

## **The Attitude of Gratitude... August 14, 2013**

### **Introduction**

Gratitude is an important part of an alcoholic's life and recovery. What is gratitude? An action... something said... something done once in awhile...?

What gets in the way of gratitude? What hampers gratitude? What can destroy gratitude?

Some have described gratitude as a "practice." What is a "practice?"

In general "practices" are at the heart of human communities. Community building "practices" are behaviors which people do together over time. They answer human needs. Some examples of "practices" are: telling the truth, keeping promises, forgiveness, hospitality and gratitude. Other behaviors can destroy communities. Some of these are: envy, grumbling, discontent, lying, and resentments, and ingratitude. These behaviors are not "practices" but rather the lack of healthy "practices."

In this talk I would like to focus on the "practice" of gratitude. How do we express gratitude, what are obstacles to it, what can destroy it?

### **I Gratitude... What Is the Practice of Gratitude?**

Gratitude can be a way of life. A person who practices gratitude notices the goodness and beauty in life, even among the small things. Thomas Traherne, a poet from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, puts it this way:

*Is not sight a jewel? Is not hearing a treasure? Is not speech a glory? O my Lord, pardon my ingratitude, and pity my dullness, who am not sensible of these gifts. The freedom of thy bounty hath deceived me. These things were too near to be considered. Thou presentest me with Thy blessings, and I was not aware. But now I give thanks... (**Growing into Community**, C. Pohl, ftnt # 36, p. 186)*

In this quote we notice one important aspect of gratitude... gratitude to God. The person of gratitude realizes that his or her whole life is in the context of God's grace, God's embrace, God's loving care. As a person grows in gratitude he or she realizes the truth of what St. Therese the Little Flower said towards the end of her life, even in the midst of her suffering and pain:

*All is grace.*

We see more and more of our life as God's calm gift of silent grace.

Gratitude to God becomes a part of our identity... and this gratitude overflows into gratitude to others and gratitude toward the many blessings of our life.

### **Girl in wheelchair – gratitude**

It's funny... often it seems that when I am working on a talk stories about my topic pop up, unbidden. It's almost as if God says: heh, check this out.. I recently read this story and it touched my heart. A few months ago a young, beautiful, healthy college student, suddenly and without warning, lost control of her body and was paralyzed from the neck down. Her friends sent prayer requests to everyone they knew and fortunately a few months later, the girl recovered.

*When she returned to school, her friends noticed that her smile was brighter than before; it was almost as if she had seen Heaven. There was a visible change of attitude; she was kinder, happier, and paid attention to people more than ever. She started sending emails to her friends and family expressing her love and gratitude for all they have done for her. She sent emails to her parents, thanking them for all the sacrifices they made for her since she was born. Although everyone loved the change in her, they had to ask her what caused this change in her? She explained that when she had been immobile in the hospital and thought she would never walk again or would maybe even die, that the most painful thing was the regret she was feeling that she had not lived her life fully. Now that it seemed to be too late, it all seemed so clear that she had not loved enough, used all opportunities to serve. She suddenly knew that all the grudges she held, and all the time lost thinking about those who had wronged her and how to avoid those she didn't like, had been a waste of her precious life. She thought about how much time she spent being mad and miserable for all that went wrong, and how little time she spent rejoicing for what went right! In her remorse, she begged God in prayer to give her a chance to live again so that she could make things right, and God heard her prayers.*

When this young woman recovered from her mysterious illness she responded with gratitude.

How many of us respond with gratitude when we recover from our alcohol disease?

As we move into recovery we hopefully begin to see that others embody God's grace to us – others are a blessing to us... our sponsor and other people in the Program. Gratitude can be our response.

Hopefully we begin to realize that we can embody God's grace to others. We can bless others. How grateful we can be for that! Our lives become useful and meaningful.

*From the Desk of Donald Ware, C.P.*

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On page 193 of the **Big Book** we have a story entitled *Gratitude in Action*. Listen to what the writer says:

*I believe it would be good to tell the story of my life. Doing so will give me the opportunity to remember that I must be grateful to God, and to those members of Alcoholic Anonymous who knew A.A. before me. Telling my story reminds me that I could go back to where I was if I forget the wonderful things that have been given to me or forget that God is the guide who keeps me on this path.*

Gratitude becomes part of our identity, even in tough times. We know that we are held secure by a loving, gracious God. When we encounter sorrow or suffering or pain we realize that we do not know the whole story... our lives still have to play out. We can trust that God can write straight with crooked lines. We can thank our loving God and other good people who help us thru the tough times – people who embody God’s graciousness to us... people who bless us. For this we can give thanks.

Listen to the stories of people who know that they were touched and saved by loving God. How many stories tell us what it was like – so many times a living hell. Then they tell us what happened? They got sick and tired of being sick and tired, they had a moment of clarity, they realized their life was unmanageable, they came to believe that a power greater than themselves could restore them to sanity and they turned their lives over to this power, praying for relief from “bondage to self” - a cruel taskmaster. (**BB**. P 59)

In the Program we find ourselves surrounded by many people who have been delivered from demon alcohol and have achieved sobriety and growth in serenity. Listen to their stories. Listen to your own story! Our stories give testimony to being delivered from addiction. If we continue to grow in the Program we experience the Promises (**BB** pp 83-84). No wonder there is gratitude in the lives of AAers. What it was like, what happened , what it’s like now.

Listen to some of the stories in the **Big Book** that speak of how gratitude overflows onto others:

*Following this spiritual path made a major difference in my life. It seemed to fill that lonely hole that I used to fill with alcohol. My self-esteem improved dramatically, and I knew happiness and serenity as I had never known it before. I started to see the beauty and usefulness of my own existence, and tried to express my gratitude through helping others in whatever ways I could... (bb, pp 287-288)*

How about this reflection:

## *From the Desk of Donald Ware, C.P.*

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*Fellowship and activity kept me coming back long enough to work the Twelve Steps. The more I did, the better I felt. I started hanging out with my sponsor and some active people at the meetings. They showed me how gratitude is something that is demonstrated, not talked about – gratitude in action. (BB p 510)*

In the July 1946 Grapevine Bill W reflects on how he was tempted to pride in being the *founder* of AA. Here's what he says:

*How much better it would have been had I felt gratitude rather than self-satisfaction – gratitude that I had once suffered the pains of alcoholism, gratitude that a miracle of recovery had been worked upon me from above, gratitude for the privilege of serving my fellow alcoholics, and gratitude for those fraternal ties which bound me ever closer to them in a comradeship such as few societies of men have ever known. (As Bill Sees It, #133)*

Jessica Powers, a cloistered nun and a poet, sums up so beautifully the experience of many of us:

*I rose up from acres of self  
that I tended with passion  
and defended with flurries of pride  
I walked out of myself and went  
into the woods of God's mercy,  
and here I abide.*

We have so much to be grateful for. We realize that *all is grace*.

Think of two or three people you are grateful for and why.

What are two or three of your gifts? Are you grateful for them?

If you have a difficult time thinking of them, ask your sponsor.

## **II Some Problems**

### **Difficult Times**

What happens when hard times come... and they will come to everyone at some point? We cannot always be smiling and cheerful.

Gratitude involves knowing that a loving God is trustworthy despite the pain or suffering we or a loved one are undergoing.

I remember a friend who asked me for help dealing with his father's immanent passing. I suggested he enjoy each day with his father and remember the good times and all of the blessings his father brought him over his life. Make each day a blessing for you and him. You can even be grateful for your father's passing, despite your sorrow... for he goes to his heavenly home now in peace.

In the Program our sponsor and other AAers will help us to ride thru the tough times... if we let them. After all, we are all involved in a communion of struggle.

### **The cult of the imperial ego**

So many suffer from the "cult of the imperial ego."

Rampant selfhood.

Bondage to self.

The gravitational pull of our ego wounds us or overcomes us.

Dethronement of self... a needed and painful experience.

Is life all about taking care of yourself first - a zero sum game in which there are winners and losers... and either you get your piece of the pie and your place in line, or you lose?

Our culture feeds our imperial ego daily with a diet of empty celebrity and superficiality, with success related to looks and not achievement, the need to package oneself and look perfect to be appreciated... with the tyranny of the fashion industry.

So often our culture is about fame for fame's sake... the desire for attention.

Who are our role models? Our mentors? For us and for kids today?

For so many people celebrities are the role models. What have celebrities accomplished? What is important in life? What is life all about?... keep up with the Kardashians? Reality TV?

Are we really entitled to better than we got? Why?

AAers rather ask these questions:

What does "act responsibly" mean to us?

Do we realize how blessed we are?

Are we grateful?

What do we give back to society?

These are our values and our vision.

Our faith in God is more than holding onto God – it is trusting that God is holding onto us. That is called God’s amazing grace. It dethrones our imperial ego so accustomed to reigning on the throne of our heart.

### **The Cult of complaint**

What else gets in the way of developing gratitude?

We live in a culture of complaint, the scourge of gratitude.

So many live life as if they are entitled to the best of everything.

They have unrealistic expectations of happiness.

Happiness becomes confused with the pursuit of fun.

Frustration and complaint occur when the promises of consumerism and commercials fail to materialize. “New and improved” never seem to deliver happiness. Dissatisfaction becomes rampant.

Gratitude lays by the roadside like road kill.

Complaint and grumbling have killed gratitude.

It’s important to address the cause of a complaint or grumbling honestly and truthfully.

But frequent complaint and grumbling are enemies of gratitude.

Grumbling and complaint toward God or others can be deadly. (Ex 15 – 17)

Grumbling is highly contagious in a family or a community. Occasional complaint can lead to a way of life.

We often struggle with the attitude that we’re entitled to better than we’ve gotten. We can then murmur and grumble.

We often fail to recognize what we have been given and be grateful for that.

### **Envy**

What else harms gratitude?

Envy is a torment of many today. It will destroy gratitude. Rather than enjoying the blessings of friends or family, we become bitter. Envy leads to

jealousy and covetousness. Rather than enjoying the good of others, envy begrudges the good that others enjoy. Why don't I have what others have?

Envy can't be expressed outwardly, so we keep it to ourselves and even act hypocritically toward the other. Envy can consume us. we can even feel ashamed by our envy.

Rather than recognizing one's own gifts and blessings and being grateful for them, envy can imprison us in misery accompanied by distrust, malice and resentment. (Cf. Mt 10:25)

As we cultivate gratitude to God and recognition of and gratitude for our own gifts, we can resist envy.

We need to develop ways of giving thanks. We need to tell stories of God's faithfulness and goodness to us and recognize this, and not just the problems. Deal with problems, but don't let problems define us. An environment of gratitude and the attitude of gratitude are critical.

## **Conclusion**

The attitude of gratitude grounds our life...

Gratitude to God.

Gratitude to others.

Gratitude for our own gifts.

Using our gifts to serve others.

Be careful of our culture of entitlement.

Be careful of envy and resentment.

Be careful of grumbling and complaining too much.

God, grant me the gift of gratitude and help me to practice it each day in my prayer, in my words and in my actions. Amen.