

Anatomy of Gratitude by On Being

What follows is the audio and transcript of an interview from On Being, with Brother David Steindl-Rast with Krista Tippett

MS. KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: Brother David Steindl-Rast is a Benedictine monk and teacher, an author beloved around the world. Now nearing 90, he's lived through world war, the end of an empire, and the fascist takeover of his country. His TED talk has been viewed nearly five million times on the subject of gratitude — a practice increasingly interrogated by scientists and physicians as a key to human well-being. And Brother David is a conversation partner in that emerging discovery. He was also an early pioneer, together with Thomas Merton, of dialogue between Christian and Buddhist monastics. He sees mysticism as the birthright of every human being. And his anatomy of gratitude is full-blooded, reality-based, and redeeming.

BROTHER DAVID STEINDL-RAST: I don't speak of the gift, because not for everything that's given to you can you really be grateful. You can't be grateful for war in a given situation, or violence, or sickness, things like that. So the key when people ask, can you be grateful for everything? No, not for everything, but in every moment.

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being.

Brother David Steindl-Rast is founder and senior advisor for the Network for Grateful Living. I traveled to Austria to speak with him at the monastery Gut Aich Priory in St. Gilgen, where he now spends most of each year.

[music: "Seven League Boots" by Zoe Keating]

MS. TIPPETT: You were born Franz Kuno?

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yeah, that's correct.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. Here — in Vienna.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: In Vienna, yeah. I'm very close to home again.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes. And here we are. How would you describe the religious and spiritual background of your childhood?

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Of my childhood?

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah, of your childhood.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: I think we had something at that time that was — I would call it Christendom, that doesn't exist anymore.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: It was a kind of combination between the Christian tradition, and all the social forms and customs, this was all one piece. And in my childhood, it was just breaking down. It was still strong enough to give me good support, and I like support. My mother always said when I was a little baby, and I wasn't very tightly wrapped, as they used to wrap the babies...

MS. TIPPETT: Swaddled, yeah.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: ...I would yell. Only when I was I very tightly wrapped did I feel comfortable. So this tight wrap of Christendom, where you knew exactly what to do, when, and how, that was very good for me. It was very congenial. But as I say, it was already breaking down. There were all the wounded from World War I, I remember, either sitting by the street and begging, or in wheelchairs, the ones who were better off in wheelchairs, but they are a very important part of the population in my childhood as I remember. But I'm grateful for the childhood I had. I had a warm, and supportive family. And ...

MS. TIPPETT: And then it was in your teenage years that the world changed...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Then it really collapsed...

MS. TIPPETT: ...so utterly ...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: ...completely.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. And also interesting to me, Austria became an occupied country, it became a fascist country. And the church's role, the church's place in that very dramatic dynamic — because the church became almost a place of contrast to the culture, right? Which — that's one way that Christendom — that monolithic Christendom was coming apart.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yes. Yes. I see — since I was exactly 12 when Hitler came, so that's — I entered my teens and I spent all my teens under Hitler. And while at the first decade of my life was, so to say, unquestioned world, then when you get into your teens you have to rebel against that world. But instead we rebelled against Hitler because that was then the authority. So we were kind of pushed into resistance. And it was very clear to us, and it was very strong. And the church was the support of it.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, I want to drill down and focus for the rest of our time on the notion of gratitude. But I think it's really important that we've kind of delved into the backdrop of your life, and how you came to that, because there's depth, and heft, and gravitas. I think gratitude is one of these words culturally that can become superficial. Right?

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Can become, yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: But we're going to talk about spiritual gratitude, and the depth of that. One thing you do is you use the word "gratefulness," sometimes rather than "gratitude," and I

wonder if you would talk about what is helpful about that language for you...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: ...of “gratefulness” at getting at kind of the gratitude as you understand it.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: The reason why I use the words “gratitude” and “gratefulness” and “thanksgiving” in the way in which I use them is that we really need different terms for our experience. And we all know from experience that moments in which this gratitude wells up in our hearts are experienced first as if something were filling up within us, filling with joy, really. But not yet articulate. And then it comes to a point where the heart overflows and we sing, and we thank somebody, and for that I like a different term. And then I call that “thanksgiving.”

MS. TIPPETT: OK.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: And the two of them are two aspects, or two phases, actually, of the process that is gratitude. So that’s why I’m using it in this way. And this idea of a vessel that it is still inarticulate until it overflows, that is also very helpful in another way. It’s like the bowl of a fountain when it fills up, and it’s very quiet, and still, and then when it overflows, it starts to make noise, and it sparkles, and it ripples down.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: And that is really when the joy comes to itself, so to say, when it is articulate. And for us, for many people in our culture, the heart fills up with joy, with gratefulness, and just at the moment when it wants to overflow and really the joy comes to itself, at that moment, advertisement comes in and says “No, no, there’s a better model, and there’s a newer model, and your neighbor has a bigger one.” And so instead of overflowing, we make the bowl bigger, and bigger, and bigger. And it never overflows. It never...

MS. TIPPETT: That’s so interesting.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: ...gives us this joy. It’s affluent, this affluency side that means it always flows in, it doesn’t overflow. It flows in, and in, and in, and in, and chokes us eventually. And we don’t have to deprive ourselves of anything, but we can learn that the real joys come with quality, not with quantity.

MS. TIPPETT: OK.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yeah, and that’s an important distinction.

MS. TIPPETT: There are a few quality, say, aspects, or qualities of the experience of gratefulness and thanksgiving that you’ve noted that I’d love to just draw out. And one of them is beholding, that surprise can be a beginning...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: ...of being grateful. And beholding, and also listening. I guess what we’re talking about here is attending.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yeah. Well, for me, this idea of listening and really looking and

beholding, that comes in when people ask well, how shall we practice this gratefulness?

And, there is a very simple kind of methodology to it: stop, look, go. Most of us are caught up in schedules, and deadlines, and rushing around. And so the first thing is that we have to stop, because otherwise we are not really coming into this present moment at all. And we can't even appreciate the opportunity that is given to us because we rush by and it rushes by. So stopping is the first thing. But that doesn't have to be long.

MS. TIPPETT: No.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: When you are in practice, a split second is enough to stop. And then you look. What is, now, the opportunity of this given moment? Only this moment, the unique opportunity this moment gives? And that is where this beholding comes in.

And if we really see what the opportunity is, we must, of course, not stop there, but we must do something with it. Go. Avail yourself of that opportunity. And if you do that, if you try practicing that at this moment, tonight, we would already be happier people, because it has an immediate feedback of joy. I always say not — I don't speak of the gift, because not for everything that's given to you can you really be grateful. You can't be grateful for war in a given situation, or violence, or domestic violence, or sickness, things like that. There are many things for which you cannot be grateful. But in every moment, you can be grateful. For instance, the opportunity to learn something from a very difficult experience, what to grow by it, or even to protest, to stand up, and take a stand. That is a wonderful gift in a situation in which things are not the way they ought to be. So opportunity is really the key when people ask, can you be grateful for everything? No, not for everything, but in every moment.

[music: "Suite for Solo Cello No. 1 in G Major, II. Allemande" by Johann Sebastian Bach, performed by Edgar Meyer]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett and this is On Being. Today at the Gut Aich Priory in St. Gilgen, Austria, with Br. David Steindl-Rast.

MS. TIPPETT: And you are a Benedictine, and, it seems to me that the Psalms, in fact, provide such a rich demonstration of — gratitude is woven into almost every Psalm, in some way, right? But it is held together with an expression of every conceivable human emotion: anger, fury, murderous fury, a sense of injustice and unfairness, and despair, and sadness, and disappointment. And the gratitude is still there kind of as an insistence, but it's more resilient than the circumstances of the moment, right? It's not a reaction to their circumstances of the moment, but it's an intention that is held. I don't know, you ...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: It's not a ...

MS. TIPPETT: What is it?

BR. STEINDL-RAST: You put it very well.

MS. TIPPETT: It's ...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: It's not a reaction to the present moment, because that would be something automatic. But it is a chosen...

MS. TIPPETT: It's a choice, yes.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: ...response. It's a real response to every moment.

MS. TIPPETT: And I love — I think when you say, not just to what's happened, but to the opportunity that you can discern, that has been presented.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: And that is why it really secures the kind of joy that us human beings look for. I always say joy is the happiness that doesn't depend on what happens. And, usually, we have the idea, well, when something nice happens, then I'm happy, and when something bad happens, of course I'm unhappy. Well, you can be unhappy, and yet joyful. We don't think of that. But there is a deep inner peace and joy in the midst of sadness. If we feel our way into it, we know that. For instance, losing a friend, a dear friend under normal circumstances, not to an accident and so forth, but under normal circumstances, losing our grandparents, losing our parents when they get very old, there's a deep sadness, but there is also a great joy...

MS. TIPPETT: A celebration.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: ...a celebration, a joy for all the love that we received and gave, and that kind of joy is what we really want, because happiness is not steady. But joy can be steady. And that's what we really want. We want the happiness that lasts.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. There's also this — oh, I think, again, in the Psalms, "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." And then somewhere you — which is, again, kind of a choice to acknowledge that every day. Whatever happened yesterday, whatever you're dreading today, but something — you quoted — you used some lines of Maya Angelou, which, to me, is a wonderful paraphrase of that, anyway. "This is a wonderful day. I've never seen this one before."

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: Which is an orientation to the day, right?

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yes. That uniqueness of every given moment of every day, to open your eyes and know another day. We can't take it for granted. We can't take it for granted. In my youth, we couldn't take it for granted because every night the bombs fell. But if you maintained this attitude, it's just as realistic. All sorts of reasons why you couldn't see another day. And you do. And that's a wonderful thing. It's a wonderful thing.

MS. TIPPETT: You also talk about gratitude as being absolutely inextricable from the notion of belonging. And I think you're talking about belonging to God, and belonging to each other.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: Say something about that.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: I remember, the grace that Buddhists pray before a meal starts with the words, "Innumerable beings brought us this food. We should know how it comes to us." And when you put that into practice and look at what's there at your table, on your plate, there is no end to connectedness. In the end, for instance, most people don't think of it, but in the end, we always eat earth. We eat earth. Not in an abstract way, in a very concrete way. This humus is what we eat, or crystals when we eat salt, it's pretty obvious

that comes out of the earth. That's earth, directly.

When we eat vegetables, well, the vegetables were nourished by all the nutrients in the earth, and then now we eat them, or the fruits of these plants. If you eat meat or fish, then they were nourished by vegetables, and they were nourished by the earth. Always comes back to earth. But that is only one aspect. Most of it was grown, so people had to work on sowing it, and harvesting it, packaging it, transporting it. There you have already a couple of thousand people whom you will never see, never know by name, never meet, and yet without them, there wouldn't be anything on your plate. There's this wonderful cartoon where the family sits at Thanksgiving around the table and says, "Thank you, Jesus." And then in a cloud comes a farm worker, whose name happens to be Jesus, like the Mexican farm workers.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: And says, "De nada." So, all the farm workers, they have been working on getting this food to us, horizontally with our people, our animals, our plants, the earth, and vertically with the great mystery in which we are embedded, which those who use the term correctly call "God." It's not somebody up there. It's more personal than it would be if there's somebody up there. It is this tremendous mystery that — to which I am, as a human being, totally directed, totally related to. That makes us human. We are related to that which we call God. It's tremendous reality.

MS. TIPPETT: And this inextricability from — or this connection between gratitude and dependence, and interdependence ...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Interdependence.

MS. TIPPETT: Right, that any complex experience of gratitude would make us aware of that.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Well, the main thing is to think it. I think the beginning is — the starting point is to think it through. The moment you speak of independence, I can just say, what are you talking about? What is anybody talking about who says I'm independent?

MS. TIPPETT: Even from one's enemies.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: From every point of view. It is always a yes, we belong together, a lived yes, we belong together. So it's a decision. It's something that has more to do with the will than with your emotions or with your thoughts. It is the clear will — I say yes to this embedding, to this connection with all. I say yes to it. I'm going to say yes to it, not just with my mouth, but I actually live that yes.

MS. TIPPETT: I want to read something — I think one thing when we talk about something like gratitude, or even compassion, it can sound so, again, it's kind of cerebral, kind of like a lovely idea. And obviously we're breaking that down, but I think it comes through very much in your writing that gratitude is something full-bodied and full-blooded. Here's something you wrote — and literally full-bodied — you said, "I'm grateful allowing my emotions fully to taste and to express the joy I have received. And thus I make it flow back to its source by returning thanks. The whole person is involved when we give thanks from our hearts. The heart is that center in which the human person is one. The intellect recognizes the gift as gift, the will acknowledges my dependence, the emotions, like a

sounding board, give fullness to the melody of this experience.” And isn’t it fascinating that we’re living in this moment, in the 21st century, where, actually, science is excavating this virtue of gratitude, starting with our bodies, in a way that theology never could. And I know you’ve been involved in dialogues with that.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: In this sense, science has really discovered spirituality. Because, at least I define “spirituality” from — the word “spirituality” comes from “spiritus” that means “life,” “breath,” “aliveness.” Spirituality is aliveness on all levels. It must start with our bodily aliveness. For many people say the sense of smell is practically nonexistent. If you really are grateful, come alive with your smell. Start smelling, not sightseeing, but smell-smelling, and it is wonderful. It makes you so much more alive. So it starts with the body. But, of course, when we say “spirituality,” we also mean aliveness to interrelationships, aliveness to our confrontation with that great divine mystery with which we are confronted as human beings, and which we can sort of look away from or forget or be dead to. We come alive to it. And all this coming alive, that is spirituality. And so, science has discovered that when people are grateful, they come alive.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes, that you can have all these measurable outcomes of well-being.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Measurable outcomes.

MS. TIPPETT: That which you can say aliveness. Yes.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Aliveness and well-being. And it’s marvelous. It’s just delightful. But many people have been waiting until science gives it a little push. And that’s all right.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. Since you talked about spirituality, let’s talk about that a little bit. How do you talk about the distinction, the connection between religion and spirituality? Those two words. I feel like this is something people are very curious about. We’re evolving our understanding of that.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yeah. Religion is a difficult word because it really combines two very, very different things. And you’re never quite sure which one you’re talking about when you say religion. Humans are religious beings, all humans. That means we are open towards this great mystery that some use the word “God” for, but whether they use it or not, we all are confronted with that great mystery as human beings. And in that sense, religiousness is very close to spirituality.

The other thing is, out of this religiousness, human beings have at certain times in history created historical and social bodies that are called the religions, or the religious traditions — usually starts with a founder that is a particularly spiritual person, deeply spiritual person. And then it kind of gets a life of its own. It kind of hardens. It kind of freezes.

So I compare these religions that we find in the world with sort of old volcanoes. At one time they were spewing fire, a gorgeous spectacle, and now, the lava has hardened, and nobody will recognize that that was at one point fire. It’s all rock. But here and there, somebody comes along, like Mother Teresa or Óscar Romero or Cesar Chavez, whoever, and makes a little crack, and out comes this live fire again.

And there you have to do with the warmth and the fervor of your own heart. Each one of us, we have a certain responsibility if we stand in a particular religion. And that has its own great advantages, because it gives us forms, it gives us examples, it gives us relatives in all the others that ever belonged to it, and will belong to it. It’s a good, healthy

embedding, but it also costs a lot of work. Inner work.

[music: “Was Gott Tut, Das Ist Wohlgetan” by Johann Sebastian Bach, performed by Christopher Parkening]

MS. TIPPETT: You can listen again and share this conversation with Br. David Steindl-Rast through our website, onbeing.org.

I’m Krista Tippett. On Being continues in a moment.

[music: “Was Gott Tut, Das Ist Wohlgetan” by Johann Sebastian Bach, performed by Christopher Parkening]

MS. TIPPETT: I’m Krista Tippett and this is On Being. Today I’m with the Benedictine monk Br. David Steindl-Rast. He’s a beloved teacher and author on the subject of gratitude. We’re exploring his full-blooded, reality-based, redemptive understanding of gratitude in daily life and in the mystical life — which he says belongs to us all.

MS. TIPPETT: It’s interesting to me — you are part of this tradition, the Benedictine tradition, which is very much embedded in the great enterprise of the Roman Catholic Church, and of Christianity. Although monasticism, in its many origins, monastic traditions kind of arose as spiritual renewal movements. Kind of what you’re saying, a church that had grown institutional and imperial, and lost its fire and its spirit. So monastics, in a sense, have always kind of been rebels in their way. And I find — and I know you must think about this. I mean, here we are in the 21st century, and your TED talk had four million views, people watching a monk talk about gratitude. People are flocking to monasteries on retreat.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: And it seems to me that monasticism itself, even while it may look established, has always been something kind of on the edges of religion. I’m kind of thinking out loud, but I wonder if this is something you...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: ...ponder.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: I completely agree with what you’re saying. I would express it differently, that monasticism was on the edges, in some respects, it was on the edges of the institution. That’s what you mean.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes. That’s what mean.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: But as far as the tradition is concerned, it was at the very heart...

MS. TIPPETT: Driving to the core.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: ...at the very core. Because the core of every religion is the religion of the heart. And that is the monastic life. Of course, as an institution, and monasteries are also institutions, it also, again and again, hardens and becomes decadent, has to be renewed. But as an idea, the monastic life — all the different monasteries are a network of networks. Every monastery is a little network of monks and all the ones that belong to

it. It's interesting, for instance, that today, when the number of monks in most monasteries, not everywhere, in other parts of the world, like in Africa and in Southeast Asia, Benedictine monasticism...

MS. TIPPETT: They're growing.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: ...is growing, growing.

MS. TIPPETT: Right, right. And they have many young people entering.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. Right.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: They are growing. But in the West, it's getting smaller and smaller, as far as monks are concerned. But so many more lay people, as oblates, as we call them, extended family members, that the monasteries, if you count the oblates, are bigger now than they were before. And for these lay people, who live their own lives every day — but in the spirit, somehow, of monastic life, because there's a monk in each of us — for them, this is really a great help in their lives, and a help also to live gratefully. So, yes, I think the monasteries have a real special vocation in our time...

MS. TIPPETT: Kind of a new vocation, right?

BR. STEINDL-RAST: ...to work as a model.

MS. TIPPETT: A renewed vocation.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: It's a vocation that has evolved, kind of ...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yes, it has evolved. Because this power pyramid that has characterized our society, our whole civilization from the very beginning, for 5,000 years now. This pyramid of power, where even all our admirable culture, and music, and inventions, and science, is all bought at the price of oppression and exploitation. It's very sad, but this power pyramid is in process of collapsing. That's what's happening in our times. And if you speak to people who are close to the top, and I have been privileged to speak to people pretty high up in politics, in economy, in science, in all the different fields, medicine and so forth, and everybody says we have come to the end of the rope, things are breaking down, people who really have an insight. Because this pyramid...

MS. TIPPETT: Right, the whole...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: ...has no future.

MS. TIPPETT: ...the form and the structure of how we did power and created ...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: It has to be replaced by network. And everybody knows that. And every group that — monks are by no means the only ones, there are many, many communes and other groups out there — that live network, or a network of friends a network of women who serve. These networks, they are the future. Raimundo Panikkar, you probably came across him, one of the great minds of the 20th century, said the future

will not be a new, big tower of power. Our hope in the future is the hope into well trodden paths from house to house, these well trodden paths from house to house. That is the image that holds a lot of promise for our future.

MS. TIPPETT: I was looking at a dialogue you had with Zen Roshi. And that's — you've been for a long time, even in the '60s, I mean, Thomas Merton because very well known for his dialogue with Buddhist monastics. And you've also been part of that all this time, and, I guess, with Thomas Merton, and that great adventure back then when it was so new. And you lived through a moment in the early 20th century, which, arguably, as bad as we may feel it is now, was so much more horrendous in terms of millions of people dying, and global crises, people starving, and you talked about the refugee crisis then, we have, literally, people dying by the side of the road, and you were involved in that.

But you said something in this dialogue that you said — you said actually, "We have had many thousands of crises in our history, but this world finds itself not only in a crisis, but on the brink of self-annihilation." That the stakes are higher, somehow, now. And I wonder if you would talk about that, but also talk about how, in this kind of moment, how is it even reasonable, or how is it vital to talk about, to use language like "gratitude" and "gratefulness?" Like, how is that a resource for us? How does it make sense in this moment?

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yes. Well, when we look at things like global warming, or the destruction of the environment, or this uncontrollable violence that's breaking out here and there, and can't be — you can't touch it, you can't grab it, that is really — I think that justifies us to say we are at the brink of self-annihilation. However, we must acknowledge our anxiety about it. We must acknowledge our anxiety. But we must not fear. And gratefulness is ...

MS. TIPPETT: We have to acknowledge our anxiety, but we must not fear.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Not fear. There is a great difference. See, anxiety, or anxious, being anxious, this word comes from a root that means "narrowness," and choking, and the original anxiety is our birth anxiety. We all come into this world through this very uncomfortable process of being born, unless you happen to be a cesarean baby. It's really a life-and-death struggle for both the mother and the child. And that is the original, the prototype, of anxiety. At that time, we do it fearlessly, because fear is the resistance against this anxiety. See? If you go with it, it brings you into birth. If you resist it, you die in the womb. Or your mother dies.

MS. TIPPETT: So, anxiety is a — not just an understandable, but a reasonable response to a lot of human experience.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: It's a reasonable response, and we are to acknowledge it and affirm it, because to deny our anxiety is another form of resistance.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. And so, that is reasonable, but the fear is actually that moment of resisting.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: But the fear is life destroying.

MS. TIPPETT: And it's a completely different move, and it takes us, our bodies, our minds, in a completely different direction.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Destroys it, yeah. And that is why we can look back at our life, not only at our birth, but at all other spots where we got into really tight spots and suffered anxiety. Anxiety is not optional in life. It's part of life. We come into life through anxiety. And we look at it, and remember it, and say to ourselves, we made it. We got through it. We made it. In fact, the worst anxieties and the worst tight spots in our life, often, years later, when you look back at them, reveal themselves as the beginning of something completely new, a completely new life.

MS. TIPPETT: Right, right.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: And that can teach us, and that can give us courage, also, now, that we think about it, in looking forward and saying, yes, this is a tight spot. It's about as tight spot as the world has ever been in, or at least humankind. But, if we go with it — and that will be grateful living — if we go with it, it will be a new birth. And that is trust in life. And this going with it means you look, what is the opportunity ...

MS. TIPPETT: So, and I think, for you, what you're getting at, for you, gratitude is as much about being present to the moment, but it's also, to you, about seeing the opportunity in the moment. Beyond...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: I am seeing the opportunity.

MS. TIPPETT: ...the current circumstances.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: And availing yourself of the opportunity.

MS. TIPPETT: OK. So it's a very active ...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: It's very active.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: And that is very difficult because anxiety has a way of paralyzing us. You see? But what really paralyzes us is fear. It's not the anxiety, it's the fear, because it resists. The moment we give up this resistance — and so, everything hinges on this trust in life. Trust. And with this trust, with this faith, we can go into that anxiety and say, it's terrible, it feels awful. But it may — I trust that it is just another birth into a greater fullness.

MS. TIPPETT: You've said that God is a direction, rather than a something.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: A direction. Yes, but not an impersonal direction, see?

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: There is a wonderful line by Rilke in which he prays to God. You know German so, I'll say it first in German...

MS. TIPPETT: And I love Rilke, as you do. Yeah, say it in German, please do.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: He says, "Ich geh doch immer auf Dich zu, mit meinem ganzen Gehen. Denn wer bin ich und wer bist du, wenn wir uns nicht verstehn?" So he says, "With every step I do, I go towards you. Because who am I and who are you if we don't understand

one another?" See? That is spoken to that great mystery, but when I say mystery, I mean not something vague, I mean something very clear.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, that gets us back to the sense of belonging. That belonging at the core of ...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: It's right in there. I go to you, see? The moment a human being says "I," at that moment I have posited a "you." That means I'm saying "I" because I'm related to a "you," that mysterious "you" that is always here. And in that sense, this mystery is not something impersonal.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm. It's relational.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: It's a relation — ultimately everything boils down to relation.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. You also said, I found this such an interesting — "Mysticism is the experience of limitless belonging."

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: That mysticism — because, again, I think that's a word — you use the word "mysticism" in Western culture, and people might think of something very abstract and very elite.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: No, no. I believe that every one of us is a mystic because we have this experience of belonging once in a while, out of the blue, this — women often say when they give birth to a child, they have it, or when we fall in love, we have this sense of belonging. Or, sometimes, without any particular reason, suddenly out in nature you feel one with everything. And every human being has this. But what we call the great mystics, they let this experience determine and shape every moment of their lives. They never forgot it. And we humans, the rest of us, tend to forget it. We just forget it. But if we keep it in mind, then we are really related to that great mystery. And then we can find joy in it.

[music: "Fünf Klavierstücke, Op. 3: I. Andante" by Richard Strauss, performed by Glenn Gould]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today at the Gut Aich Priory in St. Gilgen, Austria, with Br. David Steindl-Rast.

[music: "Fünf Klavierstücke, Op. 3: I. Andante" by Richard Strauss, performed by Glenn Gould]

MS. TIPPETT: It is a very audacious thing that you say, that everyone can be called to be a mystic. That mysticism is not, for you, the domain of professionals. That mysticism is something that is the birthright of every human being.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yeah. The mystic is not a special human being. Every human being is a special kind of mystic. And I never was around that particular kind of mystic that you can be, because you're unique. Never has anybody brought the talents and also the shortcomings that also belongs to him. And that goes very closely together with what I mean when I say "mystery." It's not something mysterious when I say this great mystery, this divine mystery that we are confronted with.

And in mysticism experience, that is something that we cannot grasp. You see, we cannot put it in words, we cannot imagine it in an image, we cannot put it in a concept. We cannot grasp it. But we can understand it. There's a great difference between grasping and understanding. And you understand it by being grasped. It does something to you. And many people experience that on a different level with music. You understand music, but you can't grasp music. You can't. What's there to grasp?

MS. TIPPETT: And you can't really talk about it. You can't ...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: You can't even talk about it, because you have no words and concepts. But you can understand it when you allow it to take hold of you, and you give yourself to the music. And that great mystery with — you might call it life, or God, or whatever — that great mystery with which all human beings are always confronted, and that we can also not grasp, obviously, but we can understand by allowing it to do something to us. And that openness can be totally silent. Silent openness is a wonderful form of prayer.

MS. TIPPETT: One of the ways — you talk about prayer, also in the context of gratitude, as whatever lifts your heart, right? That that's a way to start talking about the experience of prayer.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yes. And what we experience when we are grateful is that something lifts up our heart, that joy that is gratitude, and that joy is prayer because it lifts up our heart. Whatever lifts up our heart. And we are made for that.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah, and you've said, "If it's fishing that lifts up your heart, then fishing is your prayer."

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: Or part of your prayer. I know I have to finish. I guess, just maybe, finally — you studied psychology. And I sense that you're very aware of how it's instinctive for us to question gratitude. Maybe this is true in Western culture, right? To question its appropriateness or its purity and also to suspect the motives of others — we get very complicated when we walk into this territory of gratitude — and to withhold gratitude from others.

You speak about having the courage to let ourselves down into the depth which gratitude opens up. And I wonder if you would just say a little bit more about that, and maybe how that has come to you, how you have experienced letting yourself down into that depth.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yes. When I speak of depth and so forth, those are all only images, the poetic images that one must not...

MS. TIPPETT: But it's very magnetic language, I think.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Yeah. Well, poetic language has more power than most other language. So, you wanted me to be personal. When I'm confronted with something, for instance, of which I have to say, "Heavens, for this I can't be grateful, obviously. And where do I find the opportunity in this?" That's all too glib and I have to eat my own words.

Then I let go of all this, of all this thought, and all this — and I just try to sit quietly. It's

like you take this whole package of things that you don't particularly like to deal with, and you throw them in the lake. And they go down, and go down, and go down. And then you just quiet yourself. And when you get sufficiently quiet, that may take long, or it may not take very long, and it may not be in one sitting, it may take days or weeks. But when you've got sufficiently quiet, then without you having to figure something out, some answer emerges. That's the best I can do to express it. But we find, somehow, the way through. This throwing it into the lake is like no resistances. You don't give...

MS. TIPPETT: OK, so you're letting...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: ...don't feel.

MS. TIPPETT: ...rid of that fear, that impulse...

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Let go of the fear.

MS. TIPPETT: ...to fear.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Just accept it. This courage, this quiet holding, holding and — it leads to a new birth. I can't prove it, but I can encourage you to try, everybody try. And I think you will find it, too.

MS. TIPPETT: OK. I think that people sense, feel that we're living in a very dark time. What are you grateful for right now in the world? What gives you hope? Where does your gratitude find an abundant place to land?

BR. STEINDL-RAST: Well, one thing I have already said that's on a larger scale, looking back and seeing that all the most difficult experiences always lead to something new and even something better if we trust.

MS. TIPPETT: Even culturally, even geopolitically.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: On every level, on every level. But in order to keep us going, it is enough to be grateful for the next breath, because it's not to be taken for granted. That I can take another breath. And if I think of the millions of people who have breathing difficulties, and here I can breathe. Just to remember that. Just be grateful for the next breath.

MS. TIPPETT: OK. Thank you so much.

BR. STEINDL-RAST: You're welcome.

MS. TIPPETT: It's been really, really wonderful to be here.

[music: "Waltzes 6-10, Op. 7" by Johann Strauss, performed by Napoléon Coste]

MS. TIPPETT: Br. David Steindl-Rast is the founder and senior advisor for A Network for Grateful Living. His books include *Gratefulness: the Heart of Prayer, Belonging to the Universe*, and *A Listening Heart: The Spirituality of Sacred Sensuousness*.

If you want more gratitude, Br. David's website is gratefulness.org, and he's one of the people featured in a round-up of research and reflection, elementofgratitude.org.

At onbeing.org, you can sign up for a weekly email from us, a Letter from Loring Park. In your inbox every Saturday morning — a curated list of the best of what we are reading and publishing, including writings by our guest contributors. This week, you can read scholar of race and belonging John Powell. Find his writing and much more at onbeing.org.

On Being is Trent Gilliss, Chris Heagle, Lily Percy, Mariah Helgeson, Maia Tarrell, Annie Parsons, Marie Sambalay, Tess Montgomery, Aseel Zahran, and Bethanie Kloecker.

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