

Three Steps to Living A Life of Gratefulness by Brother David Steindl-Rast

An act of gratitude is a living whole. To superimpose on its organic flow a mental grid like a series of “steps” will always be somewhat arbitrary. And yet, for the sake of practice, such a delineation can be helpful.

In any process, we can distinguish a beginning, a middle, and an end. We may use this basic three-step grid for the practice of gratitude: What happens at the start, in the middle, and at the end, when we experience gratitude? What fails to happen when we are not grateful?

Before going to bed, I glance back over the day and ask myself: Did I stop and allow myself to be surprised? Or, did I trudge on in a daze?

To be awake, aware, and alert are the beginning, middle, and end of gratitude. This gives us the clue to what the three basic steps of practicing gratitude must be.

Step One: Wake Up

To begin with, we never start to be grateful unless we wake up. Wake up to what? To surprise. As long as nothing surprises us, we walk through life in a daze. We need to practice waking up to surprise. I suggest using this simple question as a kind of alarm clock: “Isn’t this surprising?” “Yes, indeed!” will be the correct answer, no matter when and where and under what circumstances you ask this question. After all, isn’t it surprising that there is anything at all, rather than nothing? Ask yourself at least twice a day, “Isn’t this surprising?” and you will soon be more awake to the surprising world in which we live.

Surprise may provide a jolt, enough to wake us up and to stop taking everything for granted. But we may not at all like that surprise. “How can I be grateful for something like this?” we may howl in the midst of a sudden calamity. And why? Because we are not aware of the real gift in this given situation: opportunity.

Step Two: Be Aware of Opportunities

There is a simple question that helps me to practice the second step of gratitude: “What’s my opportunity here?” You will find that most of the time, the opportunity that a given moment offers you is an opportunity to enjoy—to enjoy sounds, smells, tastes, texture, colors, and, with still deeper joy, friendliness, kindness, patience, faithfulness, honesty, and all those gifts that soften the soil of our heart like warm spring rain. The more we practice awareness of the countless opportunities to simply enjoy, the easier it becomes to recognize difficult or painful experiences as opportunities, as gifts.

But while awareness of opportunities inherent in life events and circumstances is the core

of gratefulness, awareness alone is not enough. What good is it to be aware of an opportunity, unless we avail ourselves of it? How grateful we are shows itself by the alertness with which we respond to the opportunity.

Step Three: Respond Alertly

Once we are in practice for being awake to surprise and being aware of the opportunity at hand, we will spontaneously be alert in our response, especially when we are offered an opportunity to enjoy something. When a sudden rain shower is no longer just an inconvenience but a surprise gift, you will spontaneously rise to the opportunity for enjoyment. You will enjoy it as much as you did in your kindergarten days, even if you are no longer trying to catch raindrops in your wide-open mouth. Only when the opportunity demands more from you than spontaneous enjoyment will you have to give yourself a bit of an extra push as part of Step Three.

Stop, look, go.

The Review Process It helps me to review my own practice of gratefulness by applying to these three basic steps the rule I learned as a boy for crossing an intersection: "Stop, look, go." Before going to bed, I glance back over the day and ask myself: Did I stop and allow myself to be surprised? Or did I trudge on in a daze? Was I too busy to wake up to surprise? And once I stopped, did I look for the opportunity of that moment? Or did I allow the circumstances to distract me from the gift within the gift? (This tends to happen when the gift's wrappings are not attractive.) And finally, was I alert enough to go after it, to avail myself fully of the opportunity offered to me?

There are times, I must admit, when stopping at night to review my day seems to be the first stop on an express train. Then I look back and realize with regret how much I missed. Not only was I less grateful on those non-stop days, I was less alive, somehow numb. Other days may be just as busy, but I do remember to stop; on those days, I even accomplish more because stopping breaks up the routine. But unless I also look, the stopping alone will not make my day a truly happy one; what difference does it make that I am not on an express train but on a local if I'm not aware of the scenery outside the windows? On some days, I even find in my nightly review that I stopped and I looked, but not with alertness. Just yesterday, I found a huge moth on the sidewalk; I did stop long enough to put it in a safe spot on the lawn, just a foot away, but I didn't crouch down to spend time with this marvelous creature. Only faintly did I remember, at night, those iridescent eyes on the grayish brown wings. My day was diminished by this failure to stay long enough with this surprise gift to deeply look at it and to savor its beauty gratefully.

My simple recipe for a joyful day is this: Stop and wake up; look and be aware of what you see; then go on with all the alertness you can muster for the opportunity the moment offers. Looking back in the evening, on a day on which I made these three steps over and over, is like looking at an apple orchard heavy with fruit.

This recipe for grateful living sounds simple—because it is. But simple does not mean easy. Some of the simplest things are difficult because we have lost our childlike simplicity and have not yet found our mature one. Growth in gratitude is growth in maturity. Growth, of course, is an organic process. And so we come back to what I said at the beginning: To superimpose on the organic flow of gratitude a mental grid like a series of "steps" will remain arbitrary. When I am grateful, I am neither rushing nor slouching through my day—I'm dancing. What is true in dance class is true here too: Only when you forget to think of your steps, do you truly dance.

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