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# The Unexpected Gift

Love wholeheartedly, give thanks and praise—then you will discover the fullness of your life.

—BROTHER DAVID STEINDL-RAST



## Risking Our Inner Lives

Sometimes we want to break out of our own skin—to smash through the boundaries we sense are confining our spirits so we can experience something like ecstasy, so we can feel alive. From all around us come reports of people feeling dead, or at least distanced from the kind of living they sense is possible. Feeling disconnected, unrooted, unreal. Ordinary tonics—stimulants, sex, travel—don't seem to carry enough charge to jolt them back to life. They demand stronger medicines.

We die by seconds and live by inches. As a matter of course, we maneuver cars through heavy traffic at speeds where survival is a matter of good brakes and millimeters of tire tread. We take off and land in planes (mostly safely) and undergo medical procedures of extraordinary complexity (not quite as safely). Yet most of the time, living at the edge of literal death is not part of our awareness. We often push our fears down and reduce them to something manageable. The little near-deaths somehow help us feel more alive; some even seek ever more hazardous pursuits to counter the fear of a living death.

“New economy” types, occasionally emerging from their self-imposed work prisons, sign up for expensive adventure trips that involve strenuous trekking, whitewater boating, or high-altitude ascents—

another kind of addiction to velocity. At the extreme, risk-takers throw themselves off precipices, bridges, and buildings; for them, even sky-diving has become too safe and predictable. Then there are the professional daredevils: athletes who put their bodies on the line for fame and gain, or journalists obsessively drawn to whatever world conflict is raging hottest.

That a few people are drawn to such extremes is surely part of the human behavior curve. But why, today, do so many find the need to amp up their already stressed lives? The answer, we think, is that they sense their *inner lives* are at risk. The risks we take with our inner lives are usually less obvious but more insidious—starting with simple neglect. Deprived of attention, the starving spirit weakens and soon can barely make its voice heard above the external din. Our most fundamental needs—for loving contact, communal reassurance, sensory stimulation, ritual, and ceremony (to name just a few)—may go unmet. And all the stock-market scores, trophy homes, partners, and toys disappear down a bottomless void. Unless we can feed our inner life, our ability to perceive and savor the outward world in all its splendor withers.

## Your Gratitude Quotient

We need to develop a sense of smell to help us figure out where true life can be found. We may not lack courage, but we sometimes lack discrimination in our risk-taking. Not all risks are life-bearing.

Our hunger to break out and go live is a sign that we're on to something important. We're on the edge of a great adventure of the human spirit—if we only knew it. Somewhere inside, we know that our right destiny is to experience joy, warmth, sweetness, communion, cathartic sorrow, creative work, and play—not just to imagine or recall those feelings in fleeting moments, but to feel fully alive all the time. Spring. *The surest path to that ever-renewed sense of being alive is through gratitude.* A grateful heart, we've concluded, is an absolute prerequisite to a fully human life.

Gratitude—as conviction, practice, and discipline—is an essential nutrient, a kind of spiritual amino acid for human growth, joy, and creativity. Take away the daily experience and expression of gratitude, and

life is quickly diminished. Like a weakened immune system, the spirit is left vulnerable to the diseases of cynicism, anger, low-grade depression, or at least an edgy sense of dissatisfaction. Gratitude-deprived, we suffer a relentless loss of vitality and delight.

It's easy not to notice when gratitude goes missing. More and more gets taken for granted. Privileges such as physical health, a child's love, freedom of action, and a comfortable home are all seen as entitlements. We fail to *notice* things. Travel becomes boring; even exotic adventures bring a very short wave of satisfaction. Meals are consumed mindlessly, without any ceremony of appreciation. Friends disappoint us. Boredom becomes a constant and finally sadness settles in, an unwanted, lingering guest. Under such conditions, there's no chance for the greening power of spring to take hold.

We want to expand your idea about what gratitude means. We're guessing that your gut response to the words "gratitude" or "being grateful" is slightly impatient or even dismissive. "Grateful" is what you feel when someone gives you a present, right? Or does you a favor? At least, it's how your parents *said* you should feel, and they trained you to say "thank you"—even for that ghastly sweater you got from an unpleasant aunt when you were seven. Later, expressing gratitude carried the weight of obligation. You were suddenly in someone's debt. You owed. This idea of gratitude carries the burden of having to pay back.

At best, gratitude can sound like an incredibly simple, harmless notion. "Live with a grateful heart? Sure, why not? Couldn't hurt. I'll do it! Check that off the list." But you might as well simply *decide* to live mindfully, upon first hearing of that fundamental principle of Buddhist thought. Mindfulness is being completely aware each and every present moment. Such life-changing, soul-shifting practices tend to be intellectually simple to grasp but elusive to master in everyday life. Incorporating them into our being takes not only the will to do so but time and effort.

So the practice of gratitude, as we conceive it, has a lot in common with living mindfully—in a heightened state of awareness—and our approach to it borrows from many spiritual traditions. In fact, all the great religious traditions emphasize wakefulness, gratitude, and compassion.

A deeper conception of gratitude encompasses a stance toward life and a discipline in which it is forged, tested, and strengthened. In

this stance, we choose to be open to what life offers us: to seek out all that makes us fully alive and present to experience, to acquire discernment about what works toward that fullness of life in the long run. Ram Dass says that whatever happens in your life is your *curriculum*—the vehicle for your learning. In practicing gratitude, we *choose* to view life fundamentally as a source of joy, the world as loving and giving of what we need, rather than the reverse. Or, as the poet Wendell Berry wrote, “Be joyful even though you have considered all the facts.”

Why does appreciation for the gift of life come more easily to some than to others, regardless of objective cause? This is one of life’s great mysteries. Some who have been through horrendous circumstances are able to appreciate and enjoy life, while others blessed with abundant resources respond to life mainly with resentment, anxiety, or anger. The capacity for gratitude seems to have little or no relation to wealth or circumstances, or even to whether or not we were raised in a loving home. M. Scott Peck, in his book *In Search of Stones*, even speculates that some people carry a gene for gratitude that others lack.

We would agree that everyone seems to have some mysterious, built-in setting on the gratitude spectrum. To be congenitally inclined toward gratefulness is a great gift in itself, as Peck observes. Some might call it a gift from God; others would consider it a result of brain chemistry. It doesn’t really matter, though. What matters is that everyone can benefit by nurturing this gift, to whatever extent we’re endowed with it. And if you think your gratitude quotient is low, then deliberately cultivating a grateful heart can make that much more difference in your life. Whatever we’re least good at, we need to practice most.

## Opening to Wonder

Alan set down this memory when he began thinking about occasions in his life when he was surprised by an unexpected gift:

A sunny afternoon in Paris a few years ago I took the Metro to Montmartre and walked up the steps to Sacre Coeur, when all of a sudden the world was ablaze with glory and the light of it was around me and in me and shining through everything. Where did this joy come from, with its gift of presence and rightness? What triggered it? Was

it the kid with the ice cream—great gobs of it dripping down her seraphic face? Was it the couple entwined on the grass who had eyes only for each other? Was it the sunlight playing on the leaves of the trees, delighting the eye with every shade of green imaginable? I don't know and I could drive myself crazy trying to work it out. All I do know is that it had something to do with amazement at the sheer gift of life.

It seemed to me then that joy is a bit like reading a story that never comes to an end. You get caught up in it—even lost in it. The joy of it is that it is all gift. I also had tears welling up. I discovered the strangeness of a joy because tears can be mixed up in it. You never know when life is going to surprise you and stun you with a joy that makes your eyes wet with tears.

Just for a few moments on that September afternoon, joy became my *raison d'être*. I knew why I was here. I learned something about adoration—the amazement at being our true selves in the presence of life as gift. Joy makes adoration, compassion, and community possible. And while these are possible, so are we. And it had something to do with very ordinary things like the kid with the ice cream, the lovers in the park, and all those greens of the leaves that luminescent afternoon on Montmartre. I learned that joy is in the particular, and I still worry a little bit about missing what's under my nose.

The groundwork of any gratitude practice is opening to wonder, recovering the ability to be astonished. In order to experience gratitude as more than a trivial acceptance of what is given (perhaps owed) to us, we must first be able to experience life's gifts as truly extraordinary and miraculous. In this way, the springtime of gratitude entails a revival and deepening of the imagination. Our horizons easily become narrowed, our perceptions blunted. The soil on which our growth as humans depends can be poisoned by patterns and strategies of denial, cynicism, resentment, and revenge.

Humans have an inexhaustible need for something that honors our capacity for wonder—we see this demonstrated over and over in scientific research and scholarly inquiry; in our awe of natural phenomena and our urge to explore space; in our admiration for humans who perform miraculous feats of creativity, virtuosity, or athleticism. We all need to get out of our skins, to journey outside the confines of

our own little world. However, that need can also get us into trouble. If it's not fed something nourishing then it will attach itself to activities that can do harm, such as taking unreasonable risks and doing foolish or destructive things.

Risk taking exerts such a powerful attraction because it is related to freedom—the awesome freedom to break boundaries and go beyond our limits. That's why some of us tempt fate by risking all that we have and are. Like the dormant seed in the ground, we want to respond to the warm sun and the soft rain, break out of our shell and see the light of day.

Practicing gratitude both feeds our need for wonder and frames ways we can get out of ourselves (off the treadmill of me, me, me) and risk appropriately and courageously. We can then dare to love. We can risk openness to others and the world. We can be less attached to material things. We can see how absurd our mentality of scarcity is in the light of our relative wealth. In short, we can stop playing dead and become fully alive. Specific practices that help open us to wonder include slowing down, paying attention, giving up some control, and being alive to the unexpected.

## SLOW DOWN

To experience wonder, you have to notice what's going on around you, and most of the time our lives are going by in a blur. We need to cultivate a new attitude towards time if we are to open ourselves again to wonder and heart-piercing surprise. Slowing down is not an end in itself, but a first step toward a more creative and soul-nurturing relationship with time. Instead of being irritated or enraged by life's ordinary inconveniences—waiting for an elevator, sitting in traffic, even being stuck on the runway on a delayed flight—we can use them as opportunities to open up and take notice. Unsolicited gifts often come at these inconvenient moments.

## PAY ATTENTION

Every day the world offers itself to be seen. Seeing things with a grateful eye requires attentiveness and engages our imagination; imagination is a way we take part in the world, not escape from it. We can train

ourselves to see the immensity of the commonplace, the world offering itself to our imagination every moment. A poem, a piece of music, a particular smell: if we pay attention, these can open up new worlds.

Such ordinary experiences not only affect the present moment but also shape our sense of the future. In other words, they give substance to hope. Sometimes it's as if a piece of music or a painting or a book takes possession of us, and we feel amazed and honored to have such guests inside us. We become the host of the undreamed and unexpected. The genuinely new becomes possible. Springtime returns.

Going live involves deciding where to focus our attention. Human beings, suggests the poet and translator John Ciardi, "are what we do with our attention." Or as the mystics would say, we are what we contemplate. If we give our best attention to things that ultimately fail to satisfy us, we get into trouble. Going live, then, may be the act of attending to what's really going on inside and around us. This can be unnerving, because it sharpens our awareness of life's fragility and difficulty. But it also awakens us to life as a gift and starts the wheels of gratitude turning. The positive feedback that gratitude produces is what allows us to stay live, to not shut down.

### GIVE UP CONTROL

"Do something every day that won't compute," says our friend George. Part of what he means is to get yourself out of the place where you feel comfortable and in control in order to expose yourself to someplace where you can't predict the outcome.

Technology's pervasive power offers the illusion that everything is fixable. Worse yet, it can render life sterile. Putting ourselves in its thrall is like paving a garden or putting down astroturf so that nothing can grow: you have more control but the garden is gone. Our efforts to make existence more manageable narrow our horizons; spring is effectively banished. If we wait to marshal all the facts and get everything under control before engaging, we miss the game of life. Remember Groucho Marx in *A Day at the Races*? His brother Chico convinces him that he can't place his two-dollar bet until he has purchased a breeder's guide and a whole slew of other pamphlets. By the time Groucho has looked over all of them and been utterly confused, the race is over.

Opportunities for giving up control come our way whether we choose them or not. Airline flights are a good example. It's interesting to observe how people choose to use this time. For some, work simply continues: keyboard out at wheels up. For others this time is spent reading a novel or watching the movie. On one flight to Australia from San Francisco, a neighboring passenger watched six movies back to back.

What if you used some of your flight time for practicing gratitude? The underlying premise of grateful flying is that you are out of control—if you arrive safely at your destination, someone else has made it happen. That reminder of how we depend on others is a binding element of gratitude practices.



### *Gratitude Practice: Flying*

First, get comfortable and block out as many distractions as possible. Next, focus on the remarkable fact that you are *not in control*. This is a huge leap for many of us who go through life feeling bound to control mechanisms. For those who are used to holding positions of power and responsibility, such as doctors, business leaders, and parents, the idea of not controlling the environment and worrying about outcomes is virtually impossible. As a passenger on an airplane your only responsibility is to relax into the experience of *not* being in control.

Finally, do a simple mental inventory of all of the gifts you possess: family, friends, talents, privileges such as freedom, and so on. Savor each gift. Feel no requirement to be critical. Just enjoy thinking of those small moments you relish with a lover, a grandchild, or a treasured friend. This can be retrospective or prospective. It can be anything you wish to make it: a story of a time when you felt happy or exalted, a mental image of a favorite place with a special person.

The best thing about a flying gratitude practice is that it can be completely open-ended in intent. The result can be a deeply refreshing meditation—or a nap. You may arrive at your destination better prepared to enjoy your work or holiday. The outcome, like the flying, is not in your control. Enjoy!





## DISCOVER THE UNEXPECTED GIFT

What is the movement of spring that draws life out of the seemingly dead earth and pushes us towards the light, toward going live? What needs to happen to plunge us into the twin mysteries of self-knowledge and interdependence—the signs of being fully alive? For one young woman, it happened suddenly.

*Grace Happens*

Rita is thirty-two, single, and, according to her former friends, moving down the ladder fast. Her immigrant family gave her a great education, and when she graduated from Smith, she went to New York to “make it”—and did for a few years, as a buyer for a big department store. Her world fell apart when she got pregnant. She felt caught between wanting the baby and not wanting to lose the life she had come to take for granted. At first she couldn’t tell her parents, whose old-country Catholicism was still strong. She felt no support from her boyfriend. But in the end she decided that abortion, for her, was out of the question. She took her savings, returned to her parents’ home in southern California, and had her baby, Miguel.

Much to her surprise and that of her career-minded friends, Rita’s life wasn’t ruined, it was restored. She slowed down and felt herself becoming more grounded and self-confident. She’s the first to admit that this isn’t the path for every woman in her situation. But as much as she appreciated her education and opportunities to succeed, she knew something had gone sour, that her promising life held little joy. Rita and Miguel are doing fine. Rita is back at work and in a relationship that seems, as she says, “to be going somewhere.” She says she’s never felt more alive. “My former friends often used to say, ‘Shit happens!’ Now I know that grace happens too.”

Falling deeply in love is one way of falling into the springtime mysteries. People often receive an unexpected gift in the form of a wake-up call: an accident, a chance meeting, an illness. Something happens (a minor or major catastrophe) that invites us to get down to basics and think about what really matters—life and death, the possibility of

being lost and the promise of being found. Sometimes it's something quite small—a letter we shouldn't have opened, the discovery of a lump in the breast or the groin while showering. Almost anything can place us on the edge of life, open doors we didn't know existed or would prefer to keep locked. By such events and discoveries we are embedded more deeply in the human community, which needs us more than we realize.

Hidden mercies crop up in ordinary life all the time. Karen is an avid and expert gardener; her backyard urban garden was a neatly sculpted masterpiece of clean-swept surfaces, carefully weeded borders, trimmed container shrubs, espaliered fruit trees, and gracefully draped arbors. As she gradually became disabled with severe arthritis, she fell into near despair; unable to pay a professional gardener, she had to watch as her meticulous handiwork grew untidy and overgrown.

But lately, she told us, her response has been changing. "I found that since I could only work for short periods, I had more time to just sit there and notice what was going on in the garden. I started to appreciate wild plants that I once would have ruthlessly yanked out, and things growing together in interesting patterns that I never would have planned. My cats had a new jungle playground, and there were more birds and butterflies than ever before. Best of all was what happened this spring: an old rosebush that had been on the property when we moved in had never bloomed, though I faithfully pruned it each year. This year I couldn't—and since March it's been producing the most gorgeous coral roses!"

By practicing gratitude even in the worst circumstances, we give our lives integrity. All the bits and pieces of our experiences are in touch with each other: the hurtful and the whole, the good and the bad. Spring, with its greening power, allows the seed to break open and struggle towards the light.



### *Gratitude Practice: Feeling Alive*

Unexpected gifts don't always appear through the dark, of course. Try to think of those times when you have felt most keenly alive. Was it hearing your child's first cry? Beholding a grand view at a magic hour

during a walk? Were you making love? Absorbing the shock of a family tragedy? Accepting an unexpected gift of praise? Inhaling a delicious fragrance like old roses or warm pie? When you find one or more such moments, focus on what you felt.

This is a kind of foundation practice for strengthening your gratitude quotient. Beneath the powerful—often fleeting—states of joy, terror, or passion, gratitude is germinating. And as we learn better how to cultivate gratitude, it begins to flavor all parts of our lives, expanding our souls and opening us to the perennial spring of wonder.

