

A Pinch of Sage:

Words of Wisdom

Blessings that Teach Gratitude

Years ago, one of my teachers told me to “be thankful.” Since I didn’t understand what she meant, I asked for clarification. She said, “Be thankful for every bite of food, for the weather, for the lessons life brings you — just be grateful for all of it.” My response was, “No one can be that thankful.”

I still have not attained that level of gratitude. Yet, over time I have realized that gratitude is about what I *have* in my life and not about what I *might* have. Gratitude happens when I pay attention to the present.

As a mentor for ordination candidates, I have attempted to teach the lesson of gratitude to others. When I’ve assigned a list of tasks to students, invariably the one they complain of the most is the task of creating a gratitude ritual and performing it each day for a week. Many have difficulty trying to come up with a way to give thanks; others find the idea of gratitude difficult to understand; and still others assume they have little in their lives for which to be grateful.

After several days of resistance, each student settles upon a rite. The first day the trainee haltingly begins the ritual, still focusing on the have-nots and need-to-dos. Usually, however, by the second or third day, a change occurs. Suddenly, gratitude makes sense and the words begin to flow easily during their rituals. Their lists of blessings grow. A few even see gratitude and thankfulness manifest daily in their lives.

Ephemeral as a loving touch, gratitude takes my focus away from petty squabbles, aching knees, to-do lists, paying bills, and dusty shelves. Since gratitude comes from tiny happenings, and “little things” can be so easy to miss, when it does appear I have learned to pay attention to it.

Sitting around a table drinking tea with my friends, I sit back as they talk — I am the silence in the ebb and flow of words. I look around at our group: our ages range over three decades, and our temperaments are even more varied. Yet we come together to laugh, share, plan, and discuss everything from magick to politics to recipes for vegetarian lasagna.

Suddenly I am grateful for the chaotic over-talking, interrupting, three-way exchanges; for the chatter that spills from our lips; for the bull-headed, good-hearted spilling-over of honest friendship. At this point, I want to hug them all and not let go.

Home again, I notice that one of the cats has dug in the sand around the walkway. Glancing around for the culprit, my attention is captured by the sunlight glinting on the leaves of the plants in my yard. The light caresses each leaf, forming bright jewels and soft shadows that change as the breeze trembles every stem. I stand there, watching the interplay of light and dark. Then a cat darts out of the bushes to sit at my feet, meowing for attention. As I scuff the sand back around the paving stones, I realize my mood has changed through a series of simple events: a bit of sunshine playing with shadow, a happy cat, and the world seems to fit together a bit better than it did before.

The cat and I go inside — where I almost trip over shoes and a backpack scattered in the doorway. I go in search of my son, fully intending to nag him into moving his things. Amazement erupts as I discover him in the kitchen finishing up the dishes — unasked!

He turns and says, “Hi, Mom. Did you have a good time with your friends?”

“What a wonderful surprise! You did such a nice job in here.” Certainly my smile must be bigger than his. I walk back into the living room and move his shoes and bag to their proper place. Now is not the time to mention the subject of shoes left in front of the door, but to savor his consideration and self-reliance.

Gratitude is this: that I stand in my own house listening to the birds chirping outside and appreciate the fact that I *am* standing in my own house. When morning comes, I am grateful for hot showers, a cup of mocha, and fresh fruit with my cereal. I am grateful for e-mail, telephones, cars, and videos; for sunsets, thunderheads, trees swaying in the breeze, purring cats, and screaming crows. Gratitude comes from a beloved child’s painting on the refrigerator.

Later as the moon shines through the branches etched across the night sky, I walk back outside. I hold a bit of tobacco in my left hand. My words are not eloquent but they are sincere. Gently I scatter the tobacco on the ground. “In beauty,” it is said. In beauty I will try to walk; in beauty and in gratitude.

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