

© Newsday
November 25, 1999

GIVING THANKS
***GRATITUDE IS AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF OUR DEPENDENCE ON
EACH OTHER***

By Katti Gray
Staff Writer

Miss Goldie, Miss Beverly and the others were my mother's quilting partners and confidantes.

They helped usher her body into the grave on a day of soft, southern rain last April, their weighty voices quivering in the kind of song country folks raise when death comes.

Some glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away...

It was upbeat, more a funereal cheer than dirge. As the ground received Mama, their singing dropped to a hum. Miss Goldie leaned the stump of her amputated left arm against my right side. Another in Mama's circle of women hugged me on my left side, kissed my cheek, pressed a worn-out \$5 bill into my palm and smiled.

She moved to each of my four siblings, giving them the same token. It was a tribute, payment for my mother's friendship and something exceedingly more valuable than the Dairy Queen comfort food our \$5 bills bought that day.

For some people, such gestures are honed responses, the overflow of grateful hearts. Those who seriously ponder this matter of gratitude—who seize it as a point of study, lecture, preaching, praying, chanting, writing and convening—say it can make a person savor a simple cup of coffee.

It revels in a neighborly nod to the morning, musicians on the subway, an ocean beach at dusk, love burnished by time, a surprise phone call to cut a midnight of despair.

Even if a gift was procured with cash, the recipient's expressed appreciation is what money cannot buy. Gratitude considers what one possesses rather than lacks, presses on during difficulty, lifts a joyous song in the face of death.

It defies by-the-bootstraps individualism and insists that none of us makes it on our own. It takes no one and no thing for granted.

It is a glance, a touch, a word, a feeling to convey that what was given is precious.

It is a way of giving back.

"Gratitude is an acknowledgement of our dependence on each other. That seems to me to be a foundational definition," said the Rev. Donald McCullough, president of San Francisco Theological Seminary and author of "Say Please, Say Thank You: The Respect We Owe One Another." "When I am thankful, I acknowledge that I do not live alone, that I am part of a community, that I am bound by community. Gratitude is a primal act of courtesy." Psychologists are measuring the arguably tangible effects of living gratefully.

Bookstores have devoted whole sections to that and related topics. Television's Oprah engaged, among others, Sarah Ban Breathnach, author of "Simple Abundance Journal of Gratitude," firing up her book sales.

The United Nations has declared 2000 an International Year of Thanksgiving. And the Dallas-based Center for World Thanks-Giving, which lobbied for the U.N.

designation, next year will host a third international conference on whether small and grandiose acts of thankfulness can strengthen one's spirit, familial and community ties, and maybe bind a fragmented world.

That more universal hope has driven the man congregants greet as "Father Luis" as he-upright and unbent at 78-walks the halls of St. Emeric's Catholic Church on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Officially retired but about to embark on yet another globetrot for the kind of conciliating work he has done for decades, the Rev. Luis Maria Dolan was the Dallas center's liaison regarding the U.N.'s thanksgiving declaration.

In a St. Emeric conference room, Dolan showed off the design of a postage stamp-it is being kept under wraps while some legal particulars are resolved-that he and his cohorts hope will be sold to commemorate the year of thanksgiving. He also was ruminating about the complexity of a simple word like "thanks." "So difficult, this question of gratitude," said Dolan, born as the third generation of an Irish clan in Argentina. "If we want to have peace in the world, we have to have peace among religions. If we want to avoid war, we must have dialogue across culture and religion ... Somehow it all comes back to gratitude, the small recognition of each other. It's about my wanting to know you. It is my saying, 'I do not know you, but I really do want you to come to my party.' "One does not necessarily have to be religious to show gratitude. One does have to be human." Retaining one's humanity can prove challenging in an age when clothes, cosmetics, cars, computers, groceries and who-knows-what can be purchased via

the Internet, where even gassing up the tank can be finished with the swipe of a magnetic strip and no contact with another.

GROWING UP in Nazi-occupied Austria, in a Catholic community whose resistance to Adolf Hitler carried a price, "we often had nothing to eat," said Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk cloistered near upstate Elmira.

He wrote "Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer." The most popular of his half-dozen books, it was copyrighted in 1984 and is being prepared for reissue sometime next year.

"Many times I thought we'd starve to death. We were so grateful for the little we had that we dare not take it for granted," Steindl-Rast continued. "The more we were under pressure during those last months and weeks of the war, neighbors who barely knew each other's names worked together.

"Affluence tends to dull you to that kind of interdependence...But the whole cosmos is one big family. We all are brothers and sisters and pets and furniture." Dr. Uma Mysorekar was reared in a Hindu household in India that taught her earliest lessons in gratitude. Children in her homeland, for the most part, were indoctrinated to view their parents as demi- gods of sorts.

"We were told they were of the utmost importance," said Mysorekar, a practicing gynecologist and president of the 17,000-member Hindu Temple Society of North America in Flushing, Queens.

"In one of the mythologies, the goddess Parvati wanted to test her sons, and she says, 'Who will go around the universe and get home first?' One son leaves home. The second circles his parents three times and says, 'I am here.' So, looking at our parents is like looking at God. It makes you grateful." Although the debate is far from settled, some social scientists contend that babies have an innate sense of thanksgiving, emanating largely from their blind reliance on others for care. Even the smallest infant, in gurgles and coos and smiles, expresses delight at being fed, cleaned or cuddled, sociologists say.

Robert Emmons is a psychologist at the University of California at Davis. The notion that giving thanks produces more things to be thankful about is "more than just an empty proverb," he said.

Last year, Emmons conducted what he said was a scientific study of 200 students on the campus. For almost three months, a third of that group was asked to keep a written record of either the significant events of the day or their minor complaints and hassles or the things in their lives for which they were thankful. They also logged their emotions, physical symptoms and behaviors for coping.

Only the latter group experienced a higher sense of personal well-being, Emmons said. They had more energy, made more progress toward their stated life goals, had better dispositions, even spent an average of one and a half hours more in exercise each week.

"This capacity for being grateful is built in to people," Emmons said. "It's a kind of language. But you have to learn to talk it." Sometimes life offers lessons in that language. Three years ago, Judith Brooks said doctors had as much as pronounced her dead, told her family to prepare for her burial while she lay comatose for two weeks in a Suffolk County hospital.

She had been trying to quit drinking cold-turkey -she started imbibing at 13- when police found her lying flat on a floor of the Wyandanch home she shared with her then 4- and 9-year-old children. (They telephoned the officers when Brooks began hallucinating.) "I had pneumonia in my lungs. There was just a whole bunch of stuff wrong with me," said Brooks, a clerical assistant for a weekly newspaper. "They told my sister and my mother to get prepared, that I would not make it. Two weeks later, I just woke up." Not that she'd seen the white light that those convinced they have crossed over into death and back say they see, Brooks said. But she was changed.

"When I woke up, it was just like I had been sleeping," she said. "I felt I had been given another chance. Now, I try to help other people in the ways that I can. I find it hard to say no. For me, to let people know how I am blessed, blesses me. It is a feeling of great appreciation." Gratitude is the "first and major hallmark of enlightenment" in Buddhism, said the Rev. Madeline Ko-i Bastis, a Zen priest and founder of an East Hampton project, Peaceful Dwelling, caring for the terminally ill and training care-givers.

"One should show appreciation for everything in life, the good and the bad," said Bastis, expounding on that notion of enlightenment.

"When one is in the present moment, one can appreciate everything as it comes up. Even if you're terribly ill and near death, you can appreciate the sunrise." She recalled an experience with a woman named Lucy, ravaged by breast cancer and, in the last days of her life, unable to swallow much of anything.

"On her tray was a tangerine. She didn't even have the strength to open it," Bastis, a hospital chaplain, said.

"...When I stuck my nail in the peel, the room filled with the aroma of this tangerine. And Lucy just said 'Aaaaaahhh.' "That's what gratitude is ...It doesn't say, 'May I get a better job? find a better lover? win the lottery?'" It keeps an

82-year-old traipsing the hills of Seattle for his daily exercise, despite the Parkinson's disease, diabetes and hearing problems that beset him.

"I appreciate the body that I do have. I have had eight operations and some great struggles. But I expect them," said the Rev. Dale Turner. "Grateful Living" is a compilation of columns he has written over the past 17 years for the Seattle Times.

If he has continued to craft them, he said, it is because he believes his personal observations and expressions will, layer upon layer, make a difference.

"It's an unfinished world, and God really does grant us the freedom to shape it," said Turner, a retired Congregationalist minister.

Said seminary president McCullough: "We would like to think we are the people who will make the big sacrifices, to boast of what we would have done in Germany during the Nazi invasion...That's an important question, yes. But character is built one small brick at a time. Who we are will be shaped by our everyday encounters with each other.

"Day by day, year by year, being grateful, these things go to make up who we really are." MY SIBLINGS AND I learned last December of our mother's highly peculiar and advanced case of ovarian cancer.

Already, the disease was consuming, swelling her belly to the point that she appeared to verge on toppling over at times. She died within the four months that doctors said she would.

Or so we thought.

On the afternoon of Mama's flying away, a childhood friend informed that our fiercely motherly mother-demanding that her news be kept secret-confided nearly seven and a half years ago that she knew of her illness.

She had taken ownership of it. Mama, our friend said, wanted to leave here on her own terms, without relinquishing her life to meddling physicians and children-or the three sisters she loved like chocolate cake but fought with, too.

"Your Mama said she wanted to enjoy y'all and the grands," was how that neighbor put it.

Somehow, it was a comfort to us. It was our mother's gift. And, for it, we remain grateful.

Reproduced with permission of Newsday, Inc. www.newsday.com.