

LIVING WITH GRATITUDE AND HOPE

By Sister Brenda Walsh, OP, Racine Dominican

Over a decade ago, Robert Muller, former Assistant to the United Nations Secretary General shared his dream for the new millennium:

“I dream that on January 1, 2000, the whole world will stand still in prayer, awe and gratitude to God for the beautiful earth and for the miracle of human life.” He went on to express hope that the young and old, rich and poor, Black and White, people from all beliefs and cultures would join hands, minds and hearts in one great celebration of life, that would be a celebration of gratitude and hope on a global scale. Cicero once said: “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtue. It is the parent of all the other virtues.”

It is fitting to think deeply about gratitude as the season of Thanksgiving approaches. As I think of the people I have met that lived with gratitude and hope, several names and faces come to my mind.

One is a 100-year-old woman I met some time ago in Kentucky. She lived in a one room cottage with a dirt floor and walked a mile to the store to get needed supplies. When I visited her she started to name her blessings one by one - a beautiful sunrise, the strength of the mountains, her reasonably good health, a roof over head and a long life. She saw everything as a gift from God, and she never dwelt on her limited resources. Before I left, she asked her son to pick up his guitar and sing a song of thanksgiving. The glow on the woman's face was more powerful than any sermon I have ever heard. Living with gratitude and hope was a way of life for her.

I could think of many more examples of what it means to live with gratitude and hope. It is common in many cultures, but often it is forgotten in our western world. Living with gratitude for even one day can make a difference. If we are honest with ourselves, no matter how depressed or disappointed one may be, most have more priceless blessings to be grateful for than we care to acknowledge. All of us can count more on the credit side than the debit side if we put our minds and hearts to the task.

What is a blessing? David Orr, an environmental studies professor reminds us that “the rhythm of the Great Heart of God has been drowned out by the cadence of greed and violence.” To count our blessings is to see our problems in the right proportion. Mark Twain once humorously reminded us

that, “I’ve known many troubles in my lifetime, most of which never happened.” He encourages us to distinguish between what is a disappointment and what is a tragedy in our lives.

A good place to start recognizing our blessings is with the count. Soon you will need a larger notebook to keep track of them. You will discover plenty of reasons to be grateful. To name just a few:

- The gift of life in all its forms – human, animal, and plant and the Divine source of all life, linking all of us across time, place and culture
- Our own personal lives, every heartbeat, every breath we breathe, our dreams, hopes and potential
- The promise of God’s unfailing love and presence in our lives in good times and challenging times, God’s mercy, forgiveness and compassion
- The family and friends that surround us and guide us.
- The opportunity to do good and to work for justice and peace in our world.

What are the benefits of gratitude”

Health practitioners often tell us that gratitude has a power to heal. We dwell on the blessings and not on the deficits. It helps us let go of limited thinking and dwell on the limitless power of God working within us and among us. We can turn to the source of our blessings each day and find solace and strength to be a blessing to others.

Thanksgiving means “thanks living.” Blessings are never just for ourselves alone. They are given to be shared with all those who cross our path. Living with gratitude leads to hospitality and peace. It enables us to live with compassion for those deprived of life’s basic resources, for those looking for hope and meaning. Along with gratitude there needs to be a sense of justice, to reshape our social systems and structures that dehumanize so that no one is denied life or life-sustaining resources.

What are you most grateful for today? Think about specific way to express and live your gratitude. Happy Thanksgiving!