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Arlington Street Church
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Wanting What We Need - Getting Gratitude Right

Our next door neighbors, Sally and Tim, are expecting twins. Sally is so gigantic, she proceeds herself entering a room by whole seconds. It's been really fun to have a ringside seat on this pregnancy, except for one scare when it was learned that the babies share a blood supply – they are actually one organism! – and one is sharing better than the other. But everything is within normal range, and the excitement has been building toward their Valentine's Day arrival.

On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, Sally went in for a routine check-up. All of a sudden, nothing was routine. Her blood pressure had spiked: a condition called preeclampsia, and a dangerous situation for both her and the babies. She was rushed to Beth Israel and put on complete bed rest until the birth. Best case scenario: she is flat on her back for the next two and a half months.

So Tim and Sally and their 3-year-old son, Charlie, ate Thanksgiving dinner in bed, and their little family has set up household in the hospital room. You start a day like any other, and end up with your life on the line, your unborn children at risk, and miles from home for an undetermined period of time.

But Sally and Tim are counting their blessings: family and community and the best hospital in the world to support them through to the other side. And Sally's getting plenty of rest before she has three little guys to chase after. It's not what they would have chosen, but it's what they got. They're grateful, and they've got it right.

Welcome to the season of dreams and hopes and expectations, whose underside is disillusion, disappointment, and not getting what we want. *Fear not!* There is a spiritual remedy that will make this time shine. Just this: the spiritual practice is to want what we really need, and getting gratitude right.

Author Riva Pomerantz begins her day with a prayer, which she writes in her journal. On a recent morning, she prayed, “Please, God, give me the gift of

productivity today. I want to feel like my workload is lifting....” And, she added – perhaps reflexively, perhaps as an afterthought – “Thank you, God, for my job, for my family, for health, and for life itself.”

Hours later, her energetic, boisterous 14-month-old son was playing, happily, when, suddenly, his eyes rolled back in his head, his body convulsed and then went limp, and his lips turned blue. In the ambulance, the paramedics put a cold, wet towel on his chest; he was burning up, and barely conscious, his breathing shallow and faint. His mother fought off her panic and crushing fear with prayer. “God, we are in your ... hands. Please, in Your mercy, make ... [my] child well again.”

All she had wanted was to get out from under the burden of too much work. And in a catastrophic instant, all she wanted was for her child to live.

Riva's son had suffered a febrile seizure, in response to a sudden spike in temperature: terrifying, but benign. He would be fine. As he came around, he screamed, lustily. His father said, “His crying is music....”

The next day, Riva Pomerantz reread her prayer. She saw the folly of asking, first, for her workload to be lifted. The real prayer – the deepest, truest prayer – was that of gratitude: Thank you for life, health, family, job.¹

The spiritual practice is to want what we really need, and getting gratitude right.

One of my favorite quotes from this past month came from Rahm Emanuel, President-elect Barack Obama's chief of staff. He said, “Never waste a crisis.”² In *Arab News*, billed as “The Middle East's Leading English Language Newspaper,” journalist Gwynne Dyer editorialized, “... Obama inherits the in-box from hell, but an all-points crisis like the present one also creates opportunities for radical change that do not exist in more normal times.”³ What an extraordinary way to engage life on life's terms: no “would have, could have, should have;” just the big YES: YES to life, all of life, scary, messy, broken, and heartbreaking. Never *waste* a crisis; don't waste a moment. It's all grist for the mill, compost for the garden, joy to the world.

1 Riva Pomerantz, *Emergency Room*, aish.com

2 *New York Times*

3 Thursday, November 20th, 2008/22 Dhul Qa'dah 1429.

see arabnews.com/page=7§ion=0&article=116514&d=20&m=11&y=2008

An old Zen monk found a raw diamond, nearly a foot in diameter. It was a good size for a footrest, so he took it back to his cave.

Word spread throughout town that the world's largest diamond, a jewel of inestimable worth, rested unguarded in the old man's cave. One man thought, If I could get that diamond away from the old monk, I would have treasure beyond my wildest dreams!

So he went to the cave to visit, trying to think of a way to trick the monk out of the diamond. The old monk saw the man staring at his footstool. "Do you like this diamond?" the old monk asked. "Oh, yes," replied the man, "I like it very much."

"Then please, take it, as a gift," said the monk. "I can always find another footrest."

Overjoyed, the man ran down the mountain with the diamond, and stayed awake that night, guarding the jewel and thinking of all the things he could do with his newfound wealth. But the next morning, something began troubling him. It troubled him all that day, and, after spending a second sleepless night, this time because of his troubling feeling, he arose early on the the third morning and carried the huge diamond back up the mountain to the old monk's cave.

"I have taken the wrong gift," he said, greeting the old monk and setting the footrest back in its place. "I would have you teach me, instead, how you could let go of this so easily."⁴

The spiritual practice is to want what we really need, and getting gratitude right.

Here's one more story. Years ago, my friend Jim, a grateful member of Alcoholics Anonymous, had been very generous with the church. He wasn't a member of Arlington Street, but he really, really loved what we do here, and wanted to support it.

Despite the fact that giving is its own reward, I really didn't feel he was getting his money's worth, and I encouraged him to come to a service. He didn't come and didn't come, to the point that I stopped talking about it, and then, one beautiful day, I saw him walk in. I was so happy to see him, and so excited for him to experience our service.

⁴ as told by Rev. Davidson Loehr, First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin *In a Restaurant, Choose a Table Near a Waiter*, 2/6/02

He'd come with a friend I didn't know.

Just as the service was about to begin, an unkempt and extremely intoxicated man came staggering in. He pitched down the center aisle like a listing ship, and plopped himself down ... where else, but next to Jim's guest. I was glad this newcomer was here, but really miserable about his choice of where to sit. Not exactly the company you'd choose for your benefactor. It felt like very bad luck.

About halfway through the service, the gentleman pulled himself to his feet and wove his way back down the aisle and out. As I drove home, turning onto Storrow Drive, I dialed Jim to apologize. I wasn't relishing the call. Jim picked up and said, "Did you arrange that just for me?" This was going to be worse than I thought. But I never got "I'm sorry" in edgewise. "Kim," he said, "that kid with me? That's Len.⁵ I met him at an AA meeting last night, and he asked me to help him. When we got to church this morning, he'd been sober less than 24 hours. So I sit down and he sits down and that drunk sits down, and I see Len looking to his right, and looking to his left, like, really looking, a lot. And then he's quiet for maybe five minutes. Then he turns to me and says, "Jim, I'm sitting between my two choices. I swear to you now, right here in church: my past is on my right, and my future is on my left."

"Thanks, Kim! I couldn't have arranged that in my wildest dreams. Really, thanks. This is, like, payback on steroids."

I pulled the car off the road, and just sat there for a while. I apologized to whom it may concern for my short-sightedness. I gave thanks for arranging for the drunken man, who was probably Elijah, or an angel, after all. The spiritual practice is to want what we really need, and getting gratitude right.

My spiritual companions, in this season of dreams and hopes and expectations, which can so easily and so quickly devolve into disillusion, disappointment, and not getting what we want, may we seek to want what we need, and to give thanks. Never waste a crisis. And *Fear not!* With a spiritual practice of gratitude, and a spiritual community with a heart of love, the holidays will be holy days, and there will be peace.

⁵ not his real name (which is distinctive!)

