

# DEFIANT GRATITUDE

By Christine Betz Hall

What if thankfulness were edgier than we imagine? Mostly I've seen gratitude as a softer spiritual practice—something good and healthy but not provocative; calming, not energetically charged; maybe even passive, not bold or gutsy. How could gratitude become sacred resistance?

Recently a passage from an author I admire grabbed my attention:

“Gratitude is defiance of sorts, the defiance of kindness in the face of anger, of connection in the face of division, and of hope in the face of fear.”

—Diana Butler Bass (1)

I have to admit, I sometimes feel defiant about gratitude. After rereading context for the quote above, I stewed about common expressions of gratitude that seem to fall short of the ideal. I recognized cynicism about insincere or cheap veneers of thanks. I want to push back on gratitude as social obligation—the shoulds and have-to's of polite company. Plus, the ideal can't be about thankfulness that seeks to get something from someone else, including the Divine. And I reject entirely the kind of gratitude that aims for moral or spiritual superiority: “Look at how mature/faithful/good I am!” Finally, I'm clear that it's not healthy (psychologically or spiritually) to slap a gratitude Band-Aid over real suffering, using it to avoid processing my fear, pain, or grief, or to gloss over someone else's fear, pain, or grief. I figure that's what people mean by “toxic positivity.”

## A Personal Gratitude Mistake

My summer bout of COVID resulted in sudden hearing loss, severe in one ear. It's not coming back, despite the benefits of modern medicine. For several weeks, I put on a brave front and pushed to be grateful for the many ways I've been well cared for. It's true that I am privileged with access to great medical care and that grace flowed in many kind interactions through that care. But I was also using gratitude to detour around real fear and grief: What will happen to me? Will I ever enjoy a group conversation again? How will I lead workshops and retreats?

Over many years, I've grown to trust that the companioning Presence of the Holy One is with me through the hard stuff. I'm remembering to recognize and tend what I've lost with my hearing. I am remembering how to lament. Somehow, I'd imagined that gratitude and painful emotions were mutually exclusive: I couldn't be grateful and in distress at the same time. It was all or nothing, all grateful or all angry, scared, or sad. Today I can declare with joy that hearing aid tech is miraculous!

## Gratitude and Lament

Being human is more complicated than the extremes; experiences and emotions are more muddled and overlapping. What if gratitude and grief complement each other? In our active resistance to Empire, I'm clear that lament is both healthy and necessary. But without gratitude, we may lose sight of the Life of the Spirit, always active around us, always seeding Goodness even in the worst situations. Then it's easy to spiral into cynicism or despair. Perhaps gratitude and lament make more of each other. Together they can invite a more spacious world view, out of the either-or, all or nothing boxes that we imagine represent Reality. My new approach is to hold it all in the Spirit together. Then gratitude gives me strength to move through the challenges step by step.

## An Ethic of Relationship

So defiant, gutsy gratitude is sturdier than common thankfulness. It's not about good feelings—or scolding ourselves to feel only good feelings. It's an ethic, a value we live out in relationship to our sense of self, others, communities, systems, and the natural world. This counter-cultural gratitude invites a radical, transformative experience of our own wholeness in connections. Everything we have and all that we are is truly because of others and our social context over which we have limited control. That's humbling and true.

A simple reflection on all we have received can bring the details into focus:

- Begin with who you are: Remember your own ancestors whose lives and DNA made you possible at

this moment in time. Recall the family, friends, and teachers who shaped your values and strengths. What have you learned about yourself from others, maybe even through challenging circumstances?

- Then widen the circle: Consider all you've received from the places you've lived. Appreciate anew the people who've tended the land, grew your food, created the infrastructure, maintained the water and power systems.

## **APPRECIATE ANEW THE PEOPLE WHO'VE TENDED THE LAND, GREW YOUR FOOD, AND CREATED THE INFRASTRUCTURE.**

- Remember what can be deeply satisfying about being alive in these times: central heating, laundry facilities, ease of travel, global communication, and advances in health care. Imagine the multitudes who contributed these gifts to your life.
- Give thanks as you are moved.

### **Subversive Resistance**

But how is gratitude like this defiant? Our society pressures us to be self-focused and self-made. The best of the Christian and Quaker heritage invites us into an alternative Reality. It's been called the beloved community, the commonwealth, reign, or kingdom of God, and a divine ecology. With that spiritual orientation, gratitude defies the Powers that Be. We can resist the poisonous influences of Empire—greed, hatred, and violence—by naming and honoring the Goodness that is already flowing to and from all our relationships.

Defiant gratitude is not the power of force or direct confrontation. It resists the status quo subversively in hidden but real ways within and between us. To borrow an ancient image, it fuels the yeast that infects the bread and changes everything. Gratitude is an ethic of the commonwealth of God, as Jesus taught. I appreciate that defiant gratitude doesn't lend itself to debate or depend on someone else's leadership. It can be ours to do, through all circumstances (not that we're thankful "for" all circumstances). Defiant gratitude can ignite

joy through our peaceful resistance to oppression. Now seems a great time to practice.

### **Group Gratitude Intervention**

Defiant gratitude can be especially potent in groups. During a retreat in 2018, a co-facilitator and I assigned participants to experiment in public gratefulness. We described it as a "gratitude intervention" to purposefully disrupt nearby business as usual. It was outrageous, courageous, and quite moving in the end. Small groups discerned their own where's and how's. One group did an actual "gratitude parade" in a nearby town, carrying signs and singing a ditty while visiting local businesses and offices together; two groups visited a nursing home next door, one with prayer and song for residents, another to express appreciation for the hardworking, underpaid staff with a generous cash donation. A final group did a town prayer walk. What might happen if our activism expressed more gratitude out loud together?

At the end of the retreat, participants drafted an "Epistle to Friends Everywhere." They closed with this encouragement to defiant gratitude:

"The challenge we have accepted, and extend to you, dear Reader, is to drink from the Living Water, attend to the Good Seed, and let the gratitude from those sources flow over into your relationships. We are called to, and enabled, not just to be grateful for good things in our past and present, but to redeem the times with hope and trust in the One who holds us all, to look at the present and even the future with the soft eyes of the faithful." ❀

Notes:

(1) Bass, Diana Butler. *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2018, 185.

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