

This past Tuesday, a storm barged through at noon and knocked out our power. We'd had several bad storms this summer but hadn't lost our electricity, so I had grown complacent, thinking Duke Energy had trimmed all the trees, but they'd apparently overlooked a maple tree in Fred Cline's backyard, and down it went, and the wires with it. I fired up the generator and plugged in the sump pump to keep our basement dry.

The power generally returns after an hour or two, so when it wasn't on after three hours I phoned Duke Energy and the computer voice told me the power wouldn't be restored until 3 AM, if we were lucky, but not to get our hopes up. I resigned myself to a long night, waking up every hour to fill the gas tank. **Then about 7 o'clock the lights flickered, the smoke alarm beeped hello, the microwave clock flashed 12:00, and we were back in business.** One of the finest pleasures in life is the return of electricity. It's like oxygen. You take it for granted, until you don't have it, then you want it more than anything, you want it desperately. Its return is so pleasant, and you are so profoundly grateful. You just want to call someone and say "thank you."

So I've been thinking about gratitude this week, and how gratitude is often a reflection of our spiritual condition.

Perhaps one way we can measure our spiritual well-being is by this little test: If it takes more and more to make us grateful, we have a problem.

When Joan's mother was in the hospital and a nurse came in and poked her with a needle, Ruby thanked her.

**The nurse said, "That's the first time someone ever thanked me for jabbing them with a needle."**

Ruby said, "Why wouldn't I thank you? You're trying to help me."

**Ruby was always grateful for the littlest things, which, once I discovered that, saved me a lot of money at Christmas.** The slightest kindness or blessing simply delighted her.

But think for a moment how often we require more and more to make us grateful and happy. **This is a problem, because when it takes more and more to make us grateful, we're less inclined to be happy, and our lives become this mad quest to be satisfied.**

What used to make you grateful?

What does it take to make you grateful now?

How far apart are the two?

Have you become harder to satisfy?

Why?

I was reading an essay written by Brother David Stendl-Rast, who is a Catholic monk, and writes a great deal on the topics of gratitude and gratefulness. **He said gratitude is the one common theme of all religion.** That all religions begin as an effort, among other things, to express gratitude for the blessings we experience in life. We have this need to say “thank you.”

But we forgot this, and before long, rather than religion being a response of gratitude, it became a laundry list of things to do and believe. **Your holiness or spirituality is measured by the time you spend praying, or your frequency of attendance at religious services, or your unquestioned obedience to sacred books or religious leaders, or your willingness to undergo suffering for your religion.** Religions have typically measured holiness in all those ways.

But what if the true measure of our holiness was our capacity for gratitude, our heart-felt and genuine gratefulness, whose consequence was a deepened awareness of God and a deepened appreciation for others.

Let’s use that as our standard: **True gratitude leaves us with a heightened awareness of God’s presence and a deepened appreciation for others.**

Gratitude helps us see where God is working, where God is present, and what God is doing. **Though ingratitude blinds us to God's presence, gratitude opens our eyes.** "Oh, yes. Isn't there great beauty in the world! Isn't that person loving and kind! Aren't we fortunate! Aren't we blessed!" Gratitude makes us keenly aware of what God is doing in our lives and where God is working.

Sometimes people ask me how they can become more spiritual. **Many of us long for that, we want to feel more deeply connected to God, long for a sense of oneness with God.** But I don't always know how to answer that, because I've always believed the answer was different for each person. I still believe that. **But I have noticed that spiritual people share this one thing in common—they have, without exception, cultivated the practice of gratitude.** Their whole life is a thank-you, and this gives them a heightened awareness of God's presence and a deepened appreciation for others.

I was at a nursing home in Avon not long ago, visiting my friend Elsie. Walking down the hall toward her room, looking in the rooms as I went past, seeing elderly people lying on their beds, many of them unaware. It was rather depressing, and I wondered to myself how anyone could stand to live under those circumstances.

I reached Elsie's room and she was lying in a wheeled recliner. She's in the advanced stages of Parkinson's Disease and has lost almost all her mobility. Her limbs are now rigid. But she can still smile, so that's what she does. She smiles, and she thanks people. It's a curious thing. **Often when people are like that, our tendency is to shy away from them, but the nursing home workers fight over who gets to care for Elsie.** They all want to be with her. It's like there's this little Jesus trapped inside her body, and people come to see her hoping it will rub off on them. She's grateful and peaceful and filled with love.

Her husband comes to sit with her every day. He's the same way. So grateful for his family and his friends and any gesture of kindness.

I don't know. You put me in that situation, I don't know that I could do it. **I don't know how I could keep from being resentful and bitter and wanting to die.** But I never see that in Elsie. I just see gratitude and peace of mind and a quiet, steady contentment.

My favorite people are the folks who have every right to complain about what life has dealt them, but don't. I don't know how they do it, but I want to be like them.

One time, the Apostle Paul was writing to some folks who were struggling with their faith, and he said, “Never repay evil for evil. Instead, always look for any good you can do. Always be ready to rejoice, always have a spirit of prayer, and no matter what happens, in every circumstance, find something for which to be grateful.” (My own paraphrase of 1 Thessalonians 5:15-16.)

Find something for which to be grateful.

What are you grateful for today?