

## RADICAL GRATITUDE

John Killinger once told of the day he and his wife got up at 5:00 a.m. to set out on a daylong drive of over 700 miles.

They had had a great visit with family and were not looking forward to the long trip home. But that morning as they traveled, they beheld three signs or wonders that lifted their hearts.

First, a few hours into their trip, they saw an enormous rainbow in the gray clouds from a heavy rain the night before.

A little later, they we passed under a large flock of geese winging their way southward, on who knows what important mission.

They flapped and honked and celebrated the day in their inimitable way, and the Killingers felt a big tug at their hearts, as they beheld these soaring geese.

Later still, they came upon a long, thick growth of wildflowers that turned the grassy highway median into a glorious patchwork quilt.

They didn't know whether these had grown up spontaneously or some thoughtful highway worker had scattered the seed there. But either way, the flowers were wonderful.

All the way home, they had traveled under the unbidden blessing of those signs," says Killinger. He then reflects upon Jesus' words to the disciples:

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these".

There they were, those very human disciples of his, some of them anxious, some greedy, some over ambitious, some discouraged...

and he stooped and [touched] a wildflower from the grass,. Turning it admiringly between his thumb and his fingers, he said,

"Look at this! Do you know who made this? That's right: God did . And what a fragile, lustrous thing it is!

Notice how the light shines through it, illuminating its delicate veins. Did you ever see anything more beautiful?

Why, even King Solomon, with all his passion for gold and linen, never had a robe as dazzling as this. So why are you worried about your lives? Didn't God make you? Won't God look after you?"

"Consider the lilies." The Greek verb is more colourful than that.

It means to study diligently or to observe closely - to pay careful attention to something.

We don't do it enough, do we?

We miss a thousand wonders a day, too busy to notice them.

Our attention is riveted to other things.

We are so over-stimulated that we have lost the gift of thoughtfulness and observance.

A group of university students were discussing what it is like to be a young person today.

They talked of many things - their work, their fears, their ambitions.

When asked: "What does it take to get your attention?" one young man was very direct:

"Bright and loud," he said.

"It's the kind of world we live in, and in that kind of world, that's what it takes."

Bright and loud. That rules out a lot of things, doesn't it?

You wouldn't notice the different songs of the birds, or the patterns on the bark of various trees,  
or the tiny stars that may in actuality be many times the size of our sun.

You'd probably never see the delicacy of an animal's fur or the eagerness in a child's eyes  
or the lines in an old person's face.

In fact, you'd be missing most of the treasures that have always caught the attention  
of artists and photographers and poets and mystics and musicians.

And wouldn't notice some of the finest qualities evident in human lives – quiet forbearance and trust,  
compassion and generosity, forgiveness and integrity.

Is our culture today breeding people who have no eye for the wild flowers of the field,  
who no longer make the connection between all of these delights and the God who fashioned the world?

Wouldn't it be a pity to live in a world of rainbows and geese and wildflowers  
and never see them, never have our hearts lifted,  
never make the connection between them and a transcendent Presence in the midst of it all.

This Thanksgiving Weekend, what are the things you have considered and pondered  
for which you want to give to God the Giver?

Mary Jo Leddy will be a presenter at Epiphany Explorations.

In her book *Radical Gratitude*, she explores why people in some poorer countries  
often seem happier and more content than their counterparts in financially wealthier nations.

In North America, for instance, advertisers perpetuate the myth that, no matter what we have now, it is never enough.  
We are programmed to want more, better, or different.

The billionaire Howard Hughes was once asked how much money it would take to make him happy.  
He reportedly replied, "Just a little more."

Such consumerism encourages a state of constant craving and dissatisfaction.

Mary Jo believes that this inner dissatisfaction expands until it eventually "implodes"  
in a profound dissatisfaction with oneself.

It's not just that "I have not got enough" but "I myself am not enough." She says:

"If only people could experience a radical astonishment at the daily miracle of being alive."

She calls this the habit of "radical gratitude."

Here she means more than just counting one's blessings,  
but a foundational gratitude that wells up when we become conscious of the gift of life itself.

Such radical gratitude promotes a sense of appreciation and personal contentment  
both with what we have and who we are.

And it empowers us to move out beyond ourselves and make a difference in the world.

Mary Jo recalls a time when her University of Toronto theological college had invited Joy Kogawa, the Japanese Canadian author to speak about 'Prayer and Poetry' at a special lecture.

Joy began her lecture by saying, ' I really have nothing to say about prayer and poetry.'

Mary Jo began to worry about who disappointed the audience would be.

'But let me tell you about what really interests me these days,' Joy continued.

" 'I really want to support an aboriginal earth festival because I think we Japanese Canadians are now in a position to help other groups.

However, I'm not very good at fundraising

so I decided to go to the bank and take out some money.

I'm going to give each of you ten dollars and I want you to go and give ten dollars to another person and ask them to buy a ticket and give ten dollars to another person.'

"Joy walked down the main aisle of the lecture theatre and began to hand out ten dollar bills to the people sitting in the audience. Then she left.

People sat in silence as they looked at the money she had given them.

Slowly, they too left the hall.

"The next day Mary Jo went into the college and someone said excitedly 'Did you hear about the woman who handed out one hundred dollar bills?'

By the end of the day, the word was going around about the woman who had handed out thousands of dollars.

By the end of the week, the story had grown to epic proportions — about the lady who had handed out a million dollars.

"Needless to say, the Earth Festival was well attended and well funded — even without the help of a professional fund-raiser!"

Grateful people find creative ways to express that gratitude and make a difference in the world. They have learned to consider the wild flowers and countless other gifts that have blessed their lives.

And their gratitude keeps them grounded.

It promotes a sense of serenity and contentment.

And it empowers them to contribute to the betterment of others.

And those who are grateful for blessings in times past also are mindful of the future.

Only a society that has lost a sense of the future, says Mary Jo, will lay waste the environment and leave it as a garbage heap for future generations.

Only such a society will risk a global holocaust in order to preserve its present way of life.

There is a dangerous myopia in mortgaging the future through spending policies in which the benefit to a few now will be paid for by many in the years to come.

Do you recall Viktor Frankl's book, Man's Search for Meaning.

Frankl was the psychotherapist who was imprisoned by the Nazis and his book tells of that experience.

At one point, he tells about the wintry afternoon in one of the camps

when the men had tramped several miles in the cold rain, returning from their work site.

They were lying exhausted in their barracks, when suddenly one of the men burst into the barracks and shouted for the others to come outside.

Reluctantly, but sensing the urgency in the man's voice, they got up and staggered into the courtyard. The rain had stopped, and an awesome halo of sunlight was breaking through the dark, leaden clouds.

"We stood there," said Frankl, "marvelling at the goodness of the creation. We were tired and cold and sick, we were starving to death, we had lost our loved ones and never expected to see them again, yet there we stood, feeling a sense of reverence as old and formidable as the world itself!"

"Consider the wild flowers." Observe closely the wonders of this life. And let gratitude be at the core of your being.