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Gratitude: The Spiritual Key

Gratitude may be one of the simplest spiritual practices we can employ. We are often advised to keep a gratitude journal or make a short gratitude list at bedtime. We are taught that gratitude opens the way for more good. All good advice.

But gratitude can be a deeper, richer spiritual experience than simply counting our blessings. Gratitude is possible in any circumstances. It can serve as a doorway to Spirit even when we are sick, afraid, or grieving. It elevates our consciousness and puts us in the flow of positive energy that is divine life.

In this booklet, Unity ministers and other New Thought writers share their experiences with gratitude, often in the midst of adversity. They also use gratitude to celebrate the joys of the human experience and to propel them on their spiritual path.

We hope this booklet will remind you of the many ways and reasons that you can be grateful and practice giving thanks.

Your Friends in Unity

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Rev. Darlene Strickland

On the night of September 26, 2024, I was jolted awake by the sound of heavy rain and howling winds as Hurricane Helene unleashed its fury on Western North Carolina. Moments later, the power flickered off and faucets stopped flowing. What initially felt like an inconvenience quickly turned into a life-altering event.

The last text message I received before cell service failed came from a congregation member: "I'm scared. Our house is destroyed. One dog is missing. We're waiting to be rescued. Please pray." The raw vulnerability in those words encapsulated the gravity of what we were facing.

Helene left a trail of destruction: landslides, floods, uprooted trees, entire towns demolished, and tragically, lost lives. The picturesque landscape I'd known was suddenly unrecognizable. Roads were impassable, blocked by fallen trees, debris, and decimated power lines. Without electricity, running water, or cell service, life as we knew it was upended. Yet amidst the devastation, something remarkable began to unfold.

Neighbors, many of whom I had only exchanged pleasantries with before, emerged from their homes. Stripped of distractions like television and the internet, we turned to one another. Conversations that began with, "Are you okay?" evolved into sharing meals, resources, and stories. Connection replaced isolation, and collaboration became our strength.

On the third day, I could finally venture two miles to Unity of the Blue Ridge, the church I serve as minister. I found the church property battered but not broken. The five youth classrooms we had lovingly remodeled earlier in the year were water-damaged, and the kitchen showed signs of water intrusion. Yet amidst downed trees across our property, the small RV where our groundskeeper lived remained untouched, as though shielded by an invisible force.

As news trickled in, it brought a mix of heartbreak and relief. The congregant who had texted me was rescued, along with the missing dog, though their home was destroyed. Tragically, the storm claimed the lives of the operations director at our sister property, along with her two young children and fiancé. And there would be many more losses.

Hospitals, overwhelmed with patients who had no homes to return to, repurposed empty schools as makeshift care facilities. I volunteered as a chaplain in one of these shelters, where I encountered stories of unimaginable loss. One man, overcome with grief, wept, "Why did I survive and not my wife?" The collective sorrow was overwhelming, but so too was the resilience, support, and humanity I witnessed.

Each evening, I returned home to the stillness of candlelight. One night, with a heavy heart, I picked up my journal and wrote, "In all things, give thanks ..." This scripture bubbled up from my Pentecostal upbringing.

This ancient teaching holds profound wisdom but requires an essential distinction. It invites us to give thanks "in" the midst of all things; it does not ask us to give thanks "for" all things. Gratitude does not necessitate that we ignore, bypass, trivialize, or engage pretense.

Growing up, I was taught to say *thank you* as a demonstration of good manners. But there were times when my gratitude was hollow, a mechanical response to something I did not truly appreciate. Over time, I had to learn to move beyond the mechanics of saying thank you and connect with the true spirit of gratitude.

True gratitude cannot flourish in pretense; it must arise from authenticity. It is not about denying pain or glossing over hardship. The spirit of gratitude whispers, "You are in this world, but you are not of the world. Yes, you are having this experience, but you are more. This experience cannot overcome your Spirit, your Higher Self. All that I AM is greater than anything in this world."

The spirit of gratitude reminds us of our essential being and the unshakable truth that sings, "It is well with my soul." It allows us to hold grief and goodness simultaneously, to acknowledge what is lost, while cherishing what remains. Beyond the transactional idea of being grateful *for* something, we open ourselves to being grateful from an awareness of what is ultimately true. As Ralph Waldo Emerson is often credited with saying, "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."

Helene, like all of life's storms, was indiscriminate. Storms strip away distractions, and if we are open and willing, they reveal what is true and what truly matters. They push us to rediscover our true Self and our capacity for compassion, connection, creativity, and courage—in the midst of it all. For that, I am truly grateful.

Rev. Darlene Strickland is senior minister at Unity of the Blue Ridge in Asheville, North Carolina.

Gratitude in All Circumstances Rev. Juan del Hierro

One morning as I was driving my son Lucas to school, we found ourselves at a crossroads. Lucas, who at the time was a fan of K-pop music, wanted to play his Korean favorites, while I wanted to listen to my Positive Music Playlist. Lucas, especially frustrated with me that morning, exclaimed, "You don't always have to be positive and grateful! It's not always about being positive and grateful."

My 10-year-old telling me to cool it with the positivity and gratitude felt so ... uncomfortable.

Later, Lucas and I were waiting in a very long drive-through line at Taco Bell. To pass the time, we played a Sonic the Hedgehog video game on the infotainment screen in the car, which seemed to make the 20-minute wait go faster. When it was finally our turn to order, the cashier informed us they were accepting cash only, which I didn't have. Irritated, I listed all the reasons this was frustrating—the wasted time, the lack of communication, the cars that boxed us in so we couldn't leave. Then Lucas said with a grin, "Papa, be positive and grateful. At least you got to play Sonic while waiting."

His words stopped me. I realized how often I preach gratitude yet struggle to practice it in frustrating moments. While somewhat embarrassed, I was proud to be reminded of this lesson by my son. I recentered and shifted my perspective. Instead of stewing in frustration, we discussed alternatives while patiently waiting to escape the drivethrough. We ended up finding joy at a farmer's market and playground nearby. His reminder transformed what could have been a sour experience into a memorable one.

Unity teaches that gratitude is a spiritual practice that transcends circumstances. It is not contingent upon the outer world but arises from the inner knowing that in every situation, there is grace, and that grace is evidence of God.

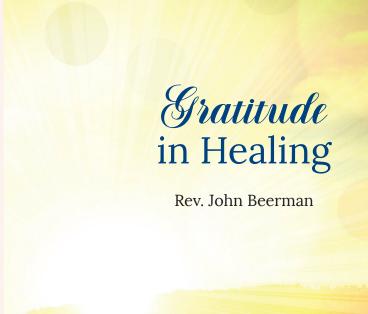
In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, we are instructed by the apostle Paul, "Give thanks in all circumstances." Gratitude, therefore, can be experienced and claimed even in adversity. This verse gives me some leeway. I don't have to give thanks for all circumstances. I can be grateful *in* all circumstances.

The practice of gratitude is an invitation to embrace the belief that within every trial lies the seed of a blessing.

Gratitude doesn't mean you isolate yourself from the experiences of human suffering. It doesn't mean to deny hardship. The practice of gratitude is an invitation to embrace the belief that within every trial lies the seed of a blessing. We can find evidence of God in every situation, put our attention on that, and allow it to realign us so we can respond to any situation we are experiencing with a greater sense of ease. We can sometimes get lost in the darkness of adversity if we forget to open our eyes and search for the light.

So I invite you to consider: What hidden blessings are present in your current challenges? What gifts of growth and transformation are emerging? By embracing gratitude, even in the midst of adversity, we shift our perspective and, with it, the situation.

Rev. Juan del Hierro is senior minister at Unity on the Bay in Miami.



I am grateful for my physical health when it is good, and I seek gratitude for health challenges when they come along. Health challenges don't mean I have done something incorrect with my prayers and affirmations. It's simply an opportunity, as our Way Shower Jesus said, "that God's works might be revealed" (John 9:3).

I enjoyed radiant health with no physical limitations until December 2022, when I was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer that undetected would have moved quickly through my body. I immediately sought the best care available and began reciting out loud Scientific Healing Affirmations from Paramahansa Yogananda.

One surgery was quickly followed by a second hospital procedure—challenges that could have felt overwhelming—but I drew on the power of the indwelling Christ presence to comfort me. This pause from my normal routine gave me an opportunity to turn more deeply within to prayer and meditation and to knowing God. I began speaking healing affirmations to every cell of my body. Spiritual healing became my primary focus in life, to seek out and apply spiritual relief to the affected parts of my body.

I commenced a journey to healing and wholeness; in truth, I was on a path toward letting go entirely and trusting God with all of me—body, soul, and mind. There was no equivocation, no bargaining, no second-guessing God.

Living with complete abandonment to Spirit sprouted a tiny seed of gratitude deep within my soul. As time went on, my gratitude developed into a new consciousness. I woke to the simple idea that healing comes when gratitude is practiced. Gratitude is a fountain of healing energy that flows like an artesian well; the Source is unlimited. It is activated when pause is practiced on mental activities like fear, worry, or dread; acceptance of a present health condition opens our body and mind to the healing power of Universal Spirit.

In other words, say *yes* to what comes your way, be it health or apparent illness. When you say *yes*, you initiate a chain of spiritual power that will ultimately result in your return to wholeness. This may or may not mean physical healing, but wholeness within your spirit is mightier than any disease or circumstance.

There are no limitations to the healing energy of Spirit and to Spirit's ability to shift our awareness from fear to faith. Faith is the inevitable result of knowing God loves us and cares deeply for us. As we allow God's grace to seep deeply into our soul, there will no longer be any doubt about God's ability or willingness to heal. We will know it, because we will experience it.

Rev. John Beerman is senior minister at Unity of Wimberley, Texas.



Rev. Lulu Logan

As I grew from a young girl to one no longer young, the word relationship always implied to me a romantic relationship-Cinderella and Prince Charming, a happily-ever-after affair. Our culture seems to revolve around this idea, and many of us spend our lives seeking this special connection: "You and me against the world, babe." Many of us see ourselves as relationship failures if we never get the sparkly ring or wedding cake smeared on our faces. Well, I'll speak for myself here. I felt that way. For decades. I'm a late bloomer, spiritually speaking, and I find no shame in this. We all have our journeys, our individual paths to traverse, and mine took me all over the place before I found my personal home base. Unity brought me face to face with my own divinity.

Even within Unity, I continued to search. I took every class offered at my church, I spent large dollars on therapy and breathwork and SoulCollage® workshops. I did Louise Hay's mirror work—looking in the mirror to affirm and compliment myself—along with myriad affirmations and denials, plus retreats and workshops near and far.

As time slipped on by, I found myself less inclined toward the outer and more inclined toward the inner. In fact, my desire for someone to "complete me" dissolved as I found that what I sought was as near as my hands and feet. The mirror work I had balked at became my mainstay, and as I gazed into those beautiful blue eyes, I became ever more devoted to she who gazed back at me. I felt myself expanding vibrationally.

I finally discovered that my relationship with myself is the single most important relationship I can enter into in this lifetime, for this relationship is my relationship with Spirit. As I fell in love with myself, I found myself falling in love with the Mystery that created me.

I also found that being in love with God, Spirit, Divine Energy makes me more attractive to other beings. Relationships of all kinds now pour into my life experience.

I discovered, ever so slowly, that I was, am, and always have been perfectly perfect. Nothing is missing. I am not handicapped or bereft if I do not have a partner on my arm. My weekends are not lonely, nor do I need to fill them with busyness to feel fulfilled. I am whole and complete in every moment.

I am totally enchanted, in relationship with all. For brief glimpses of time, I actually feel the oneness that we all are, and for this I am profoundly grateful.

What greater love relationship can there be than that exquisite relationship between the Creator and the created? What greater gratitude can I experience than this love relationship?

Rev. Lulu Logan is a minister at large based in Winter Garden, Florida.

A heart filled with gratitude magnifies God's ever-present love. —Myrtle Fillmore

Gratitude in Lack

Rev. Sandra Campbell

What if you could be grateful for everything? Unity teaches that we create our experiences by what we choose to think, feel, and believe. This means that regardless of how good or bad things may seem, we have the power to choose our attitude. It's like turning the other cheek, which changes our perspective.

When I was in elementary school I looked forward to my copy of *Weekly Reader*, an educational magazine for children that included games, puzzles, and stories. One of my favorite stories was about a little old lady who had run out of food; the only thing she found in her kitchen was a tiny morsel of leftover cake. She set the table as if preparing for a feast and placed the little piece of cake on a plate in front of her. She then put on her bifocals and thanked God for the crumbs she was about to consume. The bifocals made the sliver of cake appear at least twice its size. When it was all gone, she felt satisfied.

The little old lady in the story easily could have given in to feelings of despair. Instead, by putting on the glasses, she magnified her good. She expressed gratitude for what was right in front of her—small though it was.

I recently asked several close friends what they are grateful for. Their stories included simple things like technology that enables them to watch their grandson doing artwork from halfway across the country, phone calls and emails with friends, happy hours on Zoom, and the ability to work from home.

At times, we may be so focused on what is lacking that we completely overlook the many good things in our lives. We may not have the luxury to choose our circumstances, but we can always choose our attitude. When we are grateful for what we have, we find we have more to be grateful for.

Studies have shown that practicing gratitude improves the immune system, creates feelings of connectedness, improves morale, contributes to a positive mental attitude, and improves sleep. The challenge is to put our own stories to the test to see how gratitude can change the narrative.

To get started, take a deep breath and bring to mind something you feel is lacking in your life. Like the story of the little old lady and the tiny morsel of cake, you can change your point of view. Rewrite the story in your mind. Is there something in the story for which you can be grateful? This may take practice. But as Maya Angelou said, "If you don't like something, change it; if you can't change it, change your attitude about it."

So what's your story? After all, gratitude is an attitude!

Rev. Sandra Campbell is associate minister at Unity Temple on the Plaza in Kansas City, Missouri, and executive director of the Unity Urban Ministerial School.



Rev. Margo Ford

Being rescued in a dire situation is enough to engender a feeling of gratitude. But what if, after many years, there evolves a continued awareness that the event held so much more for which to be grateful than I was aware of at the time?

I was about 9 years old when we were living in a lake house in Wisconsin. While there was a pier at the end of the property, the lake bottom was mucky, and swimming from that pier was not possible. So my dad sunk a raft into the sandy area some 100 yards from shore, and we took a boat out there when we wanted to swim.

One day, my grandfather with his sister Anna, who was in her 80s, came to visit. Grandpa and my dad decided to go fishing, and shortly thereafter, my mother and I took Aunt Anna out to the raft. She absolutely loved to swim.

Dad had taken the motorboat, and the oars we needed to get to the raft were in that boat. So Mom and I decided to use the paddles from an old canoe. Paddling out there was fairly easy, but a problem arose when we tried to go back. The wind had picked up, and our boat was lightweight aluminum, so as hard as we paddled, the wind kept carrying us farther from shore. We needed help. Mom had some physical limitations, rendering her unable to swim the distance to shore, and clearly Aunt Anna was not a candidate. So my mother said, "Margo, you will have to swim to our neighbor's house to get help."

I was truly afraid. It was such a long distance to swim. I didn't express my fear, since there was obviously no alternative. But I especially feared swimming through the bullrushes. Kids told stories about "things" that lived in those tall reeds, and I could only imagine what I might encounter there.

I pushed through and finally ran up the lawn of our neighbor's house only to find nobody home. What to do? What to do? The closest other neighbor was the "town drunk" that everyone disdained and avoided. I was deathly afraid to approach him, but there was no other choice.

Without hesitation this man led me to his boat, and we motored out to where Mom and Aunt Anna were adrift. Attaching a rope to their boat, he towed us safely to our pier. We were indeed grateful and perhaps a little surprised at his kindness.

As I've thought about that incident over the years, I've been continually amazed at the bravery my 9-year-old self displayed in spite of my fears. I feel quite certain the event was the foundation for courage I have been able to display in myriad fearful situations across a lifetime. And for that, I am most grateful. Grateful, too, for coming to realize that there is goodness and kindness in all people, even those whom others have disdained.

Rev. Margo Ford is a minister at Unity Spiritual Center of Waco, Texas

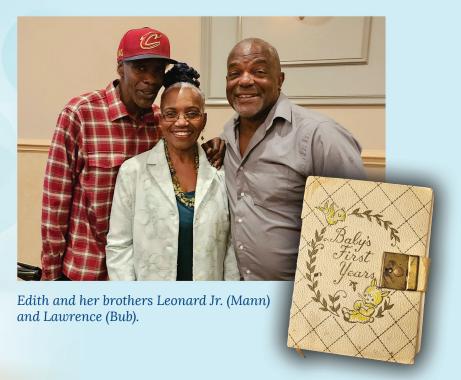
Gratitude in Loss

Rev. Edith Washington-Woods

Leaving a conference at Unity Village, Missouri, last summer, my wife Akosua and I drove with our grandson Taevion to my hometown of Gary, Indiana, to pick up a travel trailer we had left at my mother's house.

Upon arrival, my mother's advanced Alzheimer's disease made it apparent she was no longer safe alone. It took six of us in the family to get her into our Ford Expedition. Once securing mom in her seat, we were on our way, pulling our travel trailer on a 14-hour road trip to our home in Maryland.

Mom settled well into her new environment and the spare bedroom. She was not aware of the change or the 14-hour car ride. Within a month, Mom's dementia became drastically worse. She stopped walking, drank only sips of flavored water, and slept at least 23 hours a day. She was admitted to home hospice for a week, then in-patient hospice. My mother, Arla Nance, died four days later. I'm grateful I could be holding her hand as we played Aretha Franklin singing, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."



Mom always wanted her body to be donated to science, and her brain tissue went to Harvard University. I'm grateful her wishes could be honored. And I know my mama always wanted to attend college!

My mom's memorial was in our hometown of Gary. My brother Leonard Jr., nicknamed "Mann," gave me two gifts he found in our mother's belongings. One was the baby book my mom kept for the first four years of my life. I am

so grateful to know precisely what time I was born—12:33 p.m.—which was not recorded on my birth certificate. Another was the first time I met my father, June 10, because he was in the Army when I was born five months earlier.

Leonard also gave me a locket that had been our mother's. He said to me, "I thought you might like this. Perhaps you could put a picture of you, me, and Bub (our youngest brother) in there."

Little did I know that one week later, Leonard Jr. "Mann" would be killed. Nor did I know that Lawrence "Bub" would die suddenly nine weeks after Mann.

I am so grateful my brother Leonard Jr. blessed me with these two gifts. I am grateful I saw my brother Bub twice in one month—first at our mother's memorial, then at Mann's funeral. I am grateful I have pictures of the three of us at Mom's memorial that I can put in the locket. I am grateful that during a meditation I felt guided to invite our family onto Zoom for Christmas so we were able to see Bub four days before his death.

Change can be tumultuous, and change can be life-altering. Each minute of life is precious, and we are not promised tomorrow. All we are left with is the love we share with each other today.

Rev. Edith Washington-Woods is senior minister at Unity of Gaithersburg, Maryland.

Gratitude in a Chaotic World

Rev. Sheree Taylor-Jones

Living in an ever-changing world, faced with ideas that rock my beliefs, can be challenging. It's hard to feel gratitude when I witness the devastation of war, famine, and genocide. The choice by some people to deny goodness, kindness, and respect to every living being makes me question many areas of my life.

These questions arise from my desire to help create a safe place for all. How do I release the paralysis of my mind to live Truth? What is the point of being in gratitude? What is mine to do when the world feels chaotic? How can I find my purpose when humankind seems to be imploding?

Mind paralysis happens when I've allowed my mentality to be overwhelmed by stress and anxiety. I've noticed that my mind goes into stinking thinking when I focus too intensely on why bad things happen to good people. I then attempt to use my brain to solve the problems of society.

But first, I have to change the frequency. Before I am able to take any action, I must connect with goodness. I choose to change my awareness from being earthbound to rising above societal concerns. I do this through conversations with God and by aligning with my spiritual self, which is not bound by earthly problems.

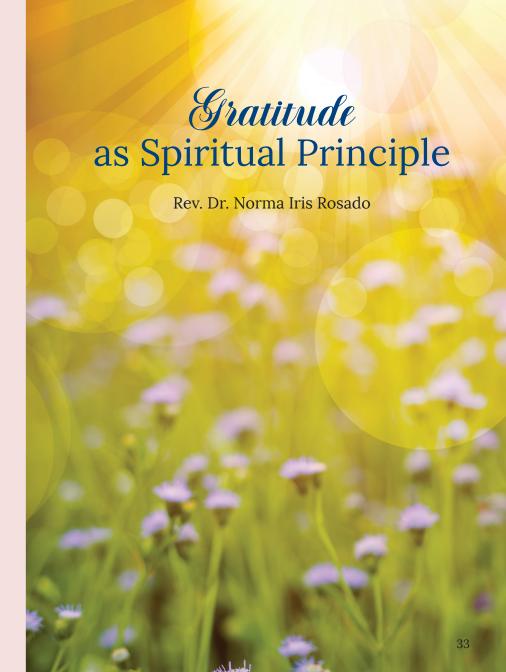
I tune into my soul's knowing and am awed by all the wonders that exist. In this moment, I see nature's beauty and the sacrifices many people make for a better world. I recognize how my personal life is blessed.

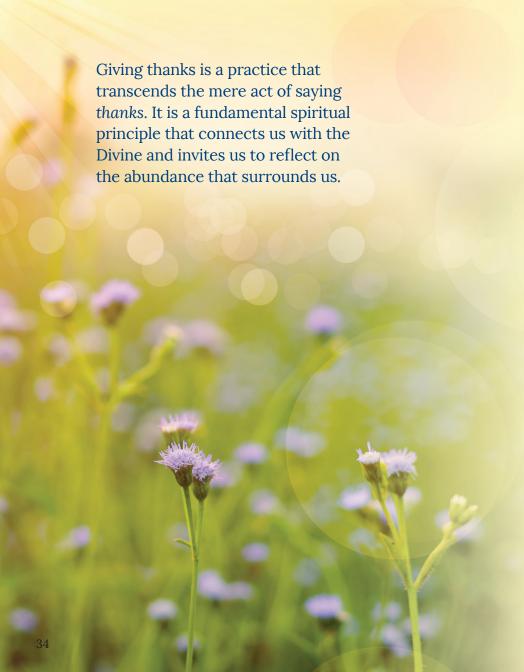
This shifts me into the frequency of gratitude, a frequency of creation. Now from this higher level, I can effectively answer what is mine to do. I am to stay in alignment with light as much as possible so that I am restored. From this place, my actions are to make a difference in each life I touch.

That's what we are here to do—make a difference in others' lives, one individual at a time.

From this perspective, I know my purpose for being on this planet: to love and support others on their spiritual journey; to remember the truth that they are divine souls inhabiting humanity. Imagine what a difference seeing others as divine could make in the world! This is the true gift of sharing one's light with another. It becomes a conflagration of hope.

Rev. Sheree Taylor-Jones heads a New Thought community in Austin, Texas, called Celebration of Spirit.





From a metaphysical perspective, thanksgiving not only involves recognizing the blessings received but also a deep understanding of our relationship with the Universe and the Creator.

In Unity, we hold that everything in the Universe is interconnected. Every thought, emotion, word, and action impacts the whole. Thanksgiving, therefore, acts as a vehicle to elevate our vibration and tune into the positive energy that permeates existence.

When we give thanks, we not only acknowledge what we have received but also affirm our connection with the only source of abundance, God. This practice helps us develop a higher consciousness, allowing us to see beyond the material and to appreciate the subtle and spiritual.

The Bible offers valuable insights about thanksgiving. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, the apostle Paul wrote: "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." In all circumstances? This approach may seem difficult when we are not feeling joyful, but it is precisely in adversity where gratitude manifests its transformative power.

Giving thanks in difficult times involves an act of faith, trusting that everything we experience has a purpose. By giving thanks even in moments of despair, we begin to let go of the need to control our circumstances and open ourselves to receive the lessons and the blessings the Universe has for us. This act of surrender frees us from stress and anxiety, allowing us to grow and evolve in our spiritual understanding.

In a world that often focuses on scarcity and lack, practicing gratitude reminds us there is always something to be thankful for. Each moment in life presents an opportunity to recognize and celebrate what we have. This mindset not only transforms our perspective of life but also becomes a magnet to attract more good into our lives, because the energy we emit is reflected in our experiences.

Thanksgiving is, therefore, a powerful spiritual principle that invites us to live from a place of connection, love, and abundance. It teaches us that every experience, whether we call it positive or negative, has intrinsic value and offers valuable lessons. By adopting this practice in our daily lives, we not only transform our own reality but influence the environment around us.

Far beyond saying *thank you*, giving thanks is an attitude, a way of life that invites us to recognize the interconnectedness of all things and to embrace abundance in all its forms. By practicing gratitude, we align ourselves with the flow of the universe, allowing peace, joy, and love to manifest. Thus, thanksgiving becomes a powerful spiritual tool that guides us on our path toward growth and personal fulfillment.

Rev. Dr. Norma Iris Rosado serves three churches in Puerto Rico.



As I approach the milestone birthday of 60 years, it feels synchronistic that I share my glorious gratitude journey.

In my postgraduate studies during the past three years, I was assigned a series of reflection papers that became life-changing. These papers, which described experiences from childhood to the present that impacted my overall growth and development, required an unexpected deep dive into sometimes murky waters. As I prayed my way through each written expression of total transparency and varying vulnerability, I could feel overflowing gratitude fill my being. With each life review, I came to understand how much my life had represented multiple moments of resiliency, strength, and tremendous growth.

Today, I have an eternal appreciation for the God-sent people, places, and events that have guided me to this glorious point in time. The journey began when I discovered my spiritual family at Christ Universal Temple in Chicago, founded by the dynamic Rev.

Dr. Johnnie Colemon. I walked through the doors into New Thought Christianity at age 11, and I know—like the essay "Footprints in the Sand"—that I always have been carried.

With eyes of gratitude, I can see that I was *always carried* in the Father's arms through childhood chaos, being raised by a single mother, and experiencing bullying. I was *always carried* through the years of navigating the stresses of adolescence, including periods of low self-esteem, father-daughter issues, and an increasing need for acceptance. I was *always carried* through my college challenges to my final graduation.

Through the years of marriage, graduate school, the birth of my two beautiful daughters, my career as a social worker, and a health diagnosis, I was *always carried*. In the loving arms of God, I was held through a divorce, co-parenting, relationships, life management, and advancing my career.

The past 10 years have been the most restorative on my gratitude journey, with countless confirmations of being *always carried* through the transitions of people I love, including both my parents in 2014, six months apart. Through it all, I walked in faith and felt divine love surrounding me through significant others, including my Christ Universal Temple family.

To express my gratitude, I have remained in service as a writer, teacher, spiritual coach, and clinical therapist. I know my life has been a continuous demonstration of miracles and manifestations, and I am blessed in all that I have been able to be, do, have, experience, receive, and give.

At the time of this writing, I am living my dream of preparing to receive my doctoral degree. Truly, I have been held tightly and *always carried* on this remarkable path of personal and professional learning.

My life has surely been built on the solid ground of gratitude. From this foundation, I remain humble, expectant, and eternally thankful for being a witness to the power of a grateful heart. I will continue to live in the universal flow through my timeless connection to praise, thanksgiving, and appreciation.

I pray that sharing my gratitude journey will inspire you to recall with appreciation the many times you, like me, were ... *always carried*.

Veronica Walker-Douglas is a clinical social worker in Illinois and affiliated with Christ Universal Temple in Chicago.

Gratitude in the Here and Now

Rev. Shirley Knight

I was alone on the beach after midnight. The full moon was low and bright, casting white light across the water. Waves rolled in and receded. Two large birds, pelicans maybe, flew purposefully across the sky, silhouetted in the moonlight.

I had left the party at the beach house down the way, no longer interested in the consumption of beverages, no longer engaged in the insular conversations. I had arrived at this moment because my relationship had ended. Ten years of stories brought to a jangled, off-key ending.

I'd packed and moved, said goodbye to the extended family I'd grown to love. My friend group had scattered; familiar pathways no longer seemed open.

I was trying out a new pack of people. They interacted from their years of shared experiences. After a while, my laughter just felt hollow. There on the beach in the moonlight, I felt detached from history yet not free of it. What would it take to start again?

I took in the sounds of the waves—rhythmic, mysterious, soothing. I felt connected with some ancient ritual. Is it possible to be hugged by Existence? God, the Universe, the inner light of Eternal Being was nearly tangible in this midnight moment, and I said *thank you*.

Thank you to the people I had loved and cared about, even the ones I might never see again. Thank you to the loneliness and the times of belonging, the dark water and the shiny surface. Thank you to the cycles that guide experiences, the spirals that bring both change and comfort. Thank you to the foundation of Earth to stand on, the sky that displays amazing uniqueness and predictable progress, the sea that hints of infinity. Thank you to the inner longing to be more than I appear to be.

I didn't go back to the party.

After that night, I found a spiritual community where people share sorrows and celebrations, where people identify emotions and nurture talent. With songs of grace, blessings, and positive intentions, we share insights, wisdom, and joy about the spiritual journey.

If my arms were big enough, I could encompass all possible pasts and all possible futures. When my view is wide enough, I see beyond the boundaries of good/bad, right/wrong, and better than/less than conversations. Everything is valid and valuable for learning.

Now I am buoyed by those who create pathways for seekers. Words reach across generations. Thoughts continue reliably as long as we give them attention.

What if all the mystics who have meditated in caves and sacred spaces have come down from the mountains and out of the forests to walk among us? Light comes forth and is revealed, not just in retreats in the far reaches of the world, but here now and wherever it is summoned. Waves wash up on the shore, birds fly gracefully together, moonlight throws itself lavishly across the water. There is no such thing as being alone.

Rev. Shirley Knight is a staff minister at Unity of Houston, Texas.



I am grateful for and to the glorious planet Earth. In the most difficult periods of my life, wild places and wild creatures have provided comfort. In gentler times, Earth's wonders delivered some of my highest highs. Many years ago, I was kayaking off the coast of Wailea, Hawaii. Humpback whales were overwintering there and I had seen many spouts in the distance. I paddled out hoping for a visit. Suddenly, much nearer to shore, a whale shot out of the water and arched into a breach. It did it again, closer, and again, closer still. Finally, it arched out once more so close I could see the striations in its blubber. My kayak danced and bobbed from the enormous splash. Only after the whale had dived back down, the wake had passed, and the sea had calmed did I notice tears of awe and gratitude streaming down my face.

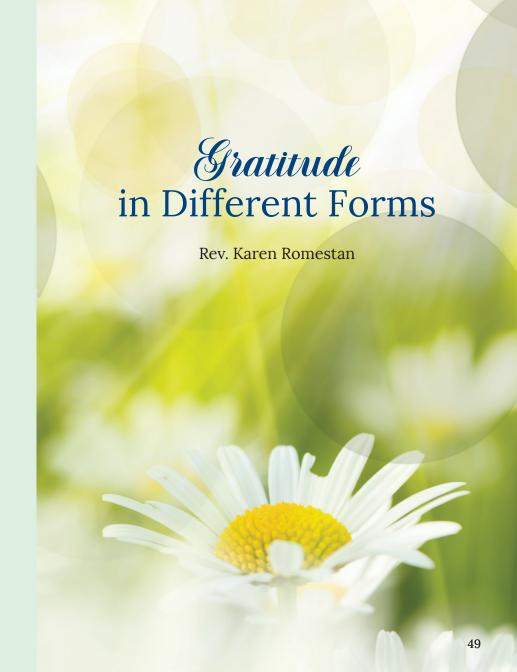
As a lifelong professional environmentalist, I grieve over the damage humanity is doing to this precious planet and the myriad species she supports. I'm grateful to everyone working to help humanity come into a healthier relationship with the rest of nature so that Earth can heal, and I'm deeply thankful for the resilience of nature.

Not long ago, I visited and documented the site of the largest dam removal project in U.S. history. Biologists believed it would take years for wild salmon to return to the upper stretches of the Klamath River in Oregon and California, but nature had different plans. Just weeks after removal of the fourth and final dam, and three days after my visit, the first salmon was spotted. Within four months more than 6,000 salmon had made the passage. For more than a century, over many generations, the wisdom to return to ancestral spawning grounds had remained alive within these extraordinary beings.

It turns out that rivers, much like human consciousness, can heal very quickly when blockages are cleared, flow is restored, and innate new/ancient wisdom is unleashed.

I'm grateful to and for behemoths like whales and elephants, and tiny but mighty workers like bees and hummingbirds who pollinate and make possible flowers and our food. I'm grateful to the far, far too many beings who suffer horribly in feed lots, industrial milk and egg factories, and slaughterhouses. I affirm gentler, more peaceful existences going forward. I am thankful for vast oceans, wild rivers, snow-capped mountains, and harsh, golden deserts. I'm grateful to and for dogs—ah, yes, dogs—and all the nonhuman creatures who become our friends and family. I'm grateful to the lone tree and the songbird in its branches surrounded by an asphalt parking lot. I appreciate the creepy crawlies who keep soil aerated and fertile. I hold deep gratitude, awe, and respect for every thread that weaves the exquisite mosaic that is this living planet.

Rev. Cylvia Hayes is associate minister at Unity Spiritual Community of Central Oregon.



Gratitude. Thanksgiving. Gratefulness. These words are often used interchangeably, yet as I delve a little deeper, there appear to be everso-subtle nuances.

As I live my everyday experiences of this life, I and many others join our hearts in feeling gratitude for the gift of each day, wholesome relationships, inspiring work to do, and good health. These markers of abundance give us opportunities to share our heartfelt gratitude.

It is gratitude we feel for the adventures and treasures that add texture and brilliance to everyday living. We may feel gratitude for a fabulous vacation, an inspiring evening at the theater, or a meaningful encounter with family and friends. We may feel gratitude for the pleasure of a walk in the park, a cool breeze on a hot summer day, or ocean waves splashing against our feet. The laughter of children at play is sure to stir a feeling of gratitude for many.

When we feel gratitude for the abundance of life, thankfulness is ignited.

While gratitude may be a feeling, thankfulness is the outer expression of that feeling. We express generosity toward others by sharing our abundance as we live and use the spiritual laws of life. We embody and radiate the quality of thankfulness.

We may often express thankfulness for others who contribute to the joy and happiness of our life. In time, we may feel gratitude and express thankfulness for the challenging lessons someone brings and the growth we experience because of them. As we grow our expression of thankfulness, our generosity expands and overflows to the world around us, contributing to the consciousness of the collective.

Unity cofounder Charles Fillmore said, "Thanksgiving will keep the heart fresh; for true thanksgiving may be likened to rain falling upon ready soil, refreshing it and increasing its productiveness."

The consistent practice of noticing and nurturing the feeling of gratitude, along with expressing thankfulness, carries us to embodying gratefulness. In gratefulness, we recognize the presence of the Infinite that is goodness.

Without question or hesitation, we anticipate goodness to be made manifest in our lives. Even when challenges arise, we are poised to receive goodness from them. We know at depth that goodness awaits even if camouflaged by obstacles. We hold a perspective that the unlimited goodness of the universe is supporting us always.

When we live a life of gratefulness, we are more cheerful, kind, generous. A greater sense of health and well-being is nurtured from gratefulness. Kristi Nelson, author of *Wake Up Grateful*, says: "We don't have to be grateful for everything that happens, and we can learn how to be grateful for every moment."

From the feeling of gratitude to the outward expression of thanksgiving, we grow into a life of gratefulness and great fullness.

Rev. Karen Romestan is minister at Unity of Augusta, Georgia.

Gratitude in Serendipitous Moments

Rev. Maggie Alderman



Gratitude arises naturally in the moments we plan for and anticipate: the joy of a long-awaited reunion, the relief of a successful endeavor, or the beauty of a sunset at the end of a well-spent day. But what about those moments that arrive unbidden, shaped by divine order and cloaked in the mystery of serendipity? It is at these surprising junctures that the power of gratitude deepens, for they remind us that Spirit is always at work, even when we cannot see the whole picture.

Several years ago, I was traveling to speak at a Unity gathering in a small town. After boarding the plane, we were delayed on the tarmac for what felt like an eternity. As frustration began to creep in, I paused and silently affirmed: *All things work together for good*. With a heart open to divine order, I chose to see this interruption as an opportunity for Spirit to reveal a greater purpose.

Seated next to me was a young mother and her restless son, Jack, who looked to be about 4 years old. Jack was squirming in his seat, clearly struggling with the confinement, while his mother appeared overwhelmed. Something within me nudged me to reach out. I started chatting with Jack, and his mother smiled gratefully, sharing that they were flying to visit family after a difficult year.

I engaged Jack by allowing him to rummage around in my backpack and making up silly names and uses for each treasure he gleefully examined. His giggles filled the cabin, lightening the mood for everyone nearby. When we finally took off, his mother turned to me with tears in her eyes, thanking me for bringing peace to a stressful situation. I could feel Spirit surrounding us all.

What had seemed like a delay became a sacred appointment, orchestrated by divine order. That experience not only reinforced my trust in Spirit but also deepened my understanding of gratitude. Gratitude is not limited to the moments that align with our plans; it flourishes when we trust in Spirit's higher plan, even when it disrupts our own. By affirming divine order, we shift from resistance to receptivity, allowing Spirit to work through us and for us.

When serendipity strikes, gratitude becomes a spiritual practice of trust and surrender. Whether it's an unexpected encounter, a chance discovery, or a sudden change in plans, every moment holds the potential for spiritual growth and connection when viewed through the lens of gratitude.

As you go about your day, consider this practice: The next time something unexpected occurs, pause and affirm: *Divine order is at work here*. Then take a moment to give thanks, trusting that Spirit is revealing blessings you may not yet see. By cultivating gratitude in serendipitous moments, you can align yourself more fully with the flow of divine order and embrace life's surprises as sacred gifts from the Infinite.

Rev. Maggie Alderman is a manager for the Unity Prayer Ministry, called Silent Unity[®].

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