family: the letters from people containing memories of my grandfather Norris as a pastor, my grandfather Totten as a doctor. I sent on to my mother a letter from a man who'd developed a crush on her when they met at high school music competitions in the 1930s. She had heard that he'd died in the Bataan death march and was very glad to know that he was alive and well.

This is not "success," not a goal that can be striven for. It is pure gift, and gratitude is the only possible response. Another of gratitude's false faces is complacency, but the sheer gladness that I feel for being able to earn my living through writing is tempered by the many years in which a crazy quilt of "day jobs" fed my writing habit. It is precisely because of that long and difficult stretch, so typical of an apprenticeship in the arts, that I can appreciate my new life for the miracle that it is. The money has not made me fabulously wealthy by American standards but it has allowed me and my husband to purchase medical insurance and our first new car in 20 years. Most important, it has been a means of giving something back to my parents and helping to provide something for the college education funds of a niece and nephew whose mother, my youngest sister, is a single parent needing all the help she can get.

True gratitude is magnificat; that is, it magnifies. It refuses to remain strictly private but, like poetry itself, employs the personal to convey something more universal, stories that others may well claim as their own. Gratitude in this sense reverberates throughout one's relationships with others and the world. As magnificat, gratitude is praise in the light of the past, and it uses past experience in order to bolster the

ability to enter into an unknown future with trust and hope. As magnificat, gratitude is not a “thank you” for a new sense of ease or comfort. If nothing else, Mary’s song in the first chapter of Luke reveals that magnificat is its own reward. And yet such wanton thanksgiving seems to provide Mary with strength for accepting the gift of the incarnation and for taking off for territories unknown.

I leave writing this column in order to devote more energy to a new and daunting task, writing a memoir of an early friend and mentor, a woman who played an important role in the lives of many American poets from the 1950s to the mid-1980s. I feel the need to shape a book that will be partly her story and partly my own, and as yet have very little idea of how this might be accomplished. I have 20 years of memories, and have had another 12 years to mourn her death.

Now I face the blank page (and frequently a blank mind) and can think of no better way to express my gratitude than to ask readers to pray for me.