

GRATITUDE, A SAVING GRACE

Every Thanksgiving, I remember a magical November, 30 years ago, when I stumbled into feelings of gratitude that I had never known before.

My husband and I had just spent more than four years in the Air Force. Our story started the year we got married, when we lived in a small New England town, he as a banker-in-training, me as a free-lance writer and student, in a sweet Victorian house on a shady street, beginning a life as simple, perfect and predictable as the delicate, hand-painted teacups my aunt had given us for our wedding. A year later, we were living in Biloxi, Mississippi, near Keesler Air Force Base, in a damp, mildew-cursed concrete rental, riveted to nightly news of the escalating war that could fling us anywhere and of the murders of those we had counted on to keep us safe. A year or so after that, we were living on the island of Okinawa, a remote dot in the South China Sea, and our neighbors were flying troops and bombs and napalm into Vietnam every day and not always coming back. News from home was about campus riots, burning buildings, brutality, protests, upheaval and danger for anyone returning to the U.S. in uniform. We lost our innocence quickly; we lived amid daily reports of horror and more horror. Every possibility open to us was either gory or grim and there was no way out of it.

Then, in November, 1970, we came back to the U.S. We drove away from the burnished ground of Travis Air Force Base and left the war behind us. We breathed sweet freedom. We had decided to cross the U.S., looking in any cities that caught our fancy, and seeing where we would go and where we would choose to live. We already knew we couldn't go "home" again; our old circle of friends and acquaintances were not disposed to welcome those who had chosen to enlist. So we opened the map and started driving south and east to discover a new home. We had no preferences and no plans. We had no idea what we were going to do. We entered each day of this odyssey looking to see if we were "there", whatever "there" would come to mean to us, open to anything, free from any considerations. It was a beautiful thing to be alive and wonder. In every city we visited, we interviewed for jobs, looked at houses, walked around the main street, picnicked in parks, wandered through museums, and thought, for those hours or that day, "We are here, now. This is what it is to live here." And we loved them all.

By the end of the trip, when we reached Florida in late November, we were as giddy as children at recess. We were thrilled with everything. We could go anywhere. We were bubbling with enthusiasm for every place we had visited, and then we explored Florida, too, and loved it as much. We were overwhelmed with beautiful feelings of peace and happiness. We had nothing. Everything we had left behind when we went overseas had burned up in a big warehouse fire while we were gone. We had no jobs. We had no security. We had no home. We had spent the last of our money on the car we drove and

the trip we took. We had no worries and no cares. Everything was working out, moment by moment. And every moment, right now, was perfect and we gave thanks.

In my entire life, before or since, nothing has stood out to me as vividly as that time of infinite possibility, of appreciating every small thing in every moment, of noticing the ruddy, grainy earth in Arizona almost pebble by pebble, of counting tiny bird tracks on a sandy field in Texas, of glimpsing the reflections of ornate ironwork in fat raindrops dripping slowly off a vine in New Orleans, of basking in the soft golden glow of autumn in the hills near Knoxville, of blinking at the glitter of glassy columns rising in Atlanta, of touching the sticky bristle of palm fronds in Gainesville. Time flew by, and yet it stopped, as we were constantly awestruck by the complex magnificence of ordinary life.

At a holiday event that year, someone asked us about the war and what the previous four years had been like for us. We tried to recall the life we had led only a few weeks before, but it was like looking at a scene through the wrong of a telescope. Our memories were small and bleak and seemed to recede as we tried to grasp them. We knew then that gratitude had freed us from the grim and gory prison of our past.

That gratitude was grace. It saved us, healed us, and led us gently into our future without fear or regret. That gratitude was presence. It opened our eyes to what was in front of us without any distraction from what we left behind us or any anxiety about what lay ahead of us. That gratitude was wisdom. It freed our minds and opened our hearts and allowed us to find satisfaction in our discoveries, certainty in our decisions, and confidence to start life fresh without any pressure to know more than we could see as we went along. That gratitude was contentment. It unraveled all our sorrows and knitted us a vivid scarf of joy, one colorful row at a time. That gratitude was non-contingent. It just was, a feeling, deep and pure, that burst like a sunrise across the horizon of our lives.

We didn't understand it, then, and when we lost it, we had no idea where it had come from or how to find it again. We struggled for a long time to get back the feeling of that mysterious month of Thanksgiving. And it was a long time and there was sadness and separation, before I learned that the struggle was what kept us from it, not our life.

Gratitude is the natural balm of a mind at rest. Rest is the natural state of mind of a person at peace. Peace is the natural experience of the present. The present is all we have, outside of our imagination, which can rerun the past or project the future and spread a confusing overlay across the page we are on right now.

How do we find it? We find it by quietly giving thanks without needing or seeking a reason to do so.

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