Counting Blessings

ROOTED IN GRATITUDE, TALK TWO · REV. BLAINE TINSLEY · UNITY ON MAUI

WHAT IF EVERYTHING IS GOING RIGHT?

Last week we asked a bold question. Our brains are wired to scan for trouble, but we can retrain them to notice the good that is already here. This week we take the next step. Once we start noticing our blessings, a new question appears: *who* is behind that good?

WE END UP COUNTING PEOPLE

Name three blessings in your life. Most of us find that at least one, and often all three, came through another person. Even a sunrise over Haleakalā, pure grace from God, makes us want to turn to someone and say, "Look!" **When we really count our blessings, we end up counting people, and we end up on someone else's list, too.** Our good comes to us through others, and their good comes, at least in part, through us.

AFFIRMATION

God's good flows to me through others and through me to others.

EVERY BLESSING HAS A FACE

Writer A. J. Jacobs set out to personally thank everyone who made his morning coffee possible: the barista, roaster, truck driver, warehouse worker, farmer, and the person who designed the lid. He thanked about a thousand people and wrote about it in his book *Thanks a Thousand*. Here on Maui, nearly everything we eat crossed an ocean in someone's care.

A CLOUD IN A SHEET OF PAPER

Thich Nhat Hanh would hold up a sheet of paper and say that if you look deeply, you can see a cloud in it. No cloud, no rain; no rain, no tree; no tree, no paper. The logger is in it too, and the bread the logger ate. He called this *interbeing*: nothing exists on its own. Ubuntu says it this way: "I am because we are."

ONLY ONE PRESENCE AND ONE POWER

Unity affirms one Presence and one Power, God, the Source of all our good. Yet that good rarely arrives by lightning bolt. It comes through people: a teacher, a parent, a friend, a kind stranger. Counting blessings honestly means honoring the Source **and** the channels.

GRATITUDE HAS TWO PARTS

Psychologist Robert Emmons describes gratitude in two steps. **First,** recognize that something good has happened. **Second,** notice that someone or something beyond you helped make it happen. You can feel satisfied all by yourself, but you cannot feel grateful all by yourself. *Gratitude always has an address.* Sometimes that address is a person. Sometimes it is God. But it is never only ourselves.

FIND, REMIND, AND BIND

Researcher Sara Algoe suggests gratitude exists for a reason: it helps us **find** good people, **reminds** us of the good people we already have, and **binds** us more closely to them. Gratitude does not just feel good. It weaves us together.

MY STORY: MR. PEABODY

When I was twelve, my dad died, and I was sent to Southern California Military Academy for seventh through ninth grades. I was lost. The P.E. teacher, Mr. Peabody, encouraged me to join the basketball team, even though my real talent was keeping the bench warm. Being on that team made me feel part of something. For a boy who had just lost his father, belonging to something was everything. Mr. Peabody didn't give me fame or a championship. He gave me a place to belong, and I doubt he ever knew how much that meant. I never thanked him. I wish I had. *Who is your Mr. Peabody, the person who made room for you when you were lost?*

The One Who Turned Back

In Luke 17, ten people with leprosy ask Jesus for mercy, and all ten are healed. Only one turns back to give thanks. Jesus asks, "Where are the nine?" The nine were surely grateful; they just never went back. Most of our gratitude is like that: felt but never delivered. With Mr. Peabody, I was one of the nine.

The Gratitude Visit

Psychologist Martin Seligman tested several happiness practices. The strongest was the gratitude visit: write a letter to someone who changed your life, then read it to them in person. Its boost faded after a few months: gratitude is a practice, not a one-time fix.

The Thank-You You've Been Hesitating to Send

Researchers Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley found that letter writers expected recipients to feel awkward. Instead, recipients were far more surprised and moved than writers imagined. **The thank-you you've been hesitating to send matters more than you think.**

Gratitude Keeps the Goodness Moving

Adam Grant and Francesca Gino found that a sincere thank-you roughly doubled people's willingness to help again. **Gratitude doesn't just honor the giver. It keeps the goodness moving.**

I Am Blessed, and I Am a Blessing

God promised Abraham, "I will bless you… and you shall be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2). The blessing was never meant to stop with him. It was meant to flow through him, and through us.

THANKS, First, Then Circulation

Charles Fillmore taught that **praise and thanksgiving have a multiplying power.** With five loaves and two fish, Jesus first gave thanks; then the bread passed from hand to hand until thousands were fed. Thanks first, then circulation: that is how blessing works. Robin Wall Kimmerer, in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, shares the Indigenous teaching that a gift begins a relationship and carries a responsibility to pass the good along.

You Are on Someone's List

Right now, someone counts you among their blessings: a child you encouraged, a friend you sat with, a neighbor you checked on after a storm. You may never find out. But you are someone's answered prayer. You may be someone's Mr. Peabody.

Your Influence Travels Farther Than You Can See

Researchers Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler found that happiness and kindness spread through social networks, sometimes three people away. People you will never meet may be better off because of you. Being a blessing is rarely grand: a returned call, a meal, a patient ear, a specific thank-you.

This Week's Challenge: Be the One Who Turns Back

Bring to mind one person who changed your life for the better. Write them a letter. Tell them specifically what they did and how it changed you. Then read it to them, in person or by phone. If they have passed on, write it anyway and read it aloud. Gratitude is never wasted.

"Thank You" Is Enough

Meister Eckhart is often credited with saying, "If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is 'thank you,' it will be enough." Gratitude needs no eloquence, only sincerity.

A Blessing

May you see the faces behind your blessings, and may your heart overflow with thanks for each one.
May the good that came to you through others flow freely through you to the world.
May you speak your gratitude out loud, and may you know, deep in your soul,
that you are on someone's list of blessings, too.
You are blessed, and you are a blessing. And so, it is.