

## LIVING GRATEFULLY

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

This weekend we shall reflect on the contribution of gratitude to health and happiness

Emotionally healthy persons have genuine appreciation for life and its blessings. They experience spontaneous joy and deep satisfaction in living. They are sensitive to the wonderful things happening in them and around them—the daily miracles of life. While recognising the limitations that life imposes on them, and despite the troubles and tragedies they experience, they are able to see and appreciate the blessings in their life. They live gratefully.

Emotionally healthy persons are able to experience this gratitude even in the midst of tragedy. This is beautifully exemplified in a research on parents whose son or daughter had been murdered and who had experienced a positive transformation in their lives through their tragic loss. The research question was: What are the processes and resources that enabled these parents to turn the tragedy – the murder of their son or daughter -- into a gift, to turn their trauma into a positive source for growth and transformation?

A surprising finding was that one of the resources that enabled each of the participants to grow out of their pain, and experience a positive personal transformation was thankfulness. We might wonder what is there to be thankful for when someone has murdered one's son or daughter. Yet each one of the participants had so many things for which they were grateful.

Among these participants the one who could have turned out to be most bitter and resentful was Julia (name changed). Yet, she was according to the researcher, the most grateful of all the participants. Julia's only children - twin daughters -, ten years old, were murdered together one night, supposedly by her estranged husband. Despite this awful tragedy Julia found much in her life for which was thankful. That thankful attitude had enabled her to overcome her trauma and grow through her pain and loss. This is how she expressed her gratitude:

*"I am so fortunate . . . it just amazes me, you know. . . . I am so fortunate. . . . I could not have had them – (my girls). What they brought into my life is so wonderful and precious, that*

*I really am blessed.... And I am lucky to have those memories now. They are still in my life. Those bullets didn't take those away. . . . And I have tons of gifts in my life. You know, in the balance of my life, yeah, there is a lot of tragedy, but look at the happiness I've got, look at the neat things there are in my life."*

Julia finds so much to be grateful for in life, despite the tragedy that struck her.

### **What is Gratitude?**

Gratitude is much more than saying "thank you" to someone who has given us a gift or helped us in some way, or to God for a blessing received. Gratitude, as defined in psychology, is —"the capacity to feel the emotion of thankfulness on a *regular and consistent* basis, across situations and over time." In other words, gratitude is a disposition that accompanies us through good times and bad; when things go well and things go wrong, through success and failure.

### **The Power of Gratitude**

Psychological and medical research has found that gratitude is a virtue that has enormous consequences for physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. For example, it has been found that grateful persons fall less often sick, and even when they fall sick, they recover much faster than ungrateful persons. And more important, grateful persons live significantly longer lives than the ungrateful persons.

The major reason for the health benefits of gratitude, research tells us, is that gratitude is the disposition that most creates positive emotions in us. These positive emotions, in turn, strengthen our immune system and help us to ward off disease. They increase our resilience.

It is good for us to keep in mind these physical health benefits of gratitude during these Corona times.

The spiritual power of gratitude can be gauged from the saying attributed to the great fourteenth century Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart who said: *"If the only prayer you say in your entire life is 'thank you,' that would suffice."*

### **Awe and Wonder**

There are so many wonderful things, daily miracles happening around us, happenings that need to awaken in us what Albert Einstein described as a "sense of awe and wonder." But too often we consider these as too mundane. Einstein wrote: *"There are only two ways to live your life: as though nothing is a miracle, or as though everything is a miracle."*

*Even during these days of covid-19 with its hassles and restrictions, there are wonderful things happening around us. Do we notice them? Do we express thanks for them? What are the daily miracle that you see around you and which evoke awe and wonder in you?*

*You could complete the following open ended statement in different ways: "I am thankful today for...." Try making a list. Then spend a few minutes expressing gratitude to God.*

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One helpful means to cultivate gratitude is the daily practice of the *Examen of Consciousness*. Take a few minutes at the end of the day to sit quietly and allow memories of the good things – the little miracles - that have happened during the day to come into awareness and let your heart fill with thankfulness. When you do this Examen regularly you will gradually become more and more sensitive to these daily miracles and live more gratefully. Keeping a daily *Gratitude Journal* in which you list the gifts and blessings of the day and describe your feelings about them is another helpful practice for cultivating gratitude.

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Jesus sets us wonderful example of gratitude. In his prayer he often expresses gratitude to his Father - for listening to his prayer, for revealing his message to little ones. He expresses awe and wonder – at his Father’s care for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.... What is it you can learn from him about gratitude? ... You could spend few moments with him asking him to show you more of the “daily miracles” in your life and allow gratitude to take hold of you and fill your heart with a sense of awe and wonder.... Mary of Nazareth expresses her gratitude in her beautiful *Magnificat*. May be like her you too could sing your own Magnificat, expressing thanks for the great things God has done for you and continues to do.

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Have a pleasant weekend in which you can take time to notice more of the daily miracles and have opportunity to stand in awe and wonder.

Be well. Be blessed.

Thank you for listening/reading.

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