

# An Attitude TOWARD Gratitude

Caroline Bassett

It could happen any time, tornado,  
earthquake, Armageddon. It could happen.  
Or sunshine, love, salvation.

It could you know. That's why we wake  
and look out—no guarantees  
in this life.

But some bonuses, like morning,  
like right now, like noon,  
like evening.

—William Stafford

**T**his short poem by William Stafford (1998) captures an attitude of gratitude that you can find expressed explicitly in at least three of the articles in this issue (and implicitly in others, too). Can you find them? Two appear in the articles about elders. Is this a coincidence? Why do some people feel and express gratitude more as they get older, even as their infirmities increase? Why do they not complain very much? Perhaps it is because the days are going by, and the time that is left becomes deeply cherished. In her article at the end of this issue, Connie Goldman quotes writer Eve Merriam, who says,

Perhaps one of the good things about getting older is that life becomes so precious on a day-to-day basis. I think that a love for the ordinary is what is most important as one ages, not for the extraordinary. There are always trips to Bali or Yokohama or Paris, but to get the joy out of the daily-ness, that's what struck me when I hit my sixties. I thought, good heavens, I'm getting so much pleasure out of my breakfast. I didn't know grapefruit juice could taste so good. This is really amazing. It's as though some kind of slight film over the world has been stripped away, and there is now a clarity that one didn't have before.

As part of her ongoing research on wisdom and elders, Monika Ardel conducted in-depth interviews with three people who had scored as wise and three as less wise on her wisdom scale. Although the focus of the investigation did not include questions on their own well-being versus that of others, she found that the wiser elders spontaneously expressed gratitude for help they had received throughout their lives and for the life they were able to live, even though they had faced daunting difficulties. One

woman said, "I just feel so blessed all the time. That's why I don't have time for feeling bad, or thinking bad. I'm not going to waste my time doing that." This from a woman with a high school education; seven children from nine pregnancies; a child with cerebral palsy whom she refused to place in a home; the loss of a significant amount of money in a loan; and her son's estrangement from her after he left his wife and three children, moved across the country, and remarried.

Poets convey this sense of gratitude in different ways. Besides William Stafford's poem, you may be familiar with Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less perfect  
than the journey-work of the stars,  
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a  
grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,  
And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the  
highest,  
And the running blackberry would adorn  
the parlors of heaven,  
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts  
to scorn all machinery,  
And the cow crunching with depress'd  
head surpasses any statue,



And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels. (1973, 59)

Here is a more extreme example:

A thief visited Zen Master Ryokan's hut but discovered that there was nothing to take. Coming home up the path, Ryokan saw him and said, "You came a long way to visit and shouldn't leave empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift." Surprised, the thief nevertheless took his clothes and fled. Naked, Ryokan looked outside and later wrote: "The thief left it behind: the moon at my window."

—Zen Story

In spite of the bonuses that Stafford mentions, Walt Whitman's miracle mouse, Eve Merriam's grapefruit juice, and Ryokan's moon at the window—the subject of gratitude is not very visible in our culture today. I have a book of poetry by Robert Bly called *The Soul is Here For Its Own Joy* (1995), but it contains nothing on gratitude and only one or two poems about joy. Much of poetry and literature is about love and longing and mourning and death. Not a lot of it exults

in creation, with notable exceptions, such as G. M. Hopkins. Most stories in the news report on disasters, crimes, and crooks. Many people complain more than they rejoice. If we are to become wiser, as suggested by the articles in this issue as well as the poems cited here, we need some emergent wisdom to appear in us and shift our thinking to embrace the larger whole and the greater good of which we are all part. Or, as the Buddhists put it, we need to get beneath our own storyline so that we can partake more readily and freely in the resplendent world.

Using the concept that Andy Johnson suggests in this issue, this kind of change could signify growth for some of us or movement for others. Either way, it would show up as a vector on a trajectory from plaint to pleasure, from negativity to nurturance, from holes to wholes, from self-pity to celebration. A way to foster wisdom, or at least to gain a wiser perspective on the world, could come from cultivating an attitude of gratitude.

To do this, we can all sing this early Quaker song:

My life flows on in endless song,  
Above earth's lamentation.  
I hear the real though far-off hymn  
That hails a new creation.

Through all the tumult and the strife,  
I hear the music ringing,  
It sounds an echo in my soul.  
How can I keep from singing?

What though the tempest round me roars,  
I know the truth, it liveth.  
What though the darkness 'round me close,  
Songs in the night it giveth.

No storm can shake my inmost calm  
While to that rock I'm clinging.  
Since love prevails in heav'n and earth,  
How can I keep from singing? (Unitarian  
Universalist Association 1993)

#### REFERENCES

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