

Finding Gratitude: Homily #2

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I seem to have developed a reputation for being a very positive and grateful person who is courageous in the face of adversity. It's not entirely undeserved. But it isn't the whole story about me, either. Since I've already talked about being grateful from this pulpit, this morning I want to talk a bit about those times when gratitude is elusive. And I don't mean when your gratitude comes with a little ambivalence; I'm talking about when you are NOT GRATEFUL.

For instance, I have a 15-year-old son, and I often find myself thinking, and occasionally saying out loud to him, "With all you have, with all I do for you, how can YOU be SO ungrateful?!" A few months back, I was talking to my new minister about all the trials and tribulations I'd been through with him in recent weeks. After listening to a long list of complaints, Michael asked me gently, "What do you like about him?"

For the first time in our visit, I sat in uncomfortable silence as I suppressed the first answer that came to mind. In that moment, I realized that I was feeling just as ungrateful for my stupid, selfish son as he was feeling for his stupid, mean parents. And I knew, from trying to answer that simple question – what do you like about him? - that it was time for me to go in search of fresh gratitude for this growing, changing young man in my life.

I can't readily walk a mile in my son's shoes, partly because his feet are a lot bigger than mine, but also because he faces a different world than the one I know. What I can do that helps is to get out the shoes I wore when I was a teenager, so that I remember being his age.

It so happens I kept a diary for a few months when I was a young teenager. What comes back to me, reading what I wrote in 1974 as adult hormones first began to churn through my little-girl blood, isn't just the moments I recorded. I remember the times when I felt totally alone, sure that no one understood me or really cared. I remember being so miserable that I didn't even feel grateful to be alive, never mind being grateful for anything else. I haven't done a scientific study, but I've heard a lot of people express a similar feeling – that the most memorably awful year of their life was seventh grade, or eighth, or ninth. The people who are doing scientific studies on adolescent brain development are finding reasons why this might be so – it's a mess in there at that age.

It helps me to know that my son's brain is under construction and I need to do my best to be patient with him during remodeling. It helps me to be patient to realize that, he, too, may be feeling alone, unlovable, and anxious about how he fits into the human

community. It helps me to remember what I needed to grow through the painful parts of those years, and to find my place in the grown-up world.

I did need my parents, but I also needed my friends, and I needed other trusted adults I could turn to – for me, those adults were special teachers, a beloved aunt, my grandmother, and an older cousin. My son now comes to church willingly, in part because our youth group consists of intelligent, fun, and friendly teens, the majority of whom are lovely young women, but also, I think, because it is here he has begun to find some of those adult mentors he needs to help him begin to know the man he wants to be.

You don't have to be a parent, a teacher, or a youth group leader to be an important person in the life of a growing child, although I am deeply grateful to those mentors who give so much of themselves to our young people. We can each make a difference by smiling and saying hello to a shy or sullen-looking teenager; by calling a niece, a nephew, or a grandchild just to check in; and by doing our best each day to recognize and honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person, including the miserable ingrates among us.

If gratitude is flowing freely through your own spiritual oxygen mask, do be sure to watch for people around you, especially the teenagers who are making that challenging passage from childhood to their adult selves, and maybe the parents trying to love them, who may be in need of some assistance from their fellow travelers.

But what if you can't get your own mask adjusted? What if the miserable ingrate is you? Or me? November, December and January are dark months here in New Hampshire. One of the things that prevents me, sometimes, from being able to feel grateful for my many blessings is depression. I am able to feel positive and grateful most of the time, instead of staying home in bed, rocking and sobbing and totally overwhelmed by stress, because I have learned to recognize when I need help.

Most of you know the joke about the man who waited for God to save him from a flood, and drowned after sending away all human rescuers. For me, when the waters of depression begin to rise, sometimes a walk or other exercise is enough to get me to higher ground, and sometimes conversation with friends does the trick. There's a therapist I've known for years who is very helpful. In the past decade since I came out as an openly religious person, I've learned how valuable a church community can be in times of trouble. I do believe in the healing power of prayer. But when my heart gets so heavy that I can't lift it on my own, and I no longer WANT to ask for help, I know it's time for me to call my doctor. Medication alone wouldn't save me, but sometimes it's what I need to keep my head above water, and I am grateful to God for the scientists who created it.

If you find yourself going under, whether from depression or from anger, jealousy, fear, or loneliness, please do reach out for whatever *you* need to make it back up to where you can breathe with gratitude. The Universalist in me is fervent on this point: we ALL deserve to be saved, and God sends all sorts of interesting, and sometimes unexpected, rescuers.