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Cultivating an Attitude of Gratitude

Abstract

"Everything that we do in our lives should be rooted in our thankfulness for the immense gifts we receive from our God."

Posting about practicing gratefulness from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/cultivating-an-attitude-of-gratitude/>

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in things

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Cultivating an Attitude of Gratitude

Donald Roth, Erin Olson, and Kayt Frisch

As we approach the season of Thanksgiving, it is important to reflect on how we have been blessed beyond measure by what God has given to us. With these three short essays, three members of iAt's Editorial Board, Erin Olson, Donald Roth, and Kayt Frisch, bring a fresh perspective to what it means to practice thankfulness through journaling, prayer, and song.

Erin Olson

When I was seven, I really wanted a Pound Puppy for Christmas. I had seen all the commercials on TV and thought that stuffed animal would complete my stuffed animal collection perfectly. I hoped for it. I even prayed there would be a Pound Puppy under the tree on Christmas Day. And, you know what? I got that Pound Puppy. I was ecstatic... for a while. After a few weeks, the newness wore off and I stopped toting that stuffed animal everywhere I went. The toy that I thought would bring me so much joy and contentment was soon stuffed away with the others in my room, and I am sure I found something else to wish for.

I would like to say this has changed for me in adulthood, but I still often find myself chasing after things I think will make me happy or make my life easier. I think I'm actually *more* tempted now to seek contentment in things—whether it be my home, my clothing, or my vacations. Dr. Laurie Santos, a professor at Yale, teaches a wildly popular class called *Psychology and the Good Life* in which she enlightens her students of the little “glitches” in our minds that make it difficult to be content, at least not for long

(Pinsker, 2019). These things we thought would be great—the new car, the prestigious degree, the big paycheck—end up being sort of just “meh” in the end. We usually just end up in our happiness status quo after the newness wears off. According to Dr. Santos, here’s why:

- *Our brain acclimates to new things pretty quickly.* We should shift focus to things that do not last as long so the newness does not wear off. In sum, we should seek “experiences, not things.” While the experience may end, we will have memories that will last much longer.
- *We often play the comparison game with other people.* Their lives and their things become a point of reference for our own contentment and happiness. Imagine your life without that simple thing you take for granted. You may feel discontent with the size or shape of your house, but what would you do without it, or who might you have to ask for help if you did not have it?
- *We do not make time to be grateful for what we already have.* We should all “take time to smell the roses.” Acknowledging the simple pleasures you usually take for granted like your warm, soft bed or the clear, crisp, cool air of the Midwest during this time of year can really make a difference in helping us feel more grateful and content.

In this season of Thanksgiving, I have been thinking about being grateful and I am drawn to this final bullet point as I attempt to look at my life from a position of gratitude. Even as I have been finishing up writing this piece, I have been reminded to be grateful for the things around me. It’s a cloudy, dreary day, but today the temperatures have been well above normal for November and I can still see green grass when I look out my office window. While this time of year can be stressful at work, I can’t imagine what I’d do if I didn’t have this job that I (most often) love. Just taking the time to notice these things has already slightly shifted my perspective this afternoon. I find this strategy to be even more effective when I take the time to list things I should be grateful for in my journal. In her book, *One Thousand Gifts*, Ann Voskamp shares how she uses her journal as a way to identify and be thankful for the small “gifts” around her. Her book is a beautiful reminder of how even a slight shift in perspective on what we *have* rather than what we *want* can make incredible differences in our overall outlook and position of gratefulness. I encourage you to try it and notice how your perceptions change once you take a moment and look around you. Write down the things you are presently thankful for, no matter how small. Notice beauty in the unexpected places, and when you find yourself struggling to do that, look back at your lists from other days and be reminded of the many simple blessings all around you.

Donald Roth

James K.A. Smith argues that we are designed for worship. Our habits and practices nurture longings in us that orient us toward a certain vision of what really matters. Beyond using this as a lens for shaping our understanding of our daily practice, Smith uses this as a call for us to seek to be properly formed (and reformed) by our intentional worship practices. That is, it's not only important *that* we worship, but *how* we worship. Our worship trains us up in habits and dispositions we commonly call virtues, so it can be valuable to flip this lens around to think about whether our worship habits instill the virtues we think they do.

This is something that I was confronted by nearly a year ago during our family's evening worship practice. Starting with our first child, it has been a regular practice for me to sing hymns and Bible songs to my children before bed. As they've gotten older (my oldest is six, so not *much* older yet), they now sing with me more often. Similarly, around the time that my oldest was starting to talk, we incorporated prayer into that time as well, and my kids now consider "sing pray sing" to be an essential part of the pre-bed routine.

Just as I've encouraged my children to sing along with me as they learn the songs we're singing, I have moved from praying for the family to asking the children to pray as well. It was through my children's prayers that I was confronted with a misalignment in our worship, one I hadn't been sensitive to before that point.

When my oldest daughter first started praying, it quite literally sounded like she was sitting on Santa's lap. The entire prayer was "I want this" and "please make this happen." Petitions—typically selfish ones at that—comprised her entire vocabulary for prayer. I know that wasn't all I'd modelled for her, but kids have a way of picking up on what we emphasize, so there was no escaping the fact that a dominant tone of the prayers that my daughter was hearing involved asking God for stuff.

Using Smith's lens, I was convicted. Wish fulfillment is not a virtue that should guide the Christian life. Instead, the Heidelberg Catechism maintains that the fundamental disposition of the Christian life is gratitude. Everything that we do in our lives should be rooted in our thankfulness for the immense gifts we receive from our God. Of course, we can ask God for things, but I was concerned that my children were viewing their place before God primarily in terms of what He could do for us, not what He has already done.

As a result, we shifted our prayer practice. I would open our prayers, then welcome our children to voice what they are thankful for. Eventually, we've made room for more

petitions as well, but the result has been that my children's spontaneous prayers now start "Dear God, thank you for..." rather than "God, I want..." I was reminded that our children don't have to be taught to ask for things, but they do have to be taught to say "thank you," and that carries over into our prayer lives as well.

Kayt Frisch

Several years ago, instead of giving something up for the season of Lent, I practiced the discipline of thankfulness. The process was simple: each day I recorded something specific that I was thankful for, no duplicates. I really enjoyed the practice, in particular how it helped me pay attention to the good parts of my day, but I struggled to continue after Lent ended. Fast forward a few years and now I have two small people in my life, which is encouraging me to intentionally own my faith and character in a new way as I think about how to pass on the gift of faith. One of the ways that my family does this intentionally is by praying before dinner each night. Because our children like music, we have chosen to make this a song (to the tune of "Frere Jacques"):

Thank you Father
(Thank you Father)
For our food
(For our food)
Many many blessings
(Many many blessings)
Amen
(Amen)

About six months ago, we realized that we could use this song as an opportunity to cultivate a spirit of gratitude in our children, using the thankfulness discipline I had practiced that Lent. Now after singing, we go around and ask each person to name one of the many blessings for which they are thankful today. For my husband and I, this practice has help us remember to look for and focus on the good moments in our day, even when our interactions at work or with the kids have been...less than perfect. I wish that I could also say that this has magically and immediately transformed my children (ages 2 and 4) into thankful creatures. It hasn't (in fact, last night my 4 year old, who was having a bad day told me that he was thankful for "nothing"), but I am playing the game long-term here. My goal is to raise children who love God and love their neighbor.

Through the regular repetition of this act I am working to shape their hearts (or orient their *telos*, to borrow from James K.A. Smith) towards thankfulness as people who recognize their blessings come from the Giver of all good gifts. To reinforce this message, during this upcoming season of Advent we are planning to add another layer

to this practice and create a family “gratitude wall” where each night at dinner we will write our blessings to help us visibly remember to respond to God with thankfulness.