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On Gratitude

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 24, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

We now know that the first Thanksgiving in 1621 did not look much like the image we received of it as children. The Indians crashed, they were not invited. The principal meat was venison, not turkey. Etc. But, there was thanksgiving for difficulties endured and for the promise the Pilgrims felt as they pondered their colony?s future. This American founding, as opposed to the late eighteenth century founding, was a distinctly religious event.

I first learned about gratitude from David Pickford. David was the first ?larger than life? person I had met. A scion of a Midwestern family of considerable wealth, David was a graduate of Dartmouth and Wharton, a Vietnam veteran as well as a veteran of the Peace Corps, serving as executive secretary of the U.S. Treasury in the Reagan administration when we met. He had played a critical role in structuring the Chrysler bailout in the mid-70s, and would be one of the principal movers in the tax simplification effort that was the principal accomplishment of Reagan?s second term. David liked to live big and always looked for opportunities to be fancy. I recall when his sisters came to visit, he hosted a dinner party at a swanky Georgetown restaurant. As the party sat down to dinner, waiters passed large pins to each of the dozen or more guests. We all looked quizzically at each other ? this was not a typical appetizer. Then, David reached into one of the three bouquets of white flowers in the center of the table, pulled out a gardenia that was really a boutonniere, and pinned it to his lapel. We all followed suit, the ladies pulling out corsages, the men boutonnieres. Fancy.

David was also a raging alcoholic. And, when he hit bottom ? which thankfully for the nation?s finances, was a high bottom ? he joined AA and began discussing spirituality in a way he had never done before. (Raised as a broad church Anglican, in Omaha, spirituality was not something he had been reared to discuss comfortably!) If you are familiar with a twelve-step program, you know that a central focus of AA is that you must break that addictive heart?s tendency to blame others for misfortune, not with self-recrimination, but by cultivating a sense of gratitude. It is a key insight into the spiritual life. As David became more immersed in AA, and all of his friends witnessed the transformation with joy, I, too, began making ?gratitude lists,? on days when my heart is troubled.

David died from AIDS in 1989. It may be hard for some to remember what that dreaded disease was like back then. There were no medications to sustain a person afflicted with the disease: It was a death sentence. And, as the disease wreaked havoc on a person?s immune system, the person infected with the disease would physically deteriorate almost before your eyes. One month, you would pass someone on the street who looked perfectly healthy and a month later, you would see the same person barely able to walk. It was a horrific time and when the disease struck my best friend, well, the horror was complete. David responded to his illness as he had conquered his alcoholism, with his gratitude lists. When he could no longer hold a pen, he would ask his visitors to write his gratitude list for him. Even when he was having trouble speaking near the very end, and the most you could do for him was put an ice cube to his lips, ?grateful,? was the word I could always distinguish as his faint speech grew fainter still.

In my own life, when I have faced challenges liked David?s death, my parents? car accident, my favorite

uncle?s cancer, I have done what David taught me to do. I make a ?gratitude list? of all the many things for which I am exceedingly thankful.

Gratitude is not only a great antidote to depression or fear or addiction, gratitude is the only antidote to the deadliest of the seven deadly sins, pride. If one if greedy, you can try to beat back that sin by being charitable. If one is malicious, you can try and beat back that sin by focusing on being kind. If lust is the sin that afflicts you, you can focus on cultivating chastity. But, with pride, you can?t really focus on becoming more humble or, the second you make progress, that humility melts like a snowflake in the hand. The only way to offset pride is by focusing on gratitude.

So, Happy Thanksgiving one and all. Make your gratitude list. Eat turkey ? or venison ? whichever you please. We all have so much to be grateful for and at right near the top of my list is the memory of a man who taught me about the decisive spiritual significance of gratitude, my friend David, barely able to hold a pen, trying to write his gratitude list each morning.

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