

“Come Ye Thankful People, Come”

Robert A. Rees

That is the title of a Thanksgiving hymn written in 1844 by [Henry Alford](#) which is still sung in many churches today. The imperative, repeated “come” give the hymn the sense of both invitation and urgency. This is a season of coming together (as families, groups and congregations) to express appreciation, gratitude and thanksgiving (related but distinct human emotions). The Institute of HeartMath in the Santa Cruz Mountains where I worked for a dozen years has studied gratitude and its associated emotions and their impact on our minds, bodies, and spirits. Here is a summary of their findings: “[When expressing appreciation or gratitude,] you feel a deep sense of peace and internal balance —you are at harmony with yourself, with others, and with your larger environment. You experience increased buoyancy and vitality. Your senses are enlivened—every aspect of your perceptual experience seems richer, more textured. Surprisingly, you feel invigorated even when you would usually have felt tired and drained.” Another way to say this is that expressing appreciation, gratitude and thankfulness are good for us—physically, emotionally and spiritually.

And yet, we often have to be reminded to be grateful. That happened to me just this week. I was at Best Buy involved in a long, difficult phone conversation with a computer repair technician somewhere in the antipodes. I was irritated, frustrated, and tired. To a woman standing next in line waiting to be served, I complained, “What a day!” She responded, “But it is a day.” Immediately, her words changed my perspective. Yes, having any day (even a difficult one) is better than having no day. Whatever difficulties I was experiencing, I was alive. I was also immensely blessed, especially in comparison with the vast majority of humankind, including no doubt the technician on the other end of the line.

Thanksgiving is also a day, a day set apart for expressing gratitude and thanks. It is a day when we remember all of those others who have blessed our lives in some way, who have given to us beyond the limits of obligation and expectation, who have given time, patience, and love with grace and generosity and in doing so have made our lives fuller, richer, safer, and more meaningful. With just a little thought a list of those who have touched or now touch our lives in some way expands exponentially. Thus, those for whom we should be grateful are not only those millions who have sacrificed to make our world as rich, comfortable and safe as it is, but, in Wordsworth’s expression, the “little, nameless unremembered acts of kindness and love” of which we are daily recipients.

It is the nature of gratitude to engender gratitude—in ourselves and others. Which is to say that gratitude is contagious. That means that expressing gratitude on Thanksgiving is likely to elicit gratitude in others—and more gratitude in ourselves beyond Thanksgiving, finding in each day at least one thing for which we can be grateful. Expressing gratitude also often leads to our manifesting gratitude beyond words. Feelings of appreciation and thankfulness often motivate us to do something for others. As John F. Kennedy said, “As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.”

One of our family rituals is to ask all those sitting around the Thanksgiving table to name one thing for which they are especially thankful and then to have a collective prayer of thanksgiving. When I was travelling in China years ago with a group of American writers, Barry Lopez said something I have never forgotten: "An older meaning of 'to remember' means to pass something through our hearts once more." This Thanksgiving, perhaps as we sit around the table with friends and relatives we can all take a moment to let some remembrance of gratitude pass through our hearts again. As the old French proverb puts it, "Gratitude is the heart's memory."

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