

Growing Gratitude from the Weeds

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"The gate I want to open now is the one that leads into
The flower-bed of my mind, thank you, yes."

* Mary Oliver



We can easily think of gratitude as a feeling that comes from beauty... autumn in all its colors, a sunset, a flower garden in full bloom, a loving exchange, a delicious meal, watching our children do well, and so on. It is not so easy, however, to find gratitude in the hard, painful stuff of life, in the weeds of our personal gardens. How do we transform the pain in ourselves, in our relationships with others and in the world? How do our feelings from frustration and anger, with mental, emotional, and even physical suffering, change to gratitude, compassion and healing?

During the Fall, those of us who have flower or vegetable gardens have laid them to rest for the winter. Our inner gardens, however, need to have the soil tilled all year round. Gardens and people need sunlight, water, fertile soil, and loving attention to grow. If we see the light as understanding, the water as loving attention, and the fertile soil as our everyday experiences-both pleasant and difficult ones- we will have a good base to observe our confused and messy lives. We will begin to cultivate a new garden that prospers, along with the weeds.

"Our inner gardens... need to have the soil tilled all year round."

If we see the painful stuff as "nutrient rich fertilizer" for our lives, we must find an honest, healthy way of living with it. In the deep exploration of our experiences, our "fertilizer," our everyday confused feelings and thoughts, are brought into the light. This light is called awareness. It is with awareness that the richest fertilizer becomes the fullest gratitude.....the living expression of our personal garden.

Let's look at some painful stuff. What happens when we don't get what we want? Do we wish the people in our life understood us better? Would we like our boss to have congratulated us for a job well done? Do we want our partner to bring home a surprise meal because we think (s)he should know that we are tired of cooking? Will the kids EVER stop dumping their dishes by the sink for us to wash? Do we want our partner to stop working earlier and come home to be with us, so we feel chosen?

When people in our lives don't do what we want, blaming, hurtful and angry thoughts may be experienced, causing us pain. At times, we ALL have impatient and/or unkind thoughts/feelings. It's what we do with these thoughts that show us exactly where we need to grow in our understanding.

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Pain leads us to be curious about our situation. Some valuable, non-judgmental questions we may ask are, "What happens when these upsetting (blaming, angry, etc.) thoughts go unchecked? How am I feeding them?"

Do I want to continue to live in pain? What can I do? Can we see that this painful situation is fed by these pain-producing thoughts?

When we are living in the pain, we are confused. Confusion arises from the unexplored ingredients of our garden's compost pile... the stuff that's been sitting and cooking, never examined in the full light of day. Pain and confusion act as a filter, and prevents us from seeing that it's time to turn the compost pile and reveal the inner workings. Confusion prevents feelings of gratitude and joy, often creating chaos and more pain.

This fermenting pile of pain-producing thoughts has accumulated from a lifetime of unconscious decisions we have made about our world. As babies, children, younger and older men and women- whenever we have interacted with other people, we have built beliefs about ourselves and our world, from the love and/or lack of love we experienced. This is what has happened as we have innocently absorbed what life has brought our way.

We can consciously turn our attention to these beliefs, and find out if they are true for us now. It is hard work and it is worthwhile. We discover something when turning our curiosity inward. Spontaneously, we begin to experience more clarity, more honesty and joy seeping into our life.

This work of turning the compost pile, noticing the weeds and the flowers, and tasting the fruit requires awareness, patience, honesty and compassion. It can be sweaty and exhausting and bountiful as well. It opens us up to gratitude. Gardening is like that. May we all realize our own potential harvest.

Simply being present, patient, and honest with every aspect of our experience... A part of it all, thank you, yes.

*The Return, pgs. 9-10, What Do We Know, Mary Oliver, 2002, Da Capo Press, Cambridge, Ma.

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