

Grateful for the Dark Stuff Too

by Laura Grace Weldon

A handmade Gratitude Tree has hung in our hallway for years. We keep the tree lively by writing on leaves made of brightly colored paper, then tape them to the tree. It's usually filled with life affirming reminders like hugs from Daddy, going to the library, bike rides, playing cards with Grammy, and yes, winning arguments. The year my youngest son Sam was six, he got so inspired that he said he was grateful for a hundred things. A bit dubiously I offered to type the list while he dictated. I was astonished as he kept going until the list numbered 117.

Listing what we're grateful for is increasingly popular. Studies show that those who practice gratitude are healthier, happier, more helpful to others, and even more likely to reach their goals. People post gratitude lists on Facebook and on their blogs, keep gratitude journals, and pray in gratitude each morning. This is undeniably wonderful. Orienting ourselves toward what works in our lives is perpetually rejuvenating.

But perhaps we're limiting ourselves to a childlike version of gratitude. Are we grateful only for what we deem good and ungrateful for all the rest?

I'm all about emphasizing the positive—heck, I'm pretty sure we amplify what we pay attention to. But that doesn't mean that the darker sides of our lives aren't a source of blessings as well. It's one thing to be grateful for a disease in remission, a distant friend's visit, or a new job, but there's much to be grateful for right in the heart of what we consider the worst of times, the worst in ourselves. Maybe mining these experiences for gratitude can get us past the need to separate our lives into good and bad, putting us right into the seamless whole of a fully lived life. Here are a few to consider:

Mistakes

I'm not talking about the little mistakes we make each day, but those big, honking mistakes all of us who are honest with ourselves can admit we've made—errors that damaged relationships or changed the future we anticipated. Some of these mistakes were well-intended, while others were careless or downright stupid.

It's quite possible to be grateful for what we call mistakes. If nothing else, our fallibility demonstrates the foolishness of being self-righteous about others. Hopefully we learn even more. Our mistakes give us a depth of experience, a dose of humility, and the beginnings of wisdom.

Beware people who claim they have not made significant mistakes—either they haven't stepped out the door yet, or what they hide from themselves is too dark to be claimed. Our mistakes are a wonderful part of who we are. Thank goodness for our mistakes in all their falling down, awkward, forgiveness-hungry glory.

Doubt

While doubt seems ruinous, it can actually be a gift. We may doubt choices we've made, relationships we're in, or the faith we have practiced all our lives. Doubt is a powerful motivator. When we look at doubt, using our heads and our hearts, we may not like what we see. It may take us years to find answers. This forces us to tell the truth to ourselves, and that process makes us stronger. Sure it's painful, but it also leaves us much to be grateful for.

The harsh light cast by doubt can lead, after a time, to a much brighter path. We may find ourselves in stronger relationships and making more conscious choices. We may end up with deeper faith or accept that we don't know the answers, but that we love the search all thanks to our friend, doubt.

Crisis

I don't mean to minimize the impact of crisis. Like almost everyone, I've been at the mercy of crime, grief, and pain. But no matter the crisis, we have a choice. We can choose which attitude to take, and that alone is worthy of some gratitude.

Beyond that, many people find blessings of all sorts hidden in experiences that, on the surface, seem starkly horrible. They say that cancer woke them up to truly living, or they say that losing everything in a fire helped them choose more authentic priorities. Some people dedicate their energy to helping those who have suffered as they once suffered, thereby transforming their own crisis into a blessing for others.

Throughout history, cultures around the world have told folk tales that not only entertain, but also teach values while offering lessons on growing through difficulty. Too often, we've replaced these stories with weaker parables found in popular entertainment. Consider the following:

A man was given a strong horse. Many came to admire it, telling him he was the luckiest man around. He replied, "We'll see." A few days later the horse ran away and the neighbors came to console him. "How terrible!" they said. The man replied, "We'll see." The next week the horse returned. Following him were six wild horses. The neighbors congratulated him, saying, "You are richer than any of us now." The man replied, "We'll see." When his son tried to train one of the wild horses, it threw him and the young man broke his leg. "Oh, what bad luck," his neighbors said. The man only replied, "We'll see." Then an army swept through the village and conscripted all able-bodied young men, leaving only the man's son with the broken leg. The neighbors told him how fortunate he was. The man only replied, "We'll see."

The next time crisis looms chances are you will stumble, get up, cry, laugh, protest, and argue. But you may also be aware just how grateful you are to be here and living life with all it has to offer. And, as the farmer in the story did, you may step back from your predicament and say to yourself, "We'll see."

We don't bother to give thanks for many aspects of our lives, from the face in the mirror each morning to the minor frustrations of the day. Look again at your mistakes, your doubts, and your crises to see the richness that lies waiting to be discovered. I'll be doing the same.

It's not my practice to make gratitude lists, especially one as long as six-year-old Sam's list of 117 items. If I did, I admit it would include many more of the "easy" ones—birdsong, a bountiful garden, finding a lost book. But I'm inclined to see gratitude as a tree—it not only grows upward with bright leaves, it also grows deep roots in dark soil.