

Gratitude for Ordinary People

by Ruth Haley Barton

“And they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’”

Matthew 1:23

As we emerge from Thanksgiving week and enter into the Advent season, I am aware that gratitude is a powerful source of energy in the spiritual life. It is an inner dynamic that has the potential to be deeply transforming and I find myself longing for that spirit to remain, to grow and to expand in my own heart as we enter into the busy-ness of the holiday season. Rather than the familiar experience of sensing the spirit of gratitude slipping away as we move from the relative simplicity of the Thanksgiving celebration and into the swirl of the Christmas holidays, I long for gratitude to be my deepest response to the wonders of this season. I long for gratitude to infuse these days with meaning and the dynamism of Christ’s spirit. Perhaps you are noticing a similar longing within yourself.

My own journey of discovery about the power of gratitude began in an ordinary moment during a flight from Chicago to Kansas City late one Friday night. I was in the middle of a speaking engagement that had been scheduled so far in advance that I had not realized until it was too late that the date coincided with my daughter’s senior prom. Through the understanding and flexibility of the sponsoring organization and a few of my colleagues, I had been able to teach for part of the day on Friday, fly back to Chicago so that I could help Charity get dressed and be with her for pictures. Then I hopped back on a late-night flight so that I could complete my speaking assignment on Saturday.

When I collapsed onto the plane that Friday night, the cabin was pretty much empty. It was dark and quiet in a comforting sort of way and I found I had about an hour and fifteen minutes of unexpected solitude. Even though I had books and “stuff” with me, I felt drawn to just be with God with my gratitude for all that had gone right to make it possible for me to be with my daughter for an important moment of her life—a moment in which only a mom would do. I remembered the graciousness of the person who was responsible for engaging the speakers for this event. When I discovered the conflict with this speaking commitment she had said, “In the whole scheme of things, no one is going to remember this conference but your daughter will always remember whether or not you were at her senior prom.” How relieved I had been to receive such kindness and understanding! And what a delight it was to remember it on this night.

As I settled more deeply into the quietness of the nearly-empty flight, I reflected with gratitude on each and every person who had anything to do with getting me there and back. I thought of the young lady who waited outside the conference site like an accomplice with a get-away car, waiting to rush me to the airport as soon as the morning session was finished. I chuckled about my colleague who had accompanied me on this

trip thinking he was going along just to observe and then got roped into actually teaching instead. What a good sport he had been about the whole thing! I thought of the flights, ground transportation and traffic patterns that were on time and free of hang-ups. I lingered over the beauty of the moments with Charity and allowed my heart to stir with the joy and pride that only a mother can feel when she sees her daughter so beautiful and grown up. I thought about the young man she was with and how much we trusted him.

AND I WAS GRATEFUL.

It's not that this was the first time I had ever felt gratitude; but it was the first time that I had ever given it that much space. Instead of allowing the experience of gratitude to get lost by rushing on to the next thing, I let it fill every corner of my soul. I let myself feel it and relish it down to the bottom of my toes. Those moments were absolutely delicious and I was so glad that I had not reflexively reached for "stuff" to distract me rather than sitting with God with what was true about me in that moment.

But I also noticed something else. As the weekend wore on, there were benefits of giving time and space for gratitude that went far beyond the moment. Even though I was physically tired at the end of that weekend, the *experience* of gratitude, when given the opportunity to expand during that unexpected time of solitude, became a source of powerful energy for my ministry the next day and for the events of the next week overall. Creating space for gratitude rather than letting it slip by unnoticed became deeply replenishing in a way that mere sleep could not have accomplished. Gratitude changed the tenor of the whole week but most importantly, it changed me!

It also shed light on some of Paul's comments about gratitude. I had long been fascinated by the passage in Romans 1 where Paul makes a connection between wickedness and ungodliness and a lack of gratitude. He went so far as to link people's refusal to honor God and give thanks with a futility that deepens over time into senselessness and darkening of the mind. "Surely that is overstating the case!" I have thought when I have stumbled across this verse. "Gratitude is nice when it happens but certainly it is not as important as all that!"

But my experience on the airplane and on into that next week helped me to start understanding that gratitude has the power to shape our minds and our souls, propelling us to love and engagement with others that is a heart-felt response to the reality of God stirring in our lives. But the converse is true as well: a lack of gratitude leaves us in a very dark place that eventually results in a deep sense of futility and inability to make sense out of our lives. It is no wonder then that when our hearts are void of true gratitude, we begin exchanging spiritual reality—the reality of God in and among us—for those things that are poor substitutes.

Gratitude—a deep sense of who God is and what he is giving to us in the most ordinary moments—helps us to make sense of our lives. On airplanes and in taxi cabs, amid prom dresses and pictures in the park, while managing professional commitments and parenting children who are growing up too fast...the willingness to make space for gratitude opens

up dimensions of reality that we would otherwise miss. Gratitude is a lense that sharpens our ability to see the gifts and the graces of our lives as more real than the material world to which we are often tethered. Gratitude energizes us for living more fully in the middle of the life we have been given as we become more practiced at finding God there. When practiced as a spiritual discipline, gratitude is an inner dynamic that enables us to recognize Advent—the coming of Christ—in the ordinariness of our own lives which is where we need him most.

Practice

Gratitude literally changes the shape of our souls as we learn to make space for it; yet in the press of leadership, in which we are often seeking to guide others into experiences of worship and thanksgiving, we often miss simple moments of gratitude for God's goodness that could energize our own souls. If you find that this is true for you, give yourself 10 minutes to try the following simple practice. Perhaps by incorporating this practice regularly into the rhythms of your Advent season, you will discover that God has come to you in more ways than you think!

Is there something you are feeling especially grateful for these days? A place where you are experiencing life, an authentic connection with God and others, and increasing capacity to be given over to God in love? Have you had an experience of unexpected kindness, compassion, protection, or provision that you now recognize as evidence of God's presence with you? When the awareness of gratitude comes, allow yourself time to just experience it in God's presence. Don't feel like you have to *do* anything or *say* anything. Just bask in the goodness of God toward you.

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*A spiritual director, teacher and retreat leader, Ruth Haley Barton is co-founder of the Transforming Center. She is the author of books and spiritual formation resources including the spiritual formation curriculum *An Ordinary Day with Jesus: Experiencing the Reality of God in Your Everyday Life* (Willow Creek Resources).*