

Living in Thanksgiving



Christopher News Notes

*“If the only prayer you said
your whole life was ‘thank you,’
that would suffice.”*

—Meister Eckhart, German mystic

**EVERY NOVEMBER,
ON THE FOURTH THURSDAY
OF THE MONTH,** we make it a
point to remember the people
and things for which we are
grateful. But instead of just
celebrating Thanksgiving once
a year, what would happen
if we were willing to
“live in thanksgiving”
the whole year through?

Most of us live our lives knowing on some level that we are grateful for our blessings, even if we don't always say it out loud, even if we complain about whatever challenges we're facing. But practicing "intentional gratitude" is different. Based on evidence from both spiritual and secular sources, that kind of practice creates a shift in our perspective and can open us up to a new way of living, a new way of being.

Be Intentional

So, what exactly is a gratitude "practice"? Well, saying "thank you" to the stranger holding the door for you is a wonderful thing. But you can go deeper than that to practice proactive gratitude in a soul-touching way. It can be as simple as jotting down a few things each day in a cheap spiral notebook, or even keeping a running list in the Notes section of your phone.

There's something that happens when we don't just *think* about how grateful we are, but actually take the time to write it down or even speak it out loud. We make it concrete; it's no longer just an idea. Try it the next time you see something or experience something that makes you feel happy or grateful.

Gratitude can run the gamut. We can be grateful for the new job, the good diagnosis, a child's graduation, a good friend—and we can be grateful for the simple things: the sound of rain on the roof at night, the smell of chocolate chip cookies fresh from the oven, the cat curled up and purring in the corner of the couch. Even the smallest nods toward gratitude remind us that the goodness we experience comes from somewhere outside ourselves.

During his visit to New York City in 2015, Pope Francis said, "Joy springs from a grateful heart. Truly, we have received much, so many graces, so many blessings, and we rejoice in this. It will do us good to think back on our lives with the grace of remembrance. Gratitude and hard work: these are two pillars of the spiritual life. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves: are we good at counting our blessings?"

Putting It into Practice

Starting a gratitude practice is as easy as picking up a pen. Here are some tips for making that practice stick, or maybe even kicking it up a notch if you're already a gratitude practitioner:

- Get a notebook that you'll use as a gratitude journal. It can be a 50-cent notebook from an office supply store, a beautifully bound journal of handmade paper, or anything in between. Pick whatever makes you comfortable and happy.
- Put the journal where you will see it every day—on your nightstand, wherever you sit and drink your coffee each morning, next to your favorite comfy chair.
- Every day commit to writing down three things. They can be simple or complicated, from the ridiculous to the sublime. You'll be amazed when you look back on this journal a few years down the road and see the ordinary moments you noted. It's sure to make you smile.
- Give gratitude a new twist: At the beginning of a new year, start a Gratitude Jar. Take an empty container, put a slot in the lid, and then seal the lid shut with tape. (No peeking!) Keep a stack of small slips of paper next to the jar. At the end of every day, write down something for which you are grateful and slip it into the jar. On the next New Year's Eve, crack open the jar and read through your bottle full of blessings.
- Leave a special gratitude notebook on your desk at work. Try to take a few minutes each day (perhaps at lunchtime or when you're closing down your computer) to note at least one blessing from your workday. The practice could go a long way toward transforming those 9-to-5 stresses.

In an interview with *NPR*, 90-year-old Judith Viorst—author of the popular children's book *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*—surprises even herself by telling an interviewer that her favorite time of her life is right now. "It's not that the days themselves now are so fabulous," she said. "My hair is thinning. My body is not. I can't find my glasses or keys. And I spend so much time seeing specialists that, if they gave doctorates for going to doctors, I'd easily have earned a Ph.D. But still, I don't hesitate. The best is not ahead or behind. It's now."

Viorst goes on to credit some of that incredible perspective to the fact that she is "lucky enough to be conscious of" her blessings and her good fortune. "I've found that a little surplus of gratitude often has downstream effects, helping us become more tolerant, less judgmental, more forgiving," she says.

In a study at the University of California-Davis, three groups of students were recruited to test the gratitude theory. One group kept a gratitude jour-

nal. One group wrote down their daily hassles, and the third group wrote down "neutral" events. At the end of the study, the group that kept the gratitude journal exercised more regularly, had fewer physical ailments, and felt better about their lives and more optimistic about the future.

"They were also more likely to report helping someone with a personal problem or offering emotional support to another," writes Robert A. Emmons, a professor at UC and the author, with Johanna Hill, of *Words of Gratitude for Mind, Body, and Soul*.

How would your life change if you decided to begin every day not by dreading whatever you've got on your To Do list but by thanking God for being alive, for getting another chance at another day, for whatever is ahead? What if you said a short prayer of thanks before every meal? What if, in addition to writing in your gratitude journal, before you fell asleep each night you closed your eyes and reviewed that day's events, as though watching your day on video replay, making a

special point to give thanks for all those things that happened, all those people who crossed your path? Maybe some days it won't be anything more than an easy commute or a clear desk, but isn't that enough?

Grateful for Everything

It's easy to be grateful for the good things in life. Who doesn't want to send up a thank you to our Creator for a gorgeous sunset on a summer night or the rush of the ocean over our toes as we stand on the sand? But, can we take that one step further into struggle and sorrow and even find blessings there?

In her beautiful song "Blessings," singer Laura Story explores that difficult terrain. She writes: "What if Your blessings come through raindrops? / What if Your healing comes through tears? / What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know You're near? / What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise?"

That's a challenge that can put even the most ardent gratitude practitioners to the test, but it's a challenge that can also be transforming. Think about those people you may know who embody this type of worldview. They manage to find new life in the cancer diagnosis or loss. They rise above what might sink many of us and find a way to be grateful for "what is" rather than "what is not." Of course, not everyone is inclined to see even dark moments as a gift, and that is why it's so important to nurture the practice of gratitude when times are good. If we lay a strong foundation of

faith focused on our blessings, we will have something to shore us up when those storm clouds inevitably come rolling in and we start inching toward that "Why me?" feeling.

We usually associate the words "Why me, Lord," with some kind of lament when things are going wrong in our lives. But singer-songwriter Kris Kristofferson turned that idea on its head in the early 1970s when he wrote and performed, "Why Me, Lord," which became the biggest hit of his career up to that point. Instead of complaining to God about hardship, the lyrics offer a song of praise to the Creator: "Why me, Lord? / What have I ever done / To deserve even one of the pleasures I've known? / Tell me, Lord. / What did I ever do / That was worth loving You or the kindness You've shown?"

The song grew out of Kristofferson joining a friend for church one Sunday morning (something he rarely did), and hearing the preacher ask, "Does anyone feel lost in their lives?" Though he didn't want to raise his hand, Kristofferson couldn't resist the urge. He then responded to an altar call where the preacher asked him if he would accept Jesus as his savior. Kristofferson answered, "I don't know." The preacher then prayed over him, leaving Kristofferson weeping on his knees. Not long after, he wrote, "Why Me, Lord."

The lyrics continue, "Tell me, Lord, if You think there's a way / I can try to repay / All I've taken from You. / Maybe Lord, I can show someone else / What I've been through myself / On my way back to You."

This song is a wonderful reminder that even when life seems dark, we can still be grateful for the love of God. And that, in sharing His love with others, we can emerge from the darkness—and help them emerge from theirs.


**"It's better to light one candle
than to curse the darkness."**

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*"When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world
into my arms."*

Mary Oliver, poet