

The power of gratitude

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When I worked as a clinical chaplain in a state psychiatric hospital, I frequently led groups on gratitude. I would begin the group by asking people what they were grateful for. Predictably, they weren't particularly grateful for anything. After all, they were patients in a psychiatric hospital and did not want to be. They were all experiencing a mental health crisis so acute that they were admitted to the state hospital against their will. What's to be grateful for?

We'd start off slowly, though. Anyone have breakfast this morning? Yes. Can you be thankful for the food even if it wasn't what you would have liked? Yes. Anyone have coffee this morning? Yes. Can you be thankful for that even though there was no caffeine in it? Yes. And then someone would be thankful for a safe place to sleep. Then for clean clothing. Then for a family member or friend who was feeding their cat. And the list would grow from there. After a few minutes we would have a list with hundreds of things they were grateful for. Sometimes, someone would be well enough to be thankful for the care and treatment they received, and for the possibility of doing better with new medicine.

From the list we generated together, we would go on to talk about how they were feeling since we started to look for things to be grateful for. Mostly, they felt a little better, a little more hopeful. Maybe things weren't so very bad. Maybe things could get better. Someone would invariably state that being grateful made them feel better and we'd talk about that. It turns out that when you're looking around for things to be thankful for, it's really hard to focus on all the negative stuff. So then we would talk about how to make gratitude part of every day. Maybe some of the patients did manage to begin practices of gratitude, and maybe they didn't. However, I did.

I spent many years not feeling very grateful. Sometimes it was because I didn't believe I deserved what I had, so I was waiting for it to disappear more than expressing gratitude. In other ways, I failed to notice the gifts God had given me. Leading groups on gratitude with people with severe mental illness shifted my whole

self-understanding. I stopped being like the nine lepers Jesus spoke about. You know, those nine who were healed and didn't come back to give God thanks. Instead, I began to see my life as an amazing gift, and I started to give God thanks.

And I started in the hard places. I thanked God for my early experiences of suffering because over the years they had been transformed into strengths. I wasn't exactly grateful for the trauma or depression. I was grateful for the healing that made the broken places stronger. I don't believe for a second that God made bad things happen to me so that I would learn what I needed to learn. However, I do believe that without having been through the difficulties of my childhood and young adulthood, I wouldn't be who I am today. Healing was slow and painful. So slow, in fact, that I missed it for years.

Then I found myself in a ministry setting that redeemed all the despairing places in my life. All the suffering I had spent years locking away somewhere had purpose and meaning. It wasn't that my experiences were the same as the patients I met. Sometimes there were similarities, of course. But I had a depth of understanding in which empathy was deeply rooted. Because of where I had been, it was easier for me to walk with people who were in such indescribable emotional and spiritual pain. If I had come to believe that God had been with me through all my struggles (and I had), then I could confidently say that God was present in the psych hospital, too. And for that, we could all be grateful.

Since those days, I've been much quicker to move to gratitude. Last month when I fell and broke two fingers, I really was grateful that my injuries were not more serious. Just two days ago I had surgery to correct double vision that had worsened over the last 30 years. The results are not what I expected. Yesterday, the surgeon asked me how mad I was at him. He wasn't entirely kidding. My distance vision may take some time before it is not double, but it could very well come around to single vision. I couldn't be more grateful for the changes I have already experienced. He was surprised that I was not angry, frustrated, or anything other than grateful and willing to do whatever I needed to do for the best possible outcome. Why focus on the headache when there is so much to see?

I am convinced that it is easier to see God working and give thanks when we are on the margins or in the between places. The Samaritan leper, the double outcast, was the only one out of ten to run back and give thanks to Jesus for his healing. Gratitude flooded my life while I worked in a psychiatric hospital, a place truly on the

margins where people are somewhere between illness and health. Now, as my body heals, I experience the miracles of broken places mending and new vision as I am between being broken and being made whole. I am right there with that Samaritan leper singing God's praise.

There's nothing better than gratitude to change how we see the world. Perhaps we should all just take a few minutes and give thanks for the blessings we have lest we become a part of the nine who just went away without knowing true healing.

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