

Brother David Steindl Rast: A Deep Bow by Brother David Steindl-Rast

Gratitude as the root of a common religious language

This is all that matters: that we can bow, take a deep bow. Just that. Just that.

Rev. Eido Tai Shimano writes:

"People often ask me how Buddhists answer the question: 'Does God exist?' The other day I was walking along the river. The wind was blowing. Suddenly I thought, Oh! The air really exists. We know that the air is there, but unless the wind blows against our face, we are not aware of it. Here in the wind I was suddenly aware, yes it's really there. And the sun too. I was suddenly aware of the sun, shining through the bare trees. Its warmth, its brightness, and all this completely free, completely gratuitous. Simply there for us to enjoy. And without my knowing it, completely spontaneously, my two hands came together, and I realized that I was making gassho. And it occurred to me that this is all that matters: that we can bow, take a deep bow. Just that. Just that."

If we were able to experience this fundamental gratitude at all times, there would be no need to talk about it, and many of the contradictions that divide our world would at once be resolved. But in our present situation, talking about it might help us at least to recognize this experience when it is granted to us and give us courage to let ourselves down into the depth which gratitude opens up.

We can begin by asking ourselves: "What happens when we feel spontaneously grateful?" (It is, of course, this concrete phenomenon which concerns us here, not any abstract notion.) For one thing, we experience joy. Joy is certainly there at the basis of thankfulness. But it is a special kind of joy, a joy received from another person. There is that remarkable "plus" which is added to my joy as soon as I perceive that it is given to me by another, and necessarily another person.

I can treat myself to a delicious meal, but the joy will not at all be the same as if someone else treats me to a meal, even though it be a little less exquisite. I can prepare a treat for myself, but by no means of mental acrobatics can I be grateful to myself; there lies the decisive difference between the joy that gives rise to gratitude and any other joy.

Gratitude refers to another, and to another as person. We cannot in the full sense be grateful to things or to impersonal powers like life or nature, unless we conceive of them in some confused way as implicitly personal, super-personal, if you wish.

Gratitude springs from an insight, a recognition, that something good has come to me from another person, that it is freely given to me, and meant as a favor.

The moment we explicitly exclude the notion of personality, gratitude ceases. And why? Because gratitude implies that the gift I receive is freely bestowed, and someone who is capable of doing me a favor is by definition a person.

A joy, even though I receive it from another, does not make me grateful unless it is meant as a favor. We are quite sensitive for the difference. When you get an unusually big piece of pie in the cafeteria, you may find yourself hesitating for a moment, and only when you have discarded the possibility that this may indicate a change of policy or an oversight, you take it to be a favor worthy of a smile for the fellow that hands it to you across the counter.

It may be difficult in a given case to say whether the favor I receive was meant for me personally. But my gratitude will depend on the answer. At least the favor must be meant for a group with which I am personally identified. (When you wear a monk's habit you not infrequently receive a bigger piece of pie or some other unexpected kindness from someone you never met before and who you will never meet again. But there, the people do mean you, in so far as you are a monk, and it is quite a different case from the painful experience of smiling back at someone only to discover that the smile meant not you but someone who stood behind you.)

When I am grateful, I allow my emotions fully to taste and to express the joy I have received.

Where does this little phenomenology of gratitude lead us? That much we can already say: Gratitude springs from an insight, a recognition, that something good has come to me from another person, that it is freely given to me, and meant as a favor. And the moment this recognition dawns on me, gratitude too spontaneously dawns in my heart: "Je suis reconnaissant" - I recognize, I acknowledge, I am grateful; in French these three concepts are expressed by one term.

I recognize the special quality of this joy: It is a joy freely granted to me as a favor. I acknowledge my dependence, freely accepting as a gift what only another, as other, can freely give to me. And I am 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. You see that 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.

The intellect recognizes: Yes, it is good to accept my dependence; the emotions resound in gratitude, celebrating the beauty of this experience. Thus, the grateful heart, experiencing in truth, goodness and beauty the fullness of being, finds through gratitude its own fulfillment. This is the reason why a person who cannot be wholeheartedly grateful is so pitiful a failure. Lack of gratitude always indicates some malfunctioning of intellect, will, or emotions which prevents the integration of the personality thus afflicted.

It may be that my intellect insists on suspicion and does not allow me to recognize any

favor as favor. Selflessness can not be proved. Reasoning about another person's motives can only take me to the point where mere intellect must yield to faith, to trust in the other, which is a gesture no longer of the intellect alone but of the whole heart. Or it may be that my proud will refuses to acknowledge my dependence on another, thus paralyzing the heart before it can rise to give thanks. Or it may be that the scar tissue of hurt feelings no longer allows my full emotional response. My longing for pure selflessness, for true gratitude, may be so deep and so much in discrepancy with what I have experienced in the past that I give in to despair. And who am I anyway? Why should any selfless love be wasted on me? Am I worthy of it? No, I am not. To face this fact, to realize my unworthiness, and yet to open myself through hope to love, this is the root of all human wholeness and holiness, the very core of the integrating gesture of thanksgiving. However, this inner gesture of gratitude can only come to itself when it finds expression.

Expression of thanks is an integral part of gratitude, no less important than the recognition of the gift and the acknowledgement of my dependence. Think of the helplessness we experience when we do not know whom to thank for an anonymous gift. Only when my thanks are expressed and accepted is the circle of giving and thanksgiving closed and a mutual exchange established between giver and receiver.

Is not gratitude a passage from suspicion to trust, from proud isolation to a humble give and take, from enslavement to false independence to self-acceptance in that dependence which liberates?

However, the closed circle is not a well-chosen image for what happens here. We could rather compare this exchange to a spiral in which the giver receives thanksgiving, and so becomes receiver, and the joy of giving and receiving rises higher and higher. The mother bends down to her child in his crib and hands him a rattle. The baby recognizes the gift and returns the mother's smile. The mother, overjoyed with the childish gesture of gratitude, lifts up the child with a kiss. There is our spiral of joy. Is not the kiss a greater gift than the toy? Is not the joy it expresses greater than the joy that set our spiral in motion?

But notice that the upward movement of our spiral signifies not only that the joy has grown stronger. Rather we have passed on to something entirely new. A passage has taken place. A passage from multiplicity to unity: we start out with giver, gift and receiver, and we arrive at the embrace of thanks expressed and thanks accepted. Who can distinguish giver and receiver in the final kiss of gratitude?

Is not gratitude a passage from suspicion to trust, from proud isolation to a humble give and take, from enslavement to false independence to self-acceptance in that dependence which liberates? Yes, gratitude is the great gesture of passage.

And this gesture of passage unites us. It unites us as human beings, for we realize that in this whole passing universe we humans are the ones who pass and know that we pass. There lies our human dignity. There lies our human task. The task of entering into the meaning of this passage (the passage which is our whole life), of celebrating its meaning through the gesture of thanksgiving.

But this gesture of passage unites us in that depth of the heart in which being human is synonymous with being religious. The essence of gratitude is self-acceptance in that dependence which liberates; but the dependence which liberates is nothing else but that

religion which lies at the root of all religions, and even at the root of that deeply religious (though misguided) rejection of all religions.

Sacrifice itself is the prototype of all rites of passage.

When we look at the great rites of passage which belong to humanity's oldest religious heritage, the religious significance of gratitude becomes clear to us. In recent years anthropologists and scholars of comparative religion have made much of these "rites de passage," rites celebrating birth and death and the other great hours of passage through the human life. Sacrifice in one form or another belongs to the core of these rites. And this is understandable, for sacrifice itself is the prototype of all rites of passage.

The moment we take a closer look at the basic features common to the various forms of sacrificial rites, we are struck by the perfect parallel between the structure of gratitude as a gesture of the human heart and the inner structure of sacrifice. In both cases a passage takes place. In both cases the gesture rises from the joyful recognition of a gift received, culminates in an acknowledgement of the receiver's dependence on the giver, and finds its accomplishment in an external expression of thanks which unites giver and receiver, be it in the form of a conventional handshake of gratitude, or in a sacrificial meal.

Think, for example, of the sacrifice of first fruits, almost certainly the most ancient sacrificial rite. Even where we find it in its simplest and most primitive form the rite clearly displays the pattern we discovered. Let us take, for example, the Chenchu, a tribe in Southern India, belonging to one of the most ancient cultural strata not only of India but of the whole world. What happens when a Chenchu returning from a food gathering expedition in the jungle casts a choice morsel of food into the bush and accompanies this sacrifice with a prayer to the deity worshipped as mistress of the jungle and of all its products? "Our mother," he says, "by your kindness we have found. Without it we receive nothing. We offer you many thanks."

The expression of gratitude makes the original joy over a favor received rise to a higher level.

Thousands of similar rites have been observed among the most primitive peoples. But this example (recorded by Christoph von Fuerer Haimendorf, who did field work among the Chenchu) stands out for its crystal clear structure. Each sentence of the simple prayer accompanying this offering corresponds, in fact, to one of our three phases of gratitude. "Our mother, by your kindness we have found": the recognition of a favor received; "without it we receive nothing": the acknowledgement of dependence; and "we offer you many thanks": the expression of gratitude which makes the original joy over the favor received rise to a higher level.

And what the prayer expresses under three aspects, the rite expresses in one gesture: The hunter who offers a piece of his quarry to the deity expresses thereby that he appreciates the goodness of the gift received, and that through the symbolic sharing of the gift he somehow enters into communion with the giver.

So striking, in fact, is the correspondence between social gestures of gratitude and religious gestures of sacrifice that one might tend to mistake the food offerings of the Chenchu and similar examples for a mere transposition of social conventions into a religious key. However, there is no simple dependence of the one on the other. Both are

rooted in the depth of the heart, but they expand in two different directions.

Our religious awareness comes to itself through the very gesture of our sacrificial rites, just as our awareness of human solidarity comes to itself when one person expresses thanks to another.

We look at life and see that it comes to us from a Source far beyond our reach. We look at life and see that it is good – good for us; and from the firm ground of these two intellectual insights the heart dares to leap to a third insight which surpasses mere reasoning: the insight that all good comes to us as a free gift from the Source of Life. This leap of faith surpasses the grouping of the intellect, because it is a gesture of the whole person, very much like the trust I put in a friend.

Now, the moment I recognize life as a gift, and myself as recipient, my dependence is brought home to me, and this confronts me with a decision: Just as in the social sphere I can refuse to acknowledge, and lock myself up in the loneliness of pride, so in the religious dimension I can adopt a stance of proud independence towards the very Source of Life. And the temptation is strong to close my eyes to the ridiculousness of this posture. For dependence in the religious context implies more than the give and take of human interdependence; it implies obedience to a Being greater than I. And my petty pride finds it hard to swallow this.

(It is here, incidentally, that the violence of many sacrificial rites has its root. We cannot do justice to this aspect now, but we may note in passing that violent sacrificial rites are meaningful as an expression of that violence which we must do to ourselves before our hearts, enslaved by self-will, can enter into the freedom of loving obedience.) The person who kills an animal in sacrifice expresses by this rite his or her own readiness to die to everything that separates us from the goal of this rite of passage. Since the goal is union between the human and the divine, a union of wills must precede it; the human will must become obedient. But the death of self-will is only the negative aspect of obedience; its positive aspect is our birth to true life and joy. Upon the immolation follows the joy of the sacrificial banquet.

We should not overstress submission when we speak of obedience. Of much greater importance is the positive aspect: alertness for the secret signs pointing the way towards true joy. (I call them secret signs because they are intimately personal hints, in moments when we are most truly ourselves.) “We, unlike birds of passage, are not informed,” says Rilke in his *Duino Elegies*. Our passage is not predetermined by instinct. All we are given are inklings like that stirring of gratitude in our hearts and the freedom to follow these inklings.

We belong together in a deep solidarity which the heart discerns. We belong together, because together we are obligated to a reality which transcends us.

To the extent to which we have forfeited this freedom, detachment is necessary. Obedience is our alertness, our disponibilitè , our readiness to follow the homing impulse of the heart in its upward flight. Detachment liberates the wings of our heart so that we can rise to the grateful enjoyment of life in all its fullness. We must open our hand and let loose what we hold before we can receive the new gifts which every moment offers us. Detachment and obedience are merely means; the goal is joy.

If we would understand moral sacrifice in this positive way we would also understand ritual sacrifice which is its expression. Neither of the two is that grim thing into which it is

sometimes distorted. The pattern of both is the passage of thanksgiving. The accomplishment of both is the joy of our union with that which transcends us. This is expressed in the sacrificial banquet in which the rite of sacrifice culminates. This joyful meal presupposes the acceptance of our thanksgiving by the divinity. It is the embrace which unites the one who gave the gift and the one who gives thanks for it.

(Let us remember, by the way, that in the religious context, God is always the giver: Humans are the thanks-givers. Only in the far less original context of magic can this relation deteriorate to some sort of commercial transaction or even to our effort to extort favors from super-human powers. But magic and ritualism are dead-end roads of the heart; they do not concern us here.)

What does concern us is the fact that our own experience of gratitude is closely related to a universal religious phenomenon, to sacrifice, which lies at the very root of religion. And once we have grasped the root we can find access to religion in all its aspects. The whole history of religion can, in fact, be understood as the working out in all its implications of that sacrificial gesture which we ourselves experience as often as gratitude rises in our hearts.

The whole cosmos is being renewed moment by moment through sacrifice: brought back to its source through thanksgiving, and received anew as gift in all its primordial freshness.

Jewish religion, for example, begins with the implicit conviction that we would not be human unless we offered sacrifice, and leads up to the explicit awareness that "only one who brings himself or herself as sacrifice deserves to be called human." (Rabbi Israel of Rizin; died 1850) We have a perfect parallel in Hinduism where an early Vedic text sees humanity as "the one animal capable of bringing sacrifice," (Satapata Brahmanah VII, 5, 2, 23) and the development culminates in a passage from the Chandogya Upanishad (III, 16, 1): "Verily, a person is a sacrifice." Does not our own experience show us that a human person finds his or her own integrity only in the sacrificial gesture of thanksgiving?

And even to the "thou shalt love" (which is in one form or another the mature fruit of every religion) does our experience of gratitude give us access. But just as the root repelled us at first by its apparent crudeness, so this fruit of religion makes us draw back from the contradiction it seems to contain. How can love be commanded? How can there be an obligation to love? Love is not love at all unless it is gratuitous. What we experience in the context of gratitude provides us with a clue: a favor we do to another remains a favor, remains gratuitous, even though our heart tells us that we ought to do it, that we ought to be generous, ought to pardon. And why? Because we belong together in a deep solidarity which the heart discerns. We belong together, because together we are obligated to a reality which transcends us.

Christ's word comes to mind: "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go. First make peace with your brother, then come and offer your gift." (Mt. 5: 24) This is in perfect conformity with the tradition of Israel's prophets who insisted that true sacrifice is thanksgiving, that true immolation is obedience, that the true meaning of the sacrificial meal is mercy, "hesed," the covenant, love, which binds men to one another by binding them as one community to God.

What is rejected is empty ritualism, not ritual. Thanksgiving mercy, obedience are not to replace ritual, but to give it its full meaning. Indeed, our whole life is to become a sacred ritual of thanksgiving, the whole universe a sacrifice. When the prophet Zachariah says that "on that day" (the day of the Messiah) "every pot and pan in Jerusalem and Judah shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts, so that all who sacrifice may come and use them," the implication is that there is nothing on earth that cannot become a vessel filled with our gratitude and lifted up to God.

It is this universal "Eucharistia," this cosmic celebration of a thanksgiving sacrifice which forms the heart of the Christian message. And even to those of us who are not Christians the experience of gratitude gives at least a speculative access to the Christian belief that the spiral of thanksgiving is the dynamic pattern of all reality, that within the absolute oneness of the triune God there is room for an eternal exchange of giving and thanksgiving, a spiral of joy. Within the one and undivided Godhead, the Father gives himself to the Son, and the Son gives himself in thanksgiving to the Father. And the Gift of Love eternally exchanged between Father and Son is himself, personal and divine, the Holy Spirit of Thanksgiving.

Creation and redemption are simply an overflow of this divine "perichorese," this inner-trinitarian dance, an overflow into what of itself is nothingness. God the Son becomes the Son of Man in obedience to the Father, so as to unite through his sacrifice in merciful love all men with one another and with God, leading them back in the Spirit of Thanksgiving to that eternal embrace in which "God will be all in all." (1 Cor. 15: 28) "Whatever exists, exists through sacrifice." (Sat. Brah. XI, 2, 3, 6) The whole cosmos is being renewed moment by moment through sacrifice: brought back to its source through thanksgiving, and received anew as gift in all its primordial freshness. But this universal sacrifice is possible only because the one God, himself, is Giver, Thanksgiver, and Gift.

To those among us who have entered into this mystery through faith it need not be explained; to others, it cannot be explained. But to the extent to which we have given room in our hearts to gratitude, we all have a share in this reality, by whatever name we may call it. (It is a reality which we shall never fully take hold of. All that matters is that we let it take hold of us.) All that matters is that we enter into that passage of gratitude and sacrifice, the passage which leads us to integrity within ourselves, to concord with one another and to union with the very Source of Life. For "... this is all that matters: that we can bow, take a deep bow. Just that, just that."

Reprinted from:
Main Currents in Modern Thought
(May-June 1967, Vol. 23, No. 5, pp.129-132)