

Living Gratefully in the Time of Corona Virus

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As life becomes harder and more threatening, it also becomes richer, because the fewer expectations we have, the more the good things of life become unexpected gifts that we accept with gratitude. --Etty Hillesum

At *A Network for Grateful Living* we often refer to gratefulness as an orientation to life with an unconditional and expansive embrace. One that isn't reserved for that which is pleasant, desired, or going our way, rather an embrace that accepts and includes the great fullness of life — the entirety of our experience. Such an embrace opens us to the teachings and opportunities within every moment. It offers us what we need not merely to survive difficult times but to appreciate their gifts, even when the gifts take time to reveal themselves. When life feels too small or too big to handle, too predictable or too uncertain, this is when we need gratefulness most.

In the midst of times of uncertainty it serves us to reflect on how gratefulness might help to calm us, reduce fears and expectations, open us to greater clarity and love, and fuel action grounded in our deep intentions. Gratitude is not a panacea. It may not cure or solve our anxiety or concerns but it can foster ease, connection, kindness, and well-being – all valuable qualities which would be good to “go viral” these days. Gratitude cannot save us from sickness or suffering, but it can change how we experience sickness, and it may change our relationship to suffering.

So, what might this mean with regard to how we respond to the immediate concerns of COVID-19? How might gratefulness impact what we do, how we do it, and who we are during this time? How might we seek out and treasure the unexpected opportunities of the moment? In the midst of losses, how can we direct our attention toward the gifts that remain in our lives so as to build greater capacity to face what is challenging?

Here are some possibilities:

Reflect on Goodness — Reflect with gratitude on the sacrifices of front-line workers and all those who are self-quarantining; adjusting habits and lives; working overtime to do research, make tests and vaccines, and provide important, accurate and timely information. Notice the many ways you can orient your attention to notice all the ways that people are caring for fellow human beings around the globe.

Wash your Hands — The 20 seconds recommended to “lather up” offer us an opportunity to slow down to experience gratitude for the gift of hot and cold running water, the miracle of soap, and the wonder of our hands themselves. Consider making a sacred ritual of washing your hands, welcoming the opportunity to meditate on these blessings.

Stay Connected — If steering clear of events or planned events are being canceled, might this be an opportunity to connect by phone, text or email with family, friends, and neighbors to see how they're doing? How does it feel to reflect with gratitude on the relationships in our lives and let people know we care about them? Keep in touch and offer connection in all the ways that you can.

Be Generous — Extend compassion to those whose lives are impacted most by this crisis. Recognize that people's health and livelihoods are in jeopardy and nervous systems are taxed. Try being more patient, kinder, take a deep breath before responding, offer smiles and gratitude freely. Give to organizations whose operations and fundraising efforts are being impacted but whose services will be needed more than ever. Support local businesses struggling as many of us stay home. Consider making a donation in someone's honor or buying a gift certificate.

See the Privileges of the Ordinary — In the midst of a focus on how much is being lost, keep noticing all the blessings that remain. Allow yourself to appreciate and be in awe of what is available to you: phones, electricity, showers, the beauty and resilience of the natural world, all the parts of your body that work, the services and systems that serve your ability to function, and so much more.

Commit to that which Sustains You — Allow yourself to stay grounded in the things that preserve your integrity and reinforce the beliefs that help you have faith and hope in difficult times. Maintain or increase the rituals, traditions, reminders, and practices that help you to find calm in the midst of any storm. Read, write, or share poetry. Treat yourself and/or others to A Grateful Day.

And finally we offer you this poem currently being shared widely on social media:

Pandemic

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.

Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

— Lynn Ungar 3/11/20

When life becomes more trying and challenging, may each of us discover the gifts of
gratefulness, and the promise of our love — *for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, so
long as we all shall live.*