

# The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

The last issue of this Newsletter was on the theme of apology and forgiveness. It drew more response from readers than any issue we have ever published. It seemed worthwhile to try a companion theme, namely, gratitude. Forgiveness is needed when the bonds between people have become frayed or broken. Gratitude is a prior emotion; it is what happens when the bond is unbroken. Its effect is to strengthen the healthy relation between people or between people and some reality greater than themselves.

In this issue, we include four essays. In the first, Gabriel Moran explores some of the philosophical basis for gratitude. Joseph Amato's essay is excerpted from his book Guilt and Gratitude. Maria Harris writes on gratitude and evil at the end of her book Dance of the Spirit. Michael Lerner's reflection on Jewish gratitude is an editorial from the current issue of Tikkun magazine.

## THINKING AND THANKING

By Gabriel Moran

Gratitude has never been a major theme in the history of philosophy. It does not seem to fit in any obvious place. Those who approach the world with objective and mathematical precision do not find gratitude in their scope. Those who construct grand conceptual systems find gratitude to be at most a peripheral idea.

Is it possible, however, that gratitude is not a prominent philosophical thought because it is the foundation and presupposition of all thinking. Humans have something to think about only because they are open to a world beyond themselves. If they receive that world with the proper recognition that it is a gift unmerited by them, their attitude is one of thanksgiving.

The title of this essay, *Thinking and Thanking*, refers to the writing of one of the few philosophers, Martin Heidegger, who draws a connection between philosophical thinking and thanksgiving. Thinking is truly human only when it is also thanking. Heidegger plays with the roots of the two German words, danken and denken, but the point also comes through in English. The English speaker, like the German, seldom thinks of (or gives thanks for) the connection between the two words.

Unfortunately, Heidegger on this and many other points was not the best person to carry through the implications and practical significance of his insight. In addition to being nearly unreadable, Heidegger did not seem to embody the insight in his own life. At the level of interpersonal exchange, Heidegger says that human being is *being with*, but this thought shows up on p. 110 of his major work, Being and Time. And the further he went on in life, the more isolated he seemed from simple human gestures, including thanks.

In relation to the ultimate source of human life and thinking, Heidegger borrowed some of his key terms from the fourteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart. Eckhart's work is suffused with a sense of gratitude for all creation and the God of creation. But whereas for Eckhart we are to let go of our lives in thankful response to the giver of all gifts, Heidegger ends on a despairing note. The old gods having fled, *We can do nothing but wait.*

Heidegger and much of the twentieth century seem to incarnate the fear expressed by Alyosha in The Brothers Karamazov: *What if there is no God? What if he doesn't exist? Whom shall we love? Whom shall we thank? To whom shall we sing our song? Rakitin laughs, Rakitin says we can love humanity, but only a fool can say that.* And, indeed, the twentieth century found that it was not easy to simply substitute *humanity* for god. The demand to love humanity is not an illegitimate one, but people need flesh and blood reality to awaken trust, love, and gratitude. *Voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us...but nobody will die for a conclusion.* (John Henry Newman).

One twentieth-century thinker who shared Heidegger's concerns but took a nearly opposite stance was Martin Buber. Like Heidegger, Buber says that human being is *being with*, but instead of the thought appearing more than a hundred pages into the book, it is the first sentence of Buber's classic, I and

Thou. All of life is response to a human thou, and every such response is an echo of our being in relation to a thou greater than the human.

Today's environmental movement stirs awareness of the human connection to something much bigger, to a nature that is overwhelming. We seem to be headed for a recurrence of first-century Stoicism in which the only appropriate feeling is acceptance of nature. I think that instead we need a thou to thank, or perhaps conversely, we need to practice thanking to rediscover a sense of thou.

For recognizing the significance of thanking, Ludwig Wittgenstein is the other important twentieth-century philosopher. Wittgenstein shifted philosophy from its obsession with making pronouncements about the world. There are other functions of language. Wittgenstein lists Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying as forms of speech that keep humans alive and sane. He could have added praising, apologizing, confessing, forgiving, mourning and comforting. All of these languages exist in rituals that bond human beings.

While philosophy after the seventeenth century took little notice of these rituals, religious traditions kept them alive, if not always vibrant. At the center of all these rituals is thanksgiving. In the Christian church that should be obvious, given that the central act is called Eucharist, which means thanksgiving. But Christianity, like other religions, can turn into a game of asking or grasping or fearing.

Paul Tillich wrote: "The usual question 'What shall we do?' must be answered with the unusual question 'Whence can we receive?' People must understand that one cannot do much without having received much. Religion is, first, an open hand to receive a gift, and, second, an acting hand to distribute gifts. Giving and receiving are opposite ends of a single relation. In human exchanges, receiving is a form of giving oneself; therefore, the giver receives in giving. Human gifts have to keep moving until they return to the giver. If the circle is too small, the sense of gift may get replaced by the calculation of self-interest. ('How much did he spend on my present last year?') But if one passes on the gift without calculation, the circle keeps expanding to what is finally a divine circle.

The mark of religious experience is a receptiveness that is sheer acknowledgment of a gift. Such religious thanksgiving needs to be practiced each day. The first sentiment in the morning should be thanks that one does not have to create the world. The creation is already here to be enjoyed, and millions of people live faithful lives in maintaining it. Simple rituals of daily politeness embody a profound structure. Each time a person says "thank you" human life

becomes more bearable, beautiful and integral.

The end of each day is therefore a culmination of small gifts. In Topsy-Turvy, the gem of a movie about Gilbert and Sullivan, the wife of Arthur Gilbert says: "Wouldn't it be wondrous if perfectly commonplace people gave each other a round of applause at the end of the day." It is always a pleasant surprise that anyone expressing gratitude for something we have done can transform a day or a lifetime. Each nightfall is a presentiment of dying, the final culmination of life's gifts. Annie Dillard writes that "the dying person prays at the last not 'please' but 'thank you' in the same way that guests thank their host at the door."

In Mr. Clinton's State of the Union Address, I thought that the first three sentences were the best: "We are fortunate to be alive at this moment in history. Never before has our nation enjoyed, at once, so much prosperity and social progress with so little internal crisis or so few external threats. Never before have we had such a blessed opportunity -- and therefore such a profound obligation -- to build the more perfect union of our founders' dreams."

It is not clear to me how "such a profound obligation" was reflected in what followed. The country is blessed with opportunity but recognition of that fact would lead to a gratitude for blessings and a willingness to share those blessings with the less fortunate. The United States seems mainly intent on cornering an ever larger portion of the world's capital.

Mr. Clinton spoke for four of his 89 minutes on countries outside the United States. The president has asked for a foreign aid package that is 7/10 of 1% of his budget; Congress has balked at the amount and has tried to reduce it to 6/10 of 1%. As one example, Mr. Clinton pledged 150 million dollars to Africa's AIDS problem. In a budget of 1.7 trillion dollars, the amount is minuscule. And yet this is the worst crisis in the world. More people are expected to die of AIDS in Africa this decade than all of the people who died in all of the wars of the twentieth century.

Such statistics can lead to a paralysis of action. When faced with intractable political conflict or enveloping environmental problems, the danger is that people simply despair of having any power to bring about change. That is why, as Maria Harris points out in her essay, gratitude for what we have received has to anchor political struggles for justice. Without this solid and contemplative base, people quickly exhaust their energies in battles that are never ending.

GRATITUDE AND CONSCIENCE

By Joseph Amato

Gratitude is among the first human measures of the good. What has been given, which need not have been given, is always appreciated. In a world of scarcity it is deeply appreciated, for the individual's survival depends upon the reception of goods he could not have controlled.

Like chastity, prudence, and patience, gratitude seems to echo the human spirit from an earlier period. Go just about anywhere and listen to people talk. Their conversations get most intense when they touch upon the subject of unrewarded labor and unacknowledged gifts. Speaking of gratitude and ingratitude is serious business, worthy both of the most elevated philosophy and of the basest gossip.

Classical authors confirm the importance of gratitude in human affairs. Cicero called gratitude *the mother of all virtues*, and Seneca wrote: *He that urges gratitude pleads the cause of both God and men, for without it we can neither be sociable nor religious.* A thankful heart was considered to be the source of piety. In a heart replete with thankfulness, justice and love were thought to be nurtured.

Gratitude defines different personality types. At one extreme there are those who seem almost devoid of a sense of gratitude; they do not acknowledge the gifts they receive. At the other extreme are those who sense themselves perpetually indebted for everything. A customary inquiry as to how they are can elicit from them a profuse show of thankfulness. In the extreme this type of gratefulness becomes associated with the reprehensible people who are forever groveling before others.

Gratitude is evoked by different kinds of gifts, favors, and deeds. The gift may be tangible or intangible, given once or repeatedly, recognized instantaneously or realized only in distant retrospect. The gift may come from a friend or an enemy, be willingly declared or reluctantly acknowledged, accepted as elevating or experienced as debasing.

A person's self-image - his status, race, sex, and so on - generally shapes his sense of gratitude. For example, a homely female is commonly taught to be thankful for any male who comes her way; whereas the beautiful girl is taught to think of herself as a great gift to whomever she presents herself. In addition, receiving often involves the feigning of gratitude. As a wealthy tourist gives to the poor beggar to get rid of him, so the beggar repeatedly thanks the tourist to try to get more. Giving or receiving can become so ritualized and institutionalized that it is carried out in such a way that the giver expects no gratitude and the receiver gives none.

Nevertheless, with these observations aside, gratitude constitutes a fundamental element out of which all societies are formed. Perhaps gratitude is the first source of morality. An exchange of goods, services, and other favors belong to the external side of human interactions, so gratitude is the heart's internal tally of gifts and exchanges. Meeting obligations, saving face, maintaining honor, and other similar actions arise from an inner sense of duty rather than from fear of external reprisal or punishment. To use a Chinese expression, *Kindness is more binding than a loan.*

Gratitude, we should note, is not a matter of simple materialism. It is not elicited only by tangible gifts and quantifiable services. The very presence of another person, like Beatrice's presence for Dante or Laura's for Petrarch, can occasion profound thankfulness. Gratitude, at least in a decent heart, is not like water in a faucet, to be turned off and on at will. Instead, to paraphrase George Simmel, gratitude is a kind of moral memory of mankind that binds together those who have exchanged gifts.

Gratitude is considered to be a fundamental element in forming conscience. It is the dutiful memory of the man who recognizes gifts. Traditional man, the old man, built his moral order out of the sense of gratitude. In contrast to modernity's preferred philosophical formula of Descartes—*I think, therefore I am,* I hear the old man dancing and singing out this proposition: *I am, therefore I am thankful.*

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## GRATITUDE AND EVIL

By Maria Harris

Tragedy - personal and global - is with us always. Homelessness and poverty are epidemic. Violence threatens all citizens, threatening to lock us inside our homes. Our world is full of evil: cancer and AIDS and brain seizures. Vehicular homicide and bombed cities and teenagers with assault weapons. Families without shelter and men and women without work. Hunger precluding the saying of any grace. How in such a world can we speak of gratitude?

I remember the first person who asked me that question. We were in a classroom and the course was called *Education for Justice.* I was teaching about thanksgiving and, as I did, noticed one of the students becoming visibly angry until finally she erupted. *How in a world filled with hatred and evil, she challenged me, how can you speak of gratitude?*

Ironically, the mystery of evil and the mystery of gratitude are inextricably connected. Our refusal to tolerate evil comes as a direct result of realizing that

the gifts of life belong to everyone. We confront disease, violence, genocide, or any of the terrible wrongs in our world, we do so because we've got a spiritual conviction. When we volunteer in an AIDS hospice or serve in a soup kitchen, we do so based on a strong, intuitive belief. Health, peace, food, shelter, and employment are universal gifts. There is a fault line in the universe, however, that prevents those gifts from reaching all but the most privileged minority of the world's people. Some call the fault line evil; theologians call it sin.

But theologians also teach that where sin abounds, grace abounds even more. Goodness already exists in our world - to believe otherwise is to give in to despair - but it is partial goodness, incomplete goodness. The fitting human response to evil and the way in which we can fulfill our potential for goodness is to accept our responsibility to all of the earth's creatures and try to repair the inequality, deprivation, and brokenness that prevent things from being as they ought.

But before we take actions, we must pause to give thanks for the ordinary and pervasive gifts of life. Gratitude is not only the final ritual, it is the initial one too. Paradoxically, the starting point in facing evil is not the prophetic stand against it. The starting point is the genuflection of thanksgiving.

This is precisely where gratitude kindles artistic imagination. The disposition to be grateful awakens the realization that the Giver's gifts haven't yet reached everyone, thereby illuminating our interdependence with all creatures. It impels us to create forms and rituals to liberate others. It forces us onto our knees in prayer and back onto our feet in protest against injustice. The poetic insight of Nobel laureate Par Lagerkvist gives expression to this dynamic:

May my heart's disquiet never vanish  
May I never be at peace;  
May I never be reconciled to life nor to death either;  
May my path be unending.

It is a strange prayer. Yet if we pray it attentively, we realize the prayer for disquiet, in the face of gifts denied, is a petition we pray when we are quiet. When we allow ourselves to *be peace* - the phrase is *Thich Nhat Hanh's* - we hear the pain of those whose peace has been vandalized. When we are most reconciled within ourselves and with others, we are also reconciled to our unending call to stand against the power of evil.