

The Rhythm of Gratitude

Oberlin Baccalaureate

May 27, 2007

David W. Orr

Fred Lassen caught me in the middle of a particularly busy day to ask whether I'd be willing to give the baccalaureate address this year. I agreed but five minutes later I wondered what it was that I'd agreed to do. These occasions call for a preacher which I am not, although some of my best relatives have been and one still is . . . But I am a talker increasingly reliant on powerpoint . . . what to do without a powerpoint? (Imagine if Moses had had powerpoint to present the Ten Commandments!) . . . a few weeks later Andy Barnett who has arranged the music asked me for a title. Not being particularly musical I recall being told one time or another that music had something to do with rhythm and since I'd been reading a book on gratitude . . . I responded by saying off the cuff "well my title is the "Rhythm of Gratitude" not knowing what that would entail.

I'm hoping for serendipity. You are witness to my first . . . and probably my last . . . sermon. And it goes something like this.

In the beginning was the Great Heart of God that set the rhythms of the universe in motion—first the cymbal smash of the Big Bang . . . the beat heard through the still expanding Creation and in the pulsations of energy and light that animate the cosmos. In the beginning was the Great Heart of God and that rhythm drives the journeys of our little planet around its small star. Day follows night, one season follows another. The Great Heart of God beats in the Dance of Life, the ebb and flow of the tides, the migration of birds, the rhythms in our bodies, and the seasons of our lives. There is:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing.

Break the rhythm and our little part of the cosmic dance stumbles to a halt. But in the beginning and forever: The rhythm of the Great Heart of God.

A fraction of a second ago, as geologists and ecologists measure time, another rhythm was begun. Some call this the Fall. In one telling of the story the cadence was changed by a snake and a woman [A libel against a perfectly fine life form and one against all of womankind]. More likely the discordant beat came from a few males who thought that an elite few could improve the creation by changing the rhythm. C. S. Lewis once said that the intent was to control other men by seizing control of nature. Ecologically, control meant exploiting the vast pools of carbon—first the carbon rich soils of the Fertile Crescent, later the carbon in the forests of Europe, and in our time the ancient carbon stored as coal and oil.

But it was not long before others, more sophisticated and clever, realized that a few could change the rhythm of Creation altogether. The heroes of disharmony, men like Francis Bacon, Descartes, and Galileo taught us that we could and should conduct the symphony and in Bacon's words "put nature on the rack and torture her secrets out of her to the effecting of all things possible." And so in time we learned how to make things never made by nature, we learned to split the atom and to

manipulate the code of life. Some are busy making devices that will be, they say, more intelligent than humans. In the conquest of nature and of other men the rhythm changed to those of the business cycle, the product cycle, the electoral cycle, the seasons of fashion and style . . . the rhythms of commerce, greed, power, and violence. But we did not know what we were doing, as Wendell Berry once said, because we did not know what we were undoing.

Now we live in a time of consequences. Climate scientists have given us an authoritative glimpse of a literal Hell not far in the future. The levels of CO₂ and other heat trapping gases are presently around 430 ppm CO_{2e}, . . . probably higher than at any time in the past few million years . . . and increasing rapidly. We have already raised the temperature of Earth by .8 C with another .6 C believed to be unavoidable. Many scientists, including James Hansen, fear that we are fast approaching the threshold of runaway climate change . . . not just “global warming” but destabilization of the entire planet. A hotter time will change the seasons, the cycles of nature, the rhythms of life, and the great procession of evolution.

The rhythm of the Great Heart of God has been drowned out by the cadence of hubris, greed, and violence . . . And we should ask why?

There are probably as many theories as there are faculty at Oberlin. Was it our capacity for denial as Psychologist, Ernest Becker once said? Or our will to power as Nietzsche thought? Or some flaw in our mental facilities? [Kurt Vonnegut once said that the next time someone runs the experiment of life—the brain should be left out] Or as an unwary species, did we simply trap ourselves?

After reflection I have come to believe that the great Jewish Rabbi Abraham Heschel had it right that the source of dissonance is ingratitude.

As civilization advances [Heschel wrote] the sense of wonder almost necessarily declines. . . mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.

Heschel, here, connects appreciation with the sense of wonder and awe. The problem as he defines it is simply that as:

A mercenary of our will to power, the mind is trained to assail in order to plunder rather than to commune in order to love.

We were given the gift of paradise and thought that we could improve it—on our terms. We thought we could reduce the great mystery of life to a series of solvable problems each contained in one academic box or another. We thought that we could rid the world of reverence and so exorcise mystery, irony, and paradox. We thought that we might change the cadence of Creation and seize control of the great symphony of life with no adverse consequence.

But why is gratitude so hard for us? This is not a new problem. Luke (17: 12-19) tells us that Jesus healed the ten lepers, but only one returned to say thank you. That’s about average, I suppose. Here at Oberlin, we teach a thousand ways to criticize, analyze, dissect, and deconstruct, but we offer very little guidance on the cultivation of gratitude . . . simply saying Thank You.

And maybe we should not be grateful. In the spirit of pluralism, is there a case for ingratitude? Is gratitude merely a ploy that runs inversely proportional to favors not yet granted? One might

suspect the Psalmist of such. Or perhaps there is no cause for gratitude amidst the cares and trials of life. Shakespeare, for example, has Macbeth say that “Life’s but a . . . tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Political philosopher Thomas Hobbes similarly thought that life was full of peril and death . . . “nasty, brutish, and short.” [Englishmen both . . . so one might infer that the gloomy weather had something to do with their opinions] And many of us find our bodies, incomes, careers, and lives as less than we would like, whatever we might deserve.

But most of us, too, would find life without appreciation rather like a meal without flavor or living in a world without color, or one without music.

So, we set aside one day of the year for Thanksgiving, but mostly spend it eating too much and watching football. Gratitude comes hard for us for many reasons. For one thing we spend nearly a half a trillion dollars on advertising to cultivate ingratitude otherwise known as the seven deadly sins. The result is a national cult of entitlement to have as much as possible for doing as little as possible. For another the pace of modern life leaves little time to be grateful or awed by much of anything . . . especially for those of us, like me, who are Type A people!

But there are deeper reasons for ingratitude. Gratitude does not begin in the intellect but rather in the heart. “Intellect,” in David Steindl-Rast’s words:

only gets us so far . . . our intellect should be alert enough to recognize a gift but to acknowledge a gift as a gift requires an act of will and heart. But to acknowledge a gift is also “to admit dependence on the giver . . . but there is something within us that bristles at the idea of dependence. We want to get along by ourselves.

To acknowledge a gift, in other words, is to acknowledge an obligation to the giver. And herein is the irony of gratitude. The illusion of independence is a kind of servitude while gratitude—the acknowledgement of interdependence—sets us free. Only “gratefulness has the power to dissolve the ties of our alienation” as Steindl-Rast puts it. But “the circle of gratefulness is incomplete until the giver of the gift becomes the receiver; a receiver of thanks . . . and the greatest gift one can give is thanksgiving.” Saying “Thank you” is to say that we belong together: the giver and thanksgiver and it is this bond that frees us from alienation.

And the gift must move. What is given must be passed on. In the end nothing can be held or possessed—a truth grasped by every culture that approaches what we’ve come to call sustainability.

But all of this is just so many words. We live more fully in and through stories. Here are two that continue to be particularly powerful in my own life. My Aunt Emma who died just short of her 100th birthday was a builder of clinics, schools, and churches in rural Mexico, and a much sought after substitute teacher well into her 90’s when she was diagnosed with what was thought to be terminal cancer. Even with that diagnosis she did not slow down and never complained. Appropriately, at Thanksgiving dinner a year after the Doctor told her she might have a year to live . . . she turned to me and asked if I could take her to the airport later that afternoon. I thought she was kidding but finally realized that she was absolutely serious. I said “Aunt Emma, don’t you have cancer?” To which she responded “Oh yes I do, and it’s such an inconvenience.” She flew to Mexico that afternoon and made the long trek up the mountain where she was involved in the building of a church and clinic in a poor mountain community. She died five years later of just old age—all signs of cancer having disappeared. She did not have the time for cancer. She

had work to do—gifts to give. Her entire life was lived as a gift to those around her as an example of generosity, energy, and good heart.

My friend, Jeff Hallock, who some of you here will recall, had a life afflicted with one serious health problem after another until finally—at age 50—he succumbed to Lou Gehrig’s disease—a disease that kills by inches while leaving the mind in tact. There is no more cruel way to die. I usually spent a few hours each week with Jeff in his final years, reading, talking, and, surprisingly, laughing with him. He had a great sense of humor and a disposition that made little of his suffering. He took great pride in beating me at dominoes, particularly when he cheated to do it. As his time shortened, he could not move more than his facial muscles, but his spirit never lagged. I never heard Jeff complain though he had every logical reason to do so. In the beginning I went to Kendal to see Jeff to do my duty as a friend. It was only later that I realized that Jeff had given all of us a gift of witnessing courage and grace in the face of death.

Gratitude . . . changes the rhythm. It restores the cycle of giver and receiver and back again. It extends our awareness back in time to acknowledge ancient obligations and forward in time to the far horizon of the future and to lives that we are obliged to honor and protect. Gratitude requires mindfulness, not just smartness. It requires a perspective beyond self. Gratitude is at once an art and a science, and both require practice.

The arts and sciences of gratitude, which is to say, applied love, are flourishing in ironic and interesting ways. Businessman, Ray Anderson, has set his company on a path to operate by current sunlight and return no waste product to the Earth. Biologists are developing the science of biomimicry that uses nature’s operating instructions evolved over 3.8 billion years to make materials at ambient temperatures without fossil fuels and toxic chemicals . . . rather like spiders that make webs from strands five times stronger than steel. The movement to power the civilization from the gift of sunshine and wind is growing at 40% per year worldwide. The American Institute of Architects and the U.S. Green Building Council have changed the standard for buildings to eliminate use of fossil fuels by 2030. Could we, in time create a civilization that in all of its ways honors the great gift and mystery of life itself?

Can true gratitude transform our prospects? Can we harmonize the rhythms of this frail little craft of civilization with the pulse of the Great Heart of God? I believe so, but gratitude cannot be legislated or forced. It will remain a stranger to any mind that lacks compassion. It must be demonstrated but above all it must be practiced daily.

Those of you who are about to graduate from Oberlin College have a great many obvious things to be thankful for. You begin the rest of your lives with the advantage of a good education. You have prospects and projects ahead of you. You have your hopes and dreams and as good a chance to achieve these as any of your generation. But above all you have the gift of a great challenge—what philosopher and theologian Thomas Berry—calls Great Work. Like previous generations in times of peril, none of you asked for your Great Work. But, as the writer of Deuteronomy foresaw long ago, it has been given to you to distinguish between life and death with the command to choose life. But the choice you will make will be global and irreversible. It will be for all time—as we measure time. No previous generation could have said that and none, none ever had greater work to do. Your great work is to:

- stabilize then reduce greenhouse gases before it’s too late,
- quickly build a world powered by efficiency and sunlight,
- protect biological diversity and stop the hemorrhaging of life

- work toward a day in which every child is well loved and cared for,

Your Great Work is to lay the foundation for a durable and just global civilization in which everyone is secure—by design. No generation every faced a greater challenge but none was better equipped to do its Great Work. Your challenge is to secure the Gift of life and pass it on undiminished to unnumbered generations. Your generation and no other has been given this Great Work and for that you can be grateful and humbled. In that work, your strongest ally will be a grateful heart.

Gratitude is not a theory but a practice and it begins now. In this spirit I would like to say a heartfelt “Thank You” to Andy Barnett and all of the students who arranged the music for this baccalaureate. I would like to ask each of you who is able to **Please rise [pause]** take a few minutes and find someone here in this hall to whom you owe an unspoken debt and simply say “Thank You.”

Music . . .

Benediction . . . Please stand and read with me:

Orr: We are made of earth and to earth we return

Audience: We are deep air-mammals living at the bottom of an ocean of air

Orr: We live by the slow fire of oxidation

Audience: In landscapes shaped by fire, air, and water

Orr: We are creatures more water than solid; eddies in one watershed or another

Audience: All part of one great watershed

Orr: We are spirits made matter, but we are spirit and that matters

Audience: We are sojourners in a mystery called time

All: For all of this we give thanks . . .