

Surprise is a Seed by Brother David Steindl-Rast

Giving Thanks for All the Little (and Big) Things in Life

Originally featured in Spirituality and Health magazine in 2002, this article by Br. David continues to illuminate the power of wonder in cultivating gratefulness. With surprise as an entry point, we can open to life's complexity quite simply. The irony of this tension between the complex and the simple - as Br. David illuminates in this piece - is, in itself, surprising. So much so that it seems to render the distinction between simplicity and complexity moot. The same could be said for the "little" and "big" things in life. Br. David describes surprise as a seed and gratefulness as the growth from that seed. Perhaps the dissolution of these paradoxes - big and little, simple and complex - is the essence of that seed. The simple is complex. The little is big. It is all awesome. It is all worthy of our attention. And it is all cause for gratefulness.

Have you ever noticed how your eyes open a bit wider when you are surprised? It is as if you had been asleep, merely day-dreaming or sleepwalking through some routine activity, and you hear your favorite tune on the radio, or look up from the puddles on the parking lot and see a rainbow, or the telephone rings and it's the voice of an old friend, and all of a sudden you're awake. Even an unwelcome surprise shakes us out of complacency and makes us come alive. We may not like it at first, but looking back, we can always recognize it as a gift. Humdrum equals deadness; surprise equals life. In fact, my favorite name for the One I worship in wonder - the only name that does not limit God - is Surprise.

Right this moment, as I remember spiritual giants I have been privileged to meet - Mother Teresa, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, His Holiness the Dalai Lama - I can still feel the life energy they radiated. But how did they come by this vitality? There is no lack of surprises in this world, but such radiant aliveness is rare. What I observed was that these people were all profoundly grateful, and then I understood the secret.

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A surprise does not make us automatically alive. Aliveness is a matter of give-and-take, of response. If we allow surprise to merely baffle us, it will stun us and stunt our growth. Instead, every surprise is a challenge to trust in life and so to grow. Surprise is a seed. Gratefulness sprouts when we rise to the challenge of surprise. The great ones in the realm of Spirit are so intensely alive because they are so deeply grateful.

Gratefulness can be improved by practice. But where shall beginners begin? The obvious starting point is surprise. You will find that you can grow the seeds of gratefulness just by

making room. If surprise happens when something unexpected shows up, let's not expect anything at all. Let's follow Alice Walker's advice. "Expect nothing. Live frugally on surprise."

To expect nothing may mean not taking for granted that your car will start when you turn the key. Try this and you will be surprised by a marvel of technology worthy of sincere gratitude. Or you may not be thrilled by your job, but if for a moment you can stop taking it for granted, you will taste the surprise of having a job at all, while millions are unemployed. If this makes you feel a flicker of gratefulness, you'll be a little more joyful all day, a little more alive.

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Once we stop taking things for granted our own bodies become some of the most surprising things of all. It never ceases to amaze me that my body both produces and destroys 15 million red blood cells every second. Fifteen million! That's nearly twice the census figure for New York City. I am told that the blood vessels in my body, if lined up end to end, would reach around the world. Yet my heart needs only one minute to pump my blood through this filigree network and back again. It has been doing so minute by minute, day by day, for the past 75 years and still keeps pumping away at 100,000 heartbeats every 24 hours. Obviously this is a matter of life and death for me, yet I have no idea how it works and it seems to work amazingly well in spite of my ignorance.

I do not know how my eyes adapt, yet when I chant by candlelight they are 100,000 times more sensitive to light than when I read outdoors on the porch at noon. I wouldn't know how to give instructions to the 35 million digestive glands in my stomach for digesting one single strawberry; fortunately, they know how to do their job without my advice. When I think of this as I sit down to eat, my heart brims with gratefulness.

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In those moments, I can identify with the Psalmist who cried out in amazement, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (Ps.139:14) From there it is only a small step to seeing the whole universe and every smallest part of it as surprising. From the humble starting point of daily surprises, the practice of gratefulness leads to these transcendent heights. Thomas Carlyle pointed to these peaks of spiritual awareness when he wrote, "Worship is transcendent wonder" - transcendent surprise.