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WORDS OF GRATITUDE

for Mind, Body, and Soul



*Love wholeheartedly,
be surprised,
give thanks and praise—
then you will
discover the fullness
of your life.*

—BROTHER DAVID STEINDL—RAST



INTRODUCTION:
PROVERBS AS WORDS OF GRATITUDE

Brother David Steindl-Rast

 Chinese proverb popped into my mind the moment I read the opening question of this book, “What is gratitude?” The proverb answers: *When you drink from a stream, remember the spring.* Remember! Be mindful! Think! Thinking and thanking spring from the same root—in the realm of language as well as in the soul realm. Only the thoughtful are thankful. Our proverb caught it all in one image: remembering the spring as we drink from the source; this is gratitude.

Suddenly I realized that one important place to look for words of gratitude is among the world’s proverbs. Gratitude runs as an undercurrent throughout human experience at its

most vibrant, always and everywhere. Age after age we humans have harvested the fruit of experience as perennial wisdom and distilled its essence into proverbs. *Proverbs are the daughters of experience* (Dutch). No wonder that they tell us much about gratitude, much that reflects and confirms the insights of this book.

My childhood culture in Austria—between the two World Wars—still agreed with the Tatars for whom *Proverbs are the jewelry of speech*, or the African Yoruba, for whom *A proverb is the horse of conversation*. My uncles, whose every other sentence was a proverb, rode that horse gallantly. But in our post-modern world, proverbs are an endangered species. One specimen that has survived happens to deal with gratitude: *Never look a gift horse in the mouth*.

Today's way of dealing with the topic of gratitude must be more sophisticated than proverbs; our time is self-conscious, reflective, rational, analytic. The two authors of this book

are eminently qualified to treat their topic in an up-to-date way. Robert A. Emmons has pioneered a strictly scientific study of gratitude and has achieved significant psychological and sociological results. Joanna Hill brings to her task a wide anthropological horizon and a refined spiritual sensitivity. It is all the more striking that their carefully reasoned insights match, point by point, the intuitive imagery of perennial wisdom that speaks in proverbs. *Though a proverb be abandoned, it is not falsified*, the Irish say.

This book offers us words of gratitude from many different cultures and historical periods, but it does more: it carries a message. Gratitude is here presented as more than a feeling, a virtue, or an experience; gratitude emerges as an attitude we can freely choose in order to create a better life for ourselves and for others. The Nigerian Hausa put it this way: *Give thanks for a little and you will find a lot*. The key to finding gifts wherever we look is in our own hands; the key is gratitude. *Count your*

blessings and you will find them to be countless, even in the midst of adversity and tragic circumstances. *A lame foot is better than none.* Who can deny it? *Better eye sore than all blind.*

Proverbs are the coin of the common people (Russian), of the poor who have no other coins to count, who can only survive by counting their blessings. The hungry have come up with a thousand variations on the theme of this Ovambo proverb from Angola: *Hunger is a good cook. Hunger is the best sauce* (English). *When you are hungry, nothing is tasteless* (Japan). *Hunger turns beans into almonds* (Italian).

Beggars can't be choosers. But they can choose to be grateful, and they do so—more often, perhaps, than those who live in plenty. *The smallest fish is better than an empty dish. Better a crust than no bread at all.* Or, with some humor: *Better a louse in the pot than no meat at all.*

It moves me deeply to think that so many of the world's noblest words of gratitude have come down to us from the

unwashed, nameless, homeless ones. *Better a bush than an open field*, they said, when they sought shelter for the night. And in the morning, stiff from the cold, they stretched their limbs and gratefully acknowledged: *The sun is the poor people's blanket*. Gratefulness creates solidarity with the poor throughout the world.

If we have eyes to look through deceptive trappings, we realize that we are all poor. *Naked we come into this world, naked we leave it*; the proverb paraphrases Job, the biblical archetype of one who is poor in a spiritual sense. Whatever we have is gift. To look up to the Source of all gifts makes us grateful; it distinguishes us from dumb beasts. *A hog never looks up to the one who threshes down the acorns*. What makes us truly human is gratefulness. *Better a grateful dog than an ungrateful human*.

By looking up, by raising our eyes above our limited horizon, we are more likely to perceive the blessings hidden in affliction. The delay of a gift may be as great a gift as the

delayed gift itself. *Late spring: great blessing.* Gratefulness is not a state in which suffering and adversity are selectively ignored. Rather, gratefulness makes us focus on the opportunity that adversity offers, the opportunity of authentic spiritual growth. This turns suffering into growing pains. *A bitter winter brings a sweet summer.* If we dare to taste even the bitterness as a gift, it will bring about sweetness. We will find that *Not a single season is without fruit* (Turkish), and *Everything is good in its season* (Italian).

Many of the lines I am using in this Introduction to connect and parallel the proverbs are quotes and paraphrases from the book you are holding in hand. One of the most helpful features of this book is that it suggests methods for cultivating gratitude. A Polish proverb is skeptical in this respect. *Gratitude has gone to heaven and pulled up the ladder.* Yet, even this proverb implies two main contentions of Emmons and Hill: a ladder of gratitude exists and it leads to a heavenly

state—if only we can retrieve that ladder. Retrieve it we can, by practicing step-by-step that gratitude which is the door to many heavenly gifts.

That door is low, however, and we must be humble to enter. Pride is one of the hindrances to gratitude, to which the authors devote a special chapter. *Pride and grace dwell never in one place.* The most harmful form of pride is our contemporary notion of entitlement. By considering every gift as ours by right, we set no limits to our wants, impoverishing our lives in the midst of abundance. *They are not poor that have little, but they that desire much. The richest man, whatever his lot, is the one who's content with whatever he's got* (Dutch); nothing causes content but gratitude. As a Turkish proverb says: *For the grateful, the gnats make music; for the ungrateful harps and flutes make only noise.*

A contented heart is a continual feast. Since those who know how to feast never lack company, gratitude brings people

together in peace and harmony. Even rigorous clinical studies show that gratefulness tends to build and strengthen social bonds and friendships. *Gratefulness waters old friendships and makes new ones sprout* (Russian). *Gift giving binds friends together*, claims another Russian proverb; *Bound is he that takes a gift*, replies an English one. Yes, “bound,” but by what bonds? By the very bonds that hold a healthy society together. Only fools flaunt their independence. To recognize the interdependence of all with all is true wisdom; to live by it is true contentment. The give-and-take of a grateful society thrives on what this Russian proverb counsels: *Speak when you receive; be silent when you give.*

People remind us of their gifts; God never reminds us. We have to remind ourselves to be mindful, to remember. The greatest gift is life itself. A Chinese proverb reminds us, tongue in cheek: *The poorest beggar will not cross a rotten bridge.* Still, one gift is greater than life: gratitude; for without gratitude we

will not appreciate life. So the final chapter of this book deals with reminding ourselves of God's gifts, with praying for gratitude.

If we cannot pray from gratitude, we can pray to experience gratitude. To many people this comes quite spontaneously. For others it seems too much like "talking to someone up there." Yet, "God isn't someone else," as Thomas Merton expressed a universal mystical insight. To live our innermost truth with integrity is gratefulness; it is the full response to what is gratuitously given—namely, everything. Our very existence is a "given" fact; what we mindfully make of it is our gratitude-in-action.

Washing the dishes, writing a memo, mowing the lawn—all can be acts of gratitude. Still, many people find it helpful to perform some simple gesture that is *nothing but* an expression of gratitude. The website www.gratefulness.org offers the simple ritual of lighting a candle in cyberspace. Statistics

show that amazing numbers of people avail themselves of this opportunity. Obviously, there is a need in many hearts to express without words the desire to be grateful, to remember. Here we come back to the image with which we began, *When you drink from the stream, remember the spring.*

This book itself resembles a mountain stream whose water sparkles in the sunlight. Reading it, we feel refreshed by the words of gratitude that flow through these pages and remember that they arose from the currents of many traditions fed by the never-failing Spring deep in the human heart. This book is a gift for which I myself am deeply grateful.