Awakening Gratitude

“The heart that gives thanks is a happy one, for we cannot feel thankful and unhappy at the same time.”

AMERICAN AUTHOR
DOUGLAS WOOD

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

Before COVID-19 changed our lives, my busy travel and teaching schedule had me hopping. Most mornings after I woke up, I went straight to work. I had a love-hate relationship with the adrenaline of stress and was a slave to emails, itineraries, deadlines and flight schedules. Now I’m in limbo. With most of my presentations postponed or canceled, I’m home. I have time to linger over my morning cup of coffee. I have time to breathe and to think. I have time to marvel at the sunrise.

More and more, what I’ve found myself thinking about is gratitude. I’m feeling so grateful for my life these days that I’m often awash in the warm fuzziness of appreciation. The feeling sneaks up on me when I’m having an inconsequential chat with my wife or puttering around in the kitchen. It blooms when I gaze out the window or think about my new grandson.
Dr. Alan Wolfelt is recognized as one of North America’s leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. He is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a longtime consultant to funeral service. He can be reached at 970-217-7069, drwolfelt@centerforloss.com or centerforloss.com.

**MY GRATITUDE INVENTORY**

During this morning’s sunrise, I sat down to give more thought to how this pandemic has created an opportunity to wake up to the power of gratitude. As I inventory my gratitude in this article, I invite you to do the same.

**Family and Friends**

Perhaps, like me, you’ve had more time to spend with your household members in recent months. I’ve been married to my wife for 35 years, but I’ve never spent as much time in close company with her as I have since March. Our forced captivity has given me a new appreciation for our relationship, and my unconditional love for her has only deepened.

Because I can’t spend as much time with non-household family members and friends, on the other hand, when I do get to see them, I’m so thankful that my heart breaks wide open. My first grandchild was born just before COVID restrictions started, and I’ve only been able to visit him a handful of times. When I do get to hold him, boy, does it feel amazing.

**Basic Essentials**

I have a warm, dry, safe place to live. I’ve never felt more fortunate to have a roof over my head and food in my refrigerator. The other day, I happened by a food bank drive-through. In a middle-class neighborhood, cars were lined up as far as the eye could see. All the extra “stuff” I have in my life doesn’t matter in the least. I have the basics, and for that I am deeply grateful.

**Interdependence**

Here in America, we’re infected by the “ideal” of rugged individualism. Coined by Herbert Hoover in 1928, this term encapsulated the misguided notion that individuals should be self-reliant and independent, not counting on others for support. These days, I look at the grocery store clerks, healthcare professionals, teachers and other essential workers with newfound appreciation. I’m not independent. I need them. My family needs them. I also need my neighbors and community members. Whenever I have the chance, I am kind and generous. And I am happy to wear a mask to help keep all of them safe.

**Vocation**

I founded the Center for Loss and Life Transition decades ago to help people help others. I train grief caregivers. During the pandemic, I’ve been mourning not being able to conduct as many trainings or give live presentations to large groups. Webinars are just not the same. But still, being cut off from my life’s work has made me even more humbled by the past opportunities I’ve had to reach and connect. It’s something I won’t take for granted again.

**Nature**

I’m putting down my phone, turning off the TV and getting outside more. I live atop the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, and while I’ve always been renewed by nature, I find myself engaging with it more deeply these days. My wife and I like to take our dogs and go for hikes. I’ve been going for more bike rides. What a gift it is to live on this marvelous planet.

**This Very Moment**

I realize now that I used to be overly busy. I was better at doing than being. But now I’m appreciating every slow, unscheduled moment.

Recently, my healthy 60-year-old brother-in-law spent 11 days in the ICU on a ventilator due to COVID-19. For a time, it was touch and go. Happily, he survived.

Here in North America, we tend to go through life obliviously, with a high level of assumed invulnerability. Yet each of us is mortal, and living every day with an intentional awareness that we might not wake up the next enriches every minute.

**Learning to Surrender**

This pandemic has made me more aware than ever before that I have little control over the most important things in life. I can’t keep my loved ones safe. I’m not in charge of the world. So, I’m learning to surrender to this lack of control and find gratitude wherever I can.

**PRACTICE GRATITUDE**

When we consciously value something, we’re grateful for it. We actively cherish it. I’ve awakened to gratitude for these most precious values in my life. How about you? Will you use the reset created by the pandemic to inventory your gratitude? Will you adjust your habits and daily routines so they’re more in alignment with your deepest values?

The sun is fully up now. It’s shining on a brilliant new day. And I am so grateful to be here. ☀️