

## ASK ERICA

Erica J. Burns, M.A.

### The Gifts of Gratitude

As Thanksgiving approaches I've been thinking a lot about gratitude. Webster's dictionary defines the word "grateful" as "appreciative of benefits received" and "pleasing by reason of comfort supplied or discomfort alleviated." In my work I often meet people who are not feeling very grateful. They usually come to see me when they are sad, upset, anxious, frustrated, hurt and in pain. They are often seeking something, often relief from whatever ails them. One terrific tool that I often suggest is that they keep a "gratitude journal." I recommend that they get a notebook or even just a piece of paper and every night before bed they write down 3 things they are grateful for. For many people, doing this has a transformative effect. I think this is partly because it makes us notice the things that ARE working in our lives. Also, what we pay attention to expands. But I also have a suspicion that when we acknowledge the gifts in our lives that the universe responds. I even like to think that the universe, or God, or Higher Power or whatever you want to call it, just loves being thanked and noticed.

There are so many arenas where we can bring gratitude. We can offer it to relationships with significant others, our spouse, our children, our parents and siblings, our friends, our community members and service providers, and all the many people, animals and even plants that give us everything we need to exist. When working with couples, every time we meet, I ask them to take a moment and think about one thing they have noticed and appreciated about their partner and to share it with them. I then have the partner mirror back what they have heard from their beloved. This simple practice draws people closer, helps them to see the things that are working in their relationship. This is a wonderful exercise to do with children, taking the time to let them know all the things that are right and good about them.

The other day I was walking across a parking lot and a complete stranger called out to me and complimented me on what I was wearing, saying "you look beautiful." What a delight. A week ago, an oriental man who spoke no English, spotted my dog in the back of my car and his face lit up. He spoke animatedly to his family and I let Kota out of the car to say hello. He spoke excitedly, while gingerly petting the top of my dog's head. His laughter and joy conveyed so much more than words to me and to Kota. It was so obvious that he was thankful to Kota simply for the joy he was bringing to him.

At Thanksgiving we are often caught up in all the food preparation, the shopping and cooking, the travel to get to our loved ones home, the football game and when we are young perhaps the stories of the "first thanksgiving" and the pilgrims. This year I invite you to consider all that you have to be grateful for. Despite the fact that we are at war, the economy is weak and the weather may not be what we would like, we always have so much to be thankful for. Often overlooked is all the labor of others that enables you everyday to do and have the simplest things.

A prayer that I especially like to say before eating goes like this:

This food is the gift of the whole universe  
the earth, the sky, and much hard work.  
May we live in a way that makes us worthy to receive it.  
May we take only foods that nourish us and prevent illness.

We accept this food so that we may realize the path  
of understanding and love.

A couple of wonderful books I like that help me to be more grateful are “Attitudes of Gratitude” and “A Grateful Heart: Daily Blessing for the Evening Meal” both edited by M.J. Ryan.

So at this season of Thanksgiving I encourage you to be aware of all the many blessings you have in your life. The more gratitude you feel the less painful are your daily experiences. The more alert you are to all the gifts you are given everyday, the less you will notice the things that used to bother you. May you have a heartfelt Thanksgiving. Thank you.

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**If you would like to submit questions for her to answer in this column, please submit them to [ericajburns@silverstar.com](mailto:ericajburns@silverstar.com).** Feel free to submit them anonymously.