



The monthly newsletter of the Pioneer Country Emmaus Community Nov. 2024



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**Walks Suspended**

Women's Walk #155 TBD

Men's Walk #156 TBD

Please be in prayer. Hosting consistent walks are an important part of keeping a community alive. We encourage everyone to be open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit for who you might sponsor and get their application in soon.

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## **Thanksgiving is approaching and so is the Turkey!**

As we head into the fall holiday season, its a good time to stop and remind ourselves of God's work in our lives. Practicing an Attitude of Gratitude can be very fulfilling and help prepare our hearts for the wonder of Christmas. However, sometimes gratitude takes work. In her article (below) Deborah talks though a meaningful period where she experienced the practicing of Gratitude.

## **Thanks be to God: Gratitude as a Prayer of Adoration**

by Deborah Smith Douglas

Several years ago, at the invitation of an old friend, I joined her in an unusual e-mail correspondence: every day, we agreed, we would exchange short lists of particular things in our lives for which we were grateful. "Particular" was mandatory: no vague generalizations about good health or pleasant weather were allowed. Our identified blessings might be small, but they had to be specific: a ripe peach at breakfast, a family quarrel resolved, a finch's nest discovered outside the kitchen window, a lost letter found, a tedious task accomplished.

Soon after beginning this regimen of gratitude, my friend fell and broke her arm; I underwent surgery to repair a torn tendon in my shoulder. We kept careful track of every minuscule gain during our recoveries, noting each small step out of disability and pain not only as milestone but as gift.

We realized, as we taught ourselves systematically to account for all we might be thankful for under those circumstances, that gratitude is not simply an easy emotion or obvious response; it can be a challenging discipline, with far-reaching implications for the way we see the world.

Scientists are beginning to recognize the potential consequences of habitual gratitude for human health and well-being. Cognitive psychologists urge their patients to list things they are grateful for as part of a process of behavioral modification—an exercise that trains those who may be habitually discouraged, resentful, or exhausted by depression, to begin to see patches of light in the prevailing darkness, to be able to shift from a dominant attitude of negativity to a more positive approach to their situation. My wise grandmother used to admonish me when I complained about some childish misfortune, “Count your blessings, missy.” She was right: focusing our attention on our blessings can, as research now demonstrates, yield increased energy and optimism, better physical health, relief of depression, and measurable progress toward personal goals.

My friend and I certainly found this to be true. As we deliberately sought out specific blessings in our lives, we began to see how lavishly those blessings were strewn across our paths. We began to be more grateful, more cheerful, more patient with others and ourselves. Gratitude, in other words, “works.”

But practicing gratitude is not just “effective” in a short-term utilitarian way—it can also transform the way we see and live and pray; it can transform our very selves.

## **Changing the Perspective**

What began as a simple accounting of the mercies in our lives—that we might give more authentic and specific thanks for them—gradually came to change not only what we saw (“things” to thank God for) but how we saw them (with amazement, joy, love, and praise). Saluting a greater number of the manifold blessings half-hidden in the landscape of our daily lives (a simple quantitative change, as a birdwatcher might add a hitherto unseen bird to a life list) led us—without our really intending it—to a qualitative change of perception.

This was the first gift our practice gave us.

It was, in those early days, as though we were looking at Rubin’s “vase-faces”—those cognitive optical illusions developed by the Danish psychiatrist Edgar Rubin early in the twentieth century, in which what may first appear to be an image of a vase or goblet may subsequently be seen (with no change in the image itself) as two human faces in profile.

Rubin demonstrated with these images that we do not automatically “see” anything; our brains shape what our eyes observe. What at first might seem just a picture of a light-colored vase against a dark background can also be seen as two dark faces looking at each other against a light background. The positive image and its negative counterpart both present at once, both are available to our perception, but one—at least initially—is more difficult to recognize.

We interpret reality. We make choices all the time about what our eyes perceive, and—significantly—we can train that perception, can learn to see in new ways, can become aware of both the figure of the vase and the independent validity of the field that surrounds it. By the same token, we can learn to see grace in all things. Changing ourselves begins with changing our perspective. As C. S. Lewis points out, “[W]hat you see ... depends a good deal on where you are standing; it also depends on what sort of person you are.” [C. S. Lewis, “The Magician’s Nephew,” in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 75.]

## **Seeing the Mystery**

That is the second gift our practice of gratitude gave my friend and me: over time, we came to see not only the glass of blessing of our lives as half-full rather than half-empty—which requires only a simple shift of attitude—we came to see more deeply into the mystery of things.

We began to see (as Rubin might say) grace as both the figure and the ground of our lives, surrounding and pervading and defining everything. ... In St. Paul’s ... phrase, the eyes of our hearts were enlightened (Eph. 1:18).

A habit of gratitude, then, can give us a more positive outlook on life. More than that, it can actually change the way we perceive reality, can open our eyes to grace hidden in plain sight. But gratitude is not just psychologically effective self-help, not just a way to deepen our awareness of the real nature of our experience. Gratitude is also, interestingly, enjoined upon us almost as a commandment.

For Jews and Christians, who know God to be the fount of all blessing, gratitude has always been an essential (even though implicitly difficult or costly) part of worship. We are to make a “sacrifice” of thanks and praise to God (Ps. 50:23; 116:17; Heb. 13:15)—which certainly suggests that such gratitude is not always spontaneous or easy. St.

Paul insists that it is not just for the obviously good things, or in the obviously fortunate circumstances, that we are to thank God: “We must always give thanks to God” (2 Thess. 2:13); “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:18); “[give] thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything” (Eph. 5:20).

Why would our faith insist that we always, in all circumstances, give thanks to God? Of course, God does not—like some petulant despot whose vanity must be constantly appeased—either require our perpetual flattery or command that we deny heart-breaking reality and somehow feign gratitude for calamities.

I now suspect that the wisdom behind the insistence on giving thanks at all times may be linked with the insight of Rubin’s vase-face experiment. We must come to see that both the figure and the ground of our experience are real and discernible, and full of meaning: full, in fact, of God. We must not only thank God for the “good things” that happen to us but be willing to see God present with us in the “bad things” as well.

Otherwise, as Henri Nouwen points out, we tend to divide our lives into “good things to remember with gratitude and painful things to accept or forget.” [Henri Nouwen. Writings selected and introduced by Robert A. Jonas. Modern Spiritual Masters Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 67.] We are usually willing to find God in, and be grateful to God for, obvious blessings (the “figure” in Rubin’s experiment). We may need practice to see that God is also present in the background (the initially hidden “field”), giving meaning and hope even in the darkest and most difficult times.

By Deborah Smith Douglas, excerpted from Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life. March/April 2008 (Vol. XXIII, No. 2) Copyright © 2008 by The Upper Room.

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## Do You Remember This?



*PIONEER COUNTRY WOMEN'S WALK #38*  
*JUNE 23 - 26, 1994*

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**ROOSTER TALES is published by the Pioneer Country Emmaus Board of Directors for the local Emmaus Community, with editions every month except**

**for December. The Newsletter Editor can be reached by email at  
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