

## Hallelujah All the Way

Let me begin by saying I love to complain. And I'm not ever going to give it up. And I agree with Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*. To insist on always looking on the bright side can be a dangerous path. Critical thinking is essential to creating a just world. If we get lost in trying to create happy, happy, joy, joy, we'll lose the ability to recognize the forces that are, let's face it, merrily raping and plundering our planet and ignoring the needs of the powerless, let alone to recognize our own misdeeds. We are all beings of lightness and darkness. If I had to put a sock in it every time my dark side wanted to vent, I might as well be bound and gagged.

However, I do think we could all do with a little more heaven in our lives. Sometimes hell has us in its grip and we can't find our way out.

I've had eczema all my life, but this summer, it went crazy. I looked like I'd been rolling naked in a patch of poison ivy. A red, peeling, bumpy, flaky rash covered my feet, my calves, my knees, my hands and arms and shoulders and neck. The real kicker was when it then came up and covered my face. Suddenly I looked about 75 years old. When you're as vain as I am, that's torture. Plus, it hurt. The skin was all dry and tight, even though I moisturized constantly, and when I smiled, it was painful. So I smiled less and less. In fact, I was depressed for weeks. I had never known depression to last for more than a day or two before this, but I was one sad sack. "Somebody please shoot me" became a kind of mantra with me. Now, the road to getting back to normal was long and bumpy, and included both eastern and western medicine, and five different health practitioners, and much trial and error, but also, I believe, was greatly aided by immersing myself in the study of gratitude. Certain changes in diet and medicine probably helped, but when someone who knew what I'd been going through recently asked me "how did you clear it up?" without even thinking, I said "Gratitude."

Eczema is a mysterious ailment. Doctors still don't know what causes it, but they do know stress exacerbates it. I really think spending more minutes in my day being grateful and therefore fewer being stressed had a profound effect on my skin.

Now, I've long known that gratitude is a powerful virtue to cultivate and essential to creating harmony with a partner. I've read that story of the samurai and the zen master in every tantra class for couples that Peter and I

have ever taught, because part of creating a happy union is being liberal in your expression of gratitude to your mate. Do I follow my own advice? What, with that jerk?

I could do better. I've always "believed" in gratitude, but until lately didn't cultivate it very deliberately. But, wow, focusing my attention on gratitude has been such a blessing to me these past couple of months. I'm in the Berkeley Bowl. Mangoes. Oranges. Strawberries. Dill weed. Basil. All turn into a rapturous experience of smelling and seeing. Or I'm on my bike to pick up Isaiah from school and tears come to my eyes as I notice the beauty all along the route I've traveled every day for two and-a-half years.

The other night, I was cranky about some imagined slight I'd suffered from Peter, stewing in my own juices. Then it was time to do my gratitude journal. I started listing the blessings I could remember from that day. The last one I wrote was when I remembered Peter had voluntarily taken Isaiah to school that morning to give me time to work on this service. The rush of gratitude I felt for his kindness canceled out my cranky feelings from moments before, and I was back in love with my husband. I think Albert Schweitzer was right - if there is a secret to life, gratitude is it.

In the century before Christ, The Roman statesman, Cicero, called a thankful heart not only the greatest virtue, but also the parent of all virtues. Recently the scientific community started to confirm its power.

One of the books I read while preparing for this service was titled "Thanks - How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier" by Robert A. Emmons, PhD. He and a colleague did studies at UC Davis and found that a regular practice of keeping a gratitude journal not only created more happiness in peoples' lives, but also improved their interpersonal relationships, their energy level, and their sleep. So I read this and thought, "Yes, that's what I need, a regular **practice** of gratitude. Ok, so I'll be the guinea pig. I'll do this. I'll keep a journal for a month before the service so I can have lots of personal evidence to report on." And then time went by and I thought, "OK, I'll do this for **three** weeks before the service. That'll be enough time." And then, well, two weeks ago, I finally started my gratitude journal, and for **2 days** I was faithful. And then 2 days went by and I forgot both days. But just after that I found the secret to regular practice. I'll tell you more about that in a few minutes.

But now we'll take a moment to do a gratitude journaling practice together:

There should be a pencil and index card under your chair. Reach down and get those now, and put anything else that might be on your lap on the floor. Now straighten your spine, close your eyes, and take a few deep breaths. Just let your mind empty as you follow your breath in and out for a few breaths. Now, begin taking a look at the blessings in your life, be they people, possessions, talents, passions, or your five senses that allow you to savor the world. Anything that occurs to you that you are grateful for is right. Begin a list on your card when you're ready. Write down ten things that you're grateful for. When you're through, just close your eyes again and return to your breathing.

Now, if you are willing, please find a partner, preferably someone sitting next to you or near you, and take turns sharing at least three things from your list with each other. This will be very brief. We'll take no more than a minute for this. Just read from your lists to each other. When you're through, thank your partner, then you can close your eyes again and return to your breathing.

Okay. That's it. You just participated in two gratitude practices. The writing was one. The sharing with a partner was another. Making a list every day of ten things you are grateful for is your cornerstone practice for deepening your experience of heaven on earth. It's easy. It doesn't take long. And you'll find that the more you experience gratitude, the more things in life you'll find yourself being grateful for. However, it's easy to forget. This I know well. My secret to establishing a regular practice? Get a buddy.

Now, I've got a buddy for another practice in my life, and it's working so well. Penny Peak and I buddy up to clear the clutter in our houses. We call each other at 9 in the morning to begin, we each clear clutter for an hour, and then we call again at 10 to report on our progress and declare ourselves finished for the day. You can ask the women in my women's group - I've been talking about de-cluttering my house for years. But only after getting a partner have I really begun to make progress. If you're like me and you need help establishing a new habit, and if you decide you'd like to try adding this journaling practice to your life, I recommend getting a buddy. You can share your lists with each other or not. The important thing is to make contact, either by phone or email, whichever works best for you, to remind each other to do your practice, and make your list. Find a buddy here today if you like. What better use of this gift we've given ourselves here, this Live Oak UU Fellowship? We can help each other get to heaven.

Now, there is a "graduate level" of this gratitude practice that we have to talk about, because I called this service "Hallelujah All the Way" for a reason. It's

pretty easy to be thankful for chocolate and hummingbirds, good health and backrubs. It's a challenge to be grateful for the hard stuff. And yet, how many of us have discovered first-hand, that some of the most difficult experiences in our lives have held blessings in disguise, or have led us to insights or personal growth or taught us lessons that we were, in time, grateful to have received?

Rumi says:

This being human is a guest house  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

I love the image of myself meeting adversity at the door, laughing, gratefully.  
Uh huh...

Rumi's hospitality is like enlightenment: a state of grace that we can't reach  
by any amount of horsewhipping ourselves.

To quote M.J. Ryan, the author of *Attitudes of Gratitude*, "As far as I can tell, gratitude is generated in two ways; one, by a spontaneous upswelling of the heart toward the wonder of life and all its particulars; and two, by a conscious decision to practice looking at what's right in our lives rather than focusing on what's missing. Either way, we don't get to gratitude by guilt trips." She goes

on to say “ I know for myself that there are days when it is impossible for me to feel thankful for anything, no matter how hard I try - and if that's true for you sometimes, be gentle with yourself. The more you allow what is true for you to be true, and the less you “should” yourself, the more space you create for the possibility of gratitude to quietly, softly enter your heart.”

We are so blessed. Whatever source we believe is the giver, some concept of God or the randomness of the Big Bang, the fact of our being here, alive, at this moment, the fact of the butterfly's wing, the sun's warmth, the strawberry's taste, is an incredible gift. None of us - bird, flower, person - did anything to earn this gift, nor is anything required in return. No thanks is required, but when we remember to give it, it's one of the best gifts we can give ourselves.

Please join me in a moment of prayer:

Dear Spirit of Life and Love, Giver of the miracle that is our lives, and this beautiful planet that is our home, we are so grateful for the gifts we have received. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Help us to remember to be grateful for all of it. Amen.

Please rise as you are able and join me in singing “For All That is Our Life.”