

The power and wisdom of spiritual gratitude

In all your works give fervent thanks. In all our inner works give *heartfelt* thanks. This is the maxim that we're going to sit with and see what it shows us about how gratitude is a powerful and transforming spiritual potential we can release into the world.

Gratitude as a process flowing exchange releasing grace..

If we take the time, we may look around us into all of creation and intuitively get a sense of how, in everything, there's some sort of cosmic exchange going on: a dynamic, flowing, creative interaction of life, of light, of energy. This is how Osuna speaks of gratitude – a flowing exchange releasing grace. There is a going out, and a returning response in a flowing exchange. We see it in our human relationships. Where there's a giving of a gift, this can prompt a response of heartfelt gratitude, which the giver receives as a gift – and that this then in turn increases the flow of his or her generosity. Both the recipient and the giver are changed. And so also, in the divine human relationship. The more and more we receive and respond in thanksgiving the more we participate in this flowing exchange of grace.

Three forms of gratitude in spiritual recollection.

All of this begs the question, how can we begin to more consciously and more intentionally develop our capacity for gratitude as practise of recollection? Osuna gives us three particular forms of spiritual gratitude which we could reflect on in turn.

Self offering in gratitude

First of all there's the way in which we *offer the self in* a response of gratitude. Of course self offering may take a million different forms, but in our manner of self offering there's an important quality that Osuna flags up as a helpful criteria. In genuine self-offering inner congruence increases. Where we give of ourselves in response to what we know we have received, we are seeking to remain congruent to what we know. One common illustration of this is that when we recognise our natural gifts and talents that we have been given, and use and offer them in relationships of loving service in a spirit of gratitude – our inner sense of congruence grows.

Grateful expectant attention

The second form gratitude is where we learn to offer *our power of attention*. The more vigilantly attentive and expectant we are for goodness and life, the more capable of receiving what is nourishing and life-giving, and the more we receive the more we are open to receiving. This is the powerful dynamic of this receptive attention as an inner act of thanksgiving. It is in this sense of the maxim that heartfelt thanksgiving is key to participating in the flowing exchange of spiritual life in the heart.

To offer grateful attention to what we perceive as essentially good is only the half of it. What about offering grateful attention where our inner response is pain? To offer *thanksgiving in suffering* is, Osuna says, angelic. It is transcendent thanksgiving and goes against our instincts for survival and happiness. However – if we consciously and willingly choose to bring the energy of gratitude into our inner attention even with painful inner responses – we open ourselves to receive grace at some level.

Practising unconditional gratitude.

To practice unconditional gratitude takes commitment and clarity. Osuna suggests that one way of developing our capacity for unconditional gratitude is to form the habit of using a receiving phrase. He suggests a short sentence taken from the scriptures like '*Blessed be God in his gifts.*' We may find another that seems right for us. The practice is to inwardly say the simple phrase as often as possible in daily life, introducing it alongside our inner response to difficulties. We make a habit of dropping it into our awareness without the condition of experience judged as good or bad. Unconditionally we say '*Blessed be God in his gifts*' And as we develop this habit we may notice certain things going on. We may notice that as we pause to say the phrase, there's a moment of interruption of our habitual responses to difficulty, suffering, conflict. There is a small window of opportunity pausing our habitual response of anxiety or fear, anger, irritation or whatever it is. It is a small space for something new, a grace or gift to be received.

To drop in a phrase like 'Blessed be God in his gifts' is also an invocation to spiritual presence regardless of how painful our response is. And that in itself also opens us to the gifts of the spirit within us as it puts us in touch with our deepest spiritual resources. And if we continue in an attitude of inner enquiry of gratitude, we may well ask of ourselves, 'What is the gift that is being awakened in me right now?' What gift of wisdom perhaps, of discernment, or patience or strength. Or which one of the natural virtues is being awakened in us; kindness, gentleness, self-control?

So this form of offering attention is really where we get to the nub of things. We move from thanksgiving for 'what we know we have received' (that may not be in evidence) to anticipatory gratitude for what is being received in another dimension. It's a gratitude response that bears fruit in a kind of equanimity in the great joys and great trial of life.

The speech of gratitude.

The third form of gratitude is to do with speech, the expressive speech of thanksgiving. In the liturgies ancient and modern we see that in Judaic-Christianity, like many other faiths, there is a tradition of expressing gratitude, of singing from the heart. We have for instance, inherited the *Song of Songs*, the great song of love, ecstatic, erotic love that is as much a thanksgiving and blissful appreciation of the human body as a blissful appreciation of the divine lover and the human beloved. We have inherited also the whole body of the psalms, the songs, the spiritual songs of David as we know them. And as a Franciscan, Osuna has received the Song of Creation.

If we take a moment to look at how the recitation of psalms are expressions of gratitude we notice how, in so many of them, there is this poetic and powerful description of everything essential to the human experience, from intense fear to complete rage, to vengeance, to envy, to love, to peace, tranquillity. Its all in there. And as we flood our minds in the recitation or chanting or reading of the psalms, as has been happening year in and year out, we are not only having our own experiences beginning to resonate with what's being described, but we also have in the psalms, that moment of shift. We have that moment when there's a change from the description of what is going on to a turning inwardly and into prayer and saying, 'And yet will I praise thee, and yet will I give thanks.'

So we have these three forms of gratitude that we can take on and develop in many ways - the offering of ourselves in grateful service, the offering of inner attention,

and in singing songs from the heart that become spontaneous expressions of gratitude independent of any outer situation.

The fullness of gratitude in emptiness .

Spiritual gratitude takes us, slowly but surely, to a place within us where we encounter our own deepest dependence and emptiness . Everything that we receive is gift, the whole of life is gift, and it's actually out of discovering our own emptiness that the most creative flow of life is released in us.

Osuna tells a wisdom teaching story of Francis of Assisi, who we know lived a life of great external poverty. Francis was walking on the roads one day collecting alms and he was approached by a beggar who he recognised was Jesus. Jesus as beggar says to Francis, 'Francis, give to me what you have.' And Francis says, 'Lord, you know that I have nothing to give you.' And the beggar Christ says, 'Lay your hand on your heart,' so Francis does that and as he brings his hand away, he sees, in the palm of his hand, a gold sovereign. And of course as all good teaching stories go, the question is repeated and the Christ beggar says, 'Francis, Francis, what is it that you have to give me?' And Francis once again objects and says, 'Lord, surely you know that I have nothing to give you?' And Jesus says, 'Lay your hand on your heart,' and Francis obeys, and as he does so, he comes away with two sovereign coins in his hand. And the third time round as he lays his hand on his heart, acutely aware of his own emptiness, his hand comes away with three golden sovereigns in his hand.

And so it is in us . The same principle is at work, that the more and more we discover how dependent we are, how in our nothingness, our seeming nothingness, we receive the greatest sense of our spiritual inheritance.