

Gratitude in Turbulent Times

Are you feeling grateful this morning? What are you grateful for? Family, health, having enough to eat, having shelter, having love in your life?

Are you grateful for our country, Canada? Are you grateful to live here in the Niagara area where we aren't subject to hurricanes, tsunamis; floods and earthquakes? Are you grateful for this congregation and friends and having a purpose in your life?

These are all wonderful things and we all should be grateful for them. I am.

But, what about the things and happenings in life that are not easy. What about the ones that disturb you or upset you or even bring you to the point of despair. Are you grateful for those too?

Amy Green and her husband Ryan conceived a video game called That Dragon, Cancer.

Amy and Ryan's son Joel (the youngest of three sons) was diagnosed with brain cancer at age 3. He received aggressive treatment but the prognosis was still a very early death.

Amy says, "Joel responded better than anyone expected to palliative treatment, and so instead of months, we spent years learning how to love our dying child with all of our hearts. Learning to recognize that shameful feeling of holding back just a little love to try to spare ourselves just a little pain somewhere further down the road. We pushed past that self-preservation because Joel was worth loving even if that love could crush us. And that lesson of intense vulnerability has changed me."

Joel did die but Amy and her husband took this whole experience and made an interactive video game which can be played by others who are perhaps going through something similar. It is not a "fun" game to play as everyone knows the ending before they begin the game. However, it has helped many people deal with their grief in some way.

“But when our hearts break, they heal a little differently. My broken heart has been healing with a new and a deeper compassion -- a desire to sit with people in their pain, to hear their stories and try to help tell them, so that they know that they're seen.

The hardest moments of our lives change **us** more than any goal we could ever accomplish. Tragedy has shifted my heart more than any dream I could ever see come true.”

This is gratitude on a scale which few have experienced.

ANNE LAMOTT is an American novelist who has written books such as, **Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy**. Help, Thanks, Wow: The **Three** Essential Prayers. Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith. Small Victories: Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace. Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year.

She says,

My seven-year-old grandson sleeps just down the hall from me, and he wakes up a lot of mornings and he says, "You know, this could be the best day ever." And other times, in the middle of the night, he calls out in a tremulous voice, "Nana, will you ever get sick and die?"

I think this pretty much says it for me and most of the people I know, that we're a mixed grill of happy anticipation and dread.

For instance, I am no longer 47, although this is the age I feel, and the age I like to think of myself as being. My friend Paul used to say in his late 70s that he felt like a young man with something really wrong with him.

For Anne, the first and truest thing of life is that all truth is a paradox.

“Life is both a precious, unfathomably beautiful gift, and it's impossible here, on the incarnational side of things. It's been a very bad match for those of us who were born extremely sensitive. It's so hard and weird that we sometimes wonder if we're being tricked. It's filled simultaneously with heartbreaking sweetness and beauty, desperate poverty, floods and babies, acne and Mozart, all swirled together. I don't think it's an ideal system.

There is almost nothing outside of you that will help in any kind of lasting way, unless you're waiting for an organ. You can't buy, achieve, date or marry serenity and peace of mind. This is the most horrible truth, and I so resent it. But it's an inside job, and we can't arrange peace or lasting improvement for the people we love most in the world. They have to find their own ways, their own answers. You can't run alongside your grown children with sunscreen and Chapstick on their hero's journey. You have to release them. It's disrespectful not to. And if it's someone else's problem, you probably don't have the answer, anyway.

Our help is usually not very helpful. Our help is often toxic. And help is the sunny side of control. Stop helping so much. Don't get your help and goodness all over everybody.

Grace is spiritual WD-40, or water wings. The mystery of grace is that God loves Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin and me exactly as much as He or She loves your new grandchild. Go figure.

The movement of grace is what changes us, heals us and heals our world. To summon grace, say, "Help," and then buckle up. Grace finds you exactly where you are, but it doesn't leave you where it found you. And grace won't look like Casper the Friendly Ghost, regrettably. But the phone will ring or the (e-)mail will come and then against all odds, you'll get your sense of humor about yourself back. Laughter really is carbonated holiness. It helps us breathe again and again and gives us back to ourselves, and this gives us faith in life and each other. And remember -- grace always bats last.

God just means goodness. It's really not all that scary. It means the divine or a loving, animating intelligence, or, as some have said "the cosmic muffin." A good name for God is: "Not me." Emerson said that the happiest person on Earth is the one who learns from nature the lessons of worship. So, go outside a lot and look up."

We have been bombarded with tragedies, not of our own making: hurricanes, earthquakes, shootings and acts of terrorism on monumental scales.

Canada is not immune to the forces of extremism and has dealt with attacks before. In January, a gunman entered a mosque in Quebec City and fired on worshippers, killing six.

In 2014, a gunman killed a soldier guarding a war memorial in Ottawa before driving to parliament, where he was eventually killed.

A few days before that, two soldiers were rammed by a car in Quebec. The suspect was later killed by police. But one soldier was killed and another injured in what was described as an apparent act of home-grown terrorism.

Canadians are again shaken by a suspected terror incident in Edmonton that is reminiscent of recent vehicle attacks in European cities like Barcelona, London, and Berlin.

I don't know how you are feeling these days, but I often don't want to turn on the television or check the news online as the overload can make me feel really overwhelmed and depressed.

The world has had earthquakes and hurricanes; shootings and deliberate indiscriminate killings with cars and trucks. The horrors going on seem more intense than in the past or maybe it is just **more reported** and more **graphically** reported as well. The immediacy and visual impact of cell phone videos etc. seem to bring the whole thing into our living rooms and onto our computers.

But, as horrible as all of this, the aftermath is also astonishing. To hear some tell of the heroism of strangers who threw themselves on top of others, the people who rushed to the aid of someone in need, the workers who dig through the rubble and reach down into the flood waters to help others is often uplifting.

Gratitude is expressed over and over again, thankfulness at the saving of a life or the sacrifices made for a fellow human being. Sometimes, gratitude is expressed by a family member or friend talking about someone who was lost in the flood or shooting or earthquake. The victim's life is celebrated and mourned by all who hear of it. Should we as listeners be grateful? Sometimes, it is just that we are grateful that it wasn't us or someone we love.

Where does this train of thought bring us? To us. To Now. To this moment.

Lux Narayan is the CEO and co-founder of Unmetric. The company is a social media intelligence platform focusing on brands. He read 2000 obituaries from the New York Times. He and some colleagues then analyzed what they had read and drew conclusions.

“We uncovered, many lessons from lives well-led, and what those people immortalized in print could teach us. The exercise was a fascinating testament to the kaleidoscope that is life, and even more fascinating was the fact that the overwhelming majority of obituaries featured people famous and non-famous, who did seemingly extraordinary things. They made a positive dent in the fabric of life. They helped.

So, ask yourselves as you go back to your daily lives: How am I using my talents to help society? Because the most powerful lesson here is, if more people lived their lives trying to be famous in death, the world would be a much better place.

Be grateful for what you have and help someone else.

Death leaves a heartache no one can heal.

Love leaves a memory no one can steal.