Collected Works on Religious Life
Gratitude: the quality or feeling of being grateful or thankful

Secluded behind the myriad obligations of life in the Davidson College community, we may often lose sight of the many blessings we have been given.

It is no secret that Davidson College students work hard. In fact, many of us get so caught up in the day-to-day living and working that we lose sight of the many small blessings that we receive each day. It’s so easy to focus on the clouds that we forget about the glorious sun waiting within – and without. For that reason, it’s good to have people around to remind us of all the gifts in our lives. This year’s Availing is one such reminder. Here we reflect upon the many blessings, both small and large, that are showered upon us and manifested in different forms.

We extend our own gratitude to those who have made this publication possible, for its contributors and advisors, and for those who brighten each day with smiles, kind words and selfless acts.

Peace,

Erin Price ’07
Gretchen Hoffman ’09
Marie-Andrea, Living Scripture
Carolyn Klaasen ’09

Aware
Claire Asbury ’10

Tree of Life
Emily Presley ’07

More than a Meal
Clinton Smith ’10

What I cannot say with words
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James Wells ’07

A New Gratitude
Michelle Meglin ’07

Gratitude to God is at the heart of Islam
Fareed Cheema ’10

Garbage Man
Ellen Thomas ’10

Technicolor Prayer
David Orsbon ’09
After we’d introduced ourselves and put down our things on the dirt floor, Michelle, Katie Rae and I had an awkward moment in our homestay in the small, dusty town of San José de Masatepe, Nicaragua. Michelle and I couldn’t speak any Spanish, and Marie-Andrea, our host mother, spoke no English. We all sat down, with the three Americans lined up facing her, and looked at each other. Through Katie Rae, we asked some simple introductory questions, the kind you learn in Spanish I. We’d already met Marie-Andrea’s daughters. Miladi, who is six, was playing on the hammock while we talked. Her two-year old sister, Angelica, was sitting in Michelle’s lap. Angelica had decided as soon as we walked in that she wanted Michelle to hold her. For the rest of our stay, Angelica was our buddy. She giggled and grinned at us, and we picked her up and carried her around. Miladi also warmed up to us, and she would chase Katie Rae around the yard with her friends.

But now we learned that Marie-Andrea has a son, too. He was eleven, she said, and with his father. I assumed she meant elsewhere in the village, or maybe at work. As our team from Davidson had driven into this rural community, we’d seen many boys playing sports and men walking along the dusty road. But no, they were ten kilometers away, where her husband lives. She is separated from
him, and although he wants her to move back in with him, she says she won’t. She suffered with him, she explained, and she won’t live with him again unless he changes. Her trust, she said, is in God now.

With tears in her eyes, Marie-Andrea told us about her life. At fifteen, she was married and had a child. She herself, she said, was still a child. Too young. She wasn’t ready for this. Her husband was twenty, and the marriage wasn’t a good one. She suffered. She couldn’t even go to church because he didn’t want her to. But that, she explained, was just how life was in places like San José de Masatepe. Women have no options or opportunities, so they marry and have children while still young.

Now she knows better, and she wants life to be different for her daughters. The pastor of her church is a woman, and I think she helped Marie-Andrea defy her husband. Against his wishes, they are separated, he pays child support, and she attends church again. The church offered a sewing class, to teach women in the community how to make clothing for their families and to sell for income. She wanted to take it, but her husband had said no. The men, she told us, don’t want women to be independent. But they need to be, because of what poverty has done to their men. Unable to provide for their families, many men try to prove themselves by having affairs and exerting power over the women. Her husband stopped giving her money, because he didn’t want her to take the class and be able to make her own money. But she managed anyway.

This woman is strong, despite all that she has suffered. She has found her strength through the church — not just in the pastor, who suffers because the women of her congregation suffer — but in God. After dinner she began asking us questions. When she discovered that I take classes on the Bible, she questioned me more about what I studied. Esther? Deborah? Ruth? Hagar? She was very interested in women in the Bible, and we talked about their stories. “She suffered,” Marie-Andrea said about each woman. She suffered, and God heard her. She was strong. Hagar, Miriam, Ruth, Esther, Deborah, Hannah — she talked about all of them like this. I told her that she understood these women well. She said that their stories were like those of the Nicaraguan women. Like Hagar, whose husband had another wife. Nicaraguan women also experience the pain of a husband who has other women: husbands who, like Abraham,
make their wives suffer. God heard Hagar. That is what gives Marie-Andrea hope. Even though God sent Hagar back to Abraham and Sarah, back to more suffering, God heard Hagar.

The Bible is not just for the past, but is alive in us today. This woman, Marie-Andrea, is living scripture. She understands God in a way that links her with Hagar, Miriam, Ruth, Esther, Deborah and Hannah. She is them those women. She suffers, and God hears her. Because God hears her, she is strong, even though her suffering is not over. This is how I found Christ in Nicaragua.
When I was fifteen years old, I read a novel about a mouse that solved mysteries (Don’t ask.). Though I’ve forgotten basically everything about the book, I recall one thing: every night before this mouse went to bed, he listed everything for which he was thankful.

That stuck with me, and one summer I began making bullet-ed lists of things, people and experiences that enriched my life on a particular day or every day. I have done it sporadically for the past four years, and have started doing it again since coming to Davidson last fall.

Writing down what I am thankful for makes me realize how much good I have in my life. No matter how frustrating a day has been, I am always able to feel grateful for some part of it because of this exercise. I write down the shallow and the serious, as well as the normal, everyday happenings. It makes me more aware of all that God has given me. Doing this each night has not only made me more conscious of the many good things in my life, but it also makes me more thankful for them because I think about each of them and what they do to make my day significant.

I enjoy looking back on these entries after years, months or only days have passed—it reminds me of the past and continuing joys with which I have been blessed. I write random things like:
“Ireland, Commons breakfasts, ‘He’s a freshman! (clap, clap, clap, clap, clap!)’, empty washers and dryers, NPR, singing good harmony, my Birkenstocks, Maeve Binchy books, hymns!, lovely NC, water, the Wildcat Den and all it implies, The Braves, Methodist Fellowship, sleep, spring…” I scribble the names of each person that touches me, everyone I am thankful to have in my life. It doesn’t matter who, or what they did. Family, best friends, almost-siblings, mere acquaintances… They matter.

Tomorrow is Palm Sunday, and at my home church four hours away, the little children will lead the congregation in the well-known Psalm: “This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!”

It’s hard to remember that at certain times, but this practice helps remind me everyday.
The tree of life stands before me. Craggily gray-brown bark emerges through the sandy earth at the center of the stone-lined labyrinth. Thin crooked branches etch into space, casting shadows on the path which winds around the tree in a contemplative maze. Sturdy yet unassuming, this tree’s sapling size betrays the wisdom of experience embodied in its ancient bark. I set out on the winding path with intention, to praise on my way to the center, and to pray on my way back out: praise for the few miraculous days on retreat at the convent, prayer for ways to actualize my learnings in daily life.


With each measured breath and step, a continuous flow of thoughts—a constant effort to let them stream through my mind with the rosy tint of thankfulness.

I reach the center, sharing space with the tree. My hands graze the ancient bark with the tender touch of a lover, then grip it as an infant grasps onto the finger of her parent. A subtle buzz emerges to my attention—is this Something? a Divine Energy? With a seed of faith in the truth of this possibility, the energy grows
in strength, unmistakably supernatural and utterly blissful. My head falls back, my gaze lifts, the insides of my limbs tingle and my chest draws back in awe, absorbing the thousands of pilgrim prayers of those who have before journeyed these sandy paths. I have received an unimaginable answer to my deepest prayers.

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I journeyed to the convent hoping for answers to theological questions. In a world that seems to be spiraling into ultimate destruction, is God really saving us? How? And what am I supposed to do about it? This complex question on the surface was, in truth, a simple plea for hope. If I could know in my mind what God’s purpose for the world was, I could have hope when my heart despaired. Instead of receiving understanding, hope came in the form of awe with the gift of God’s presence.

“What does it mean to be human?” Sister Rosina had asked me the day before. I answered with uncertainty, “I suppose it is to be finite, and yet also to be a vessel of God’s spirit.” She nodded to my definition before responding, “I would also add that human beings are capable of awe for their Creator, and thankfulness.” Her words exposed a chronic blindness of mine, lodging themselves into a hidden hole in my being. Thankfulness. To be thankful means to recognize that I have received a gift. Caught up in the challenge to follow the prophet from Nazareth, I often forget that it is the gifts of God that enable me to live in the first place: Life. Love. Creation. These are wildly passionate, miraculous gifts that are lavished continually upon me. The gift of God’s pulsating spirit flowed through me as my fingers wrapped around that sacred tree. There is Hope in times of despair.

Today as I drink the sweet fragrances of the blooming trees, I remember the small tree of life that gifted me with great hope. I remember the Presence that overwhelms all of Creation. Thanks be to God!
There are few things in life more satisfying than smelling the aroma of a great meal gracefully flowing from the kitchen on Christmas day. The sensation it sends down your spine as the scent gently rolls in and out of your nostrils is ineffable. To combine that with the comfort and security you feel when surrounded by family and friends would obviously make for a brilliant combination. Furthermore, say you were to add the fact that you have not been with your closest family members for nearly four months. When all of these scenarios and emotions coalesce it is difficult to express the euphoria one might feel if the situation actually were to play itself out. Welcome to how I felt on December 25, 2005 — the first Christmas after Hurricane Katrina.

Nearly my entire family is from New Orleans, Louisiana. Thus, we were all affected by the disaster that was Hurricane Katrina. When we evacuated the city, all of us were scattered into different cities around the entire United States. Although many of these people were extended family by definition, these are people that I saw day in and day out for the last seventeen years of my life, so they felt as close as any immediate family could ever feel. Christmas provided us with the opportunity to see one another again
after what had been the longest four months of our lives. About thirty-five of us decided to meet for Christmas at my aunt and uncle’s home in Houston, Texas, where the majority of my family had evacuated.

My father, grandfather, a few of my uncles and I sat down together for one of our Christmas traditions, watching the annual NBA Christmas game. This year we all sat waiting to see whether or not Shaq could lead the Miami Heat past Kobe Bryant’s Los Angeles Lakers. “Selfish ball-hog” my grandfather would scoff every time the television cameras showed the player as he warmed up for the game. “If I was coachin’, I would sit ’im down on the bench until he learns how to pass the ball,” he grumbled. My dad simply chuckled and continued watching the game. Usually when my grandfather made such assertions I took it upon myself to argue the opposing side. In this case that would mean explaining how Kobe Bryant was undoubtedly the most talented player in the entire NBA. But not this time. As I played with and picked at the foam protruding from the our “new” FEMA sofa, I became more concerned with what that cinnamon smell was coming from the kitchen than what ridiculous comments my grandfather was making. Besides, I was too happy to be in his presence after so long than to worry about what he was saying. I missed his thick, black eyebrows and bald scalp. I missed the smell of his hickory pipe, which had buried itself into his favorite gray and blue plaid shirt that he seemingly wore every other day regardless of the weather. Most of all I missed the sound of his raspy, yet gentle voice grumbling about the ills of today’s society.

After all my family and I had been through the last couple of months, my grandmother decided that it would be a good idea if all of the children each picked one dish that would be served at Christmas dinner. There were about nine of us in all and we all had extremely different ideas of what a good meal was. The dishes ranged from a scintillating, glazed honey-baked ham, to peanut butter covered fruit-loops. No dish request was rejected. I requested only the best food ever to exist: dirty rice. The sensation that ground meat, rice, herbs, garlic, salt, pepper, bread crumbs, and onions give the tongue when they are all united is simply succulent. The scent that arose when fried turkey and cinnamon baked oranges were
made in the same room was needless to say an interesting one.

After the game finished, I could feel my stomach growling like a famished hyena. Much to my contentment my grandmother gently leaned her head outside of the doorway to the kitchen; while wiping her powdery white hands on her apron, she gave the nod that dinner was ready to be served.

My uncles and cousins came inside from playing with my uncle’s two German Shepherds. The huge sweat patches under my uncle’s arms looked as if someone had just put two wet sponges underneath his armpits and told him to squeeze as hard as he could.

Many of the women came into the dining area from the living room where they had been discussing their new homes, jobs, schools, and lives with one another for the last three hours. As they poured into the dining room, so did a tsunami of bad perfume and
overdone hair.

As all of us sat down at what had to be the largest table I have ever seen, we became awestruck when we saw what was before us. The plethora of colors and smells sent our senses into overdrive: red beans and rice, fried turkey, glazed honey baked ham, macaroni and cheese, gumbo, jambalaya, French bread, crawfish étoufée, and three different types of salad, not to mention the assortment of dishes that the children had selected. There was pineapple pizza, goldfish crackers, peanut butter covered fruit loops, french fries, and chicken nuggets among other things. “As you can see, this year we have quite the selection,” my grandmother chuckled.

The seemingly euphoric feeling reached its zenith when we all grabbed hands in prayer. If you are not a spiritual person it is impossible for me to describe the feeling of bliss you have when you, the people you love more than anything, and God all come together on such a special occasion for a few precious moments. There is no feeling like it in the world.

In my life there is nothing more important than God, family and food. The amalgamation of these three things only happens in such a grand fashion once a year for my family and that is on Christmas. We refused to allow Hurricane Katrina to spoil such a special occasion for us. We took lemons and made lemonade. Instead of allowing it to ruin Christmas, the storm brought us closer together and reminded all of us of how important we are to one another. The meal I shared with my family on December 25, 2005, is one I’ll never forget.
He was the typical grandfather figure, slipping me money when my parents weren’t looking, teaching me how to grow tomatoes, waiting at the end of the slide to catch me because I was scared, and reading me bedtime stories when it was my turn to spend the night at my grandparents’ house. What I began to realize as I grew older, though, is that my grandfather on my mother’s side was one of the most caring human beings I have ever known. I know this because of what I learned at his side.

He always had his camera on him, ready for anything. His photographs were emotional, expressive and unique. He is the one who turned me onto the art form, and he showed me how to capture a soul in one shot. He taught me to be patient and diligent, that I might have to shoot an entire roll of film to get one great image. He hated when people posed for photos, because they impulsively plastered on fake smiles. Photographing people in the moment, my grandfather told me, was how you got to see a part of who they really were. His countless photos of friends, family, and even strangers communicate emotions of both the subject and the artist that are each beautiful in their own way. It was through the lens of a camera that he taught me how show the world my emotions.
Long before I was born, he befriended a group of Benedictine monks that had moved to St. Louis from England to start a boys’ Catholic high school. Their first year in the United States, my grandfather realized that these monks would not be celebrating Thanksgiving because they were not familiar with the tradition. My grandfather’s appreciation for food and family absolutely would not allow this, so he and my grandmother made them a complete Thanksgiving dinner and delivered it to them on Thanksgiving Day. He did that for forty-nine years. The group of monks grew and grew, until he was feeding over thirty people. When I was about ten years old, he started bringing his grandchildren along, to make it a true family tradition. The Thanksgiving after he passed away, we took one last Thanksgiving dinner to the monks, one final tribute to a great man, and the fiftieth anniversary of the tradition. This is how my grandfather lived his life, constantly giving and asking nothing but friendship in return.

He was an unconditional giver. He believed in me. He showed me how to say what I cannot say with words. For that, I am eternally grateful.
you birthed Me.
I am born of you.
Formed by your hands
by the dust
and the bones
formed by your hands

yet I know you not.
I have chosen that.

I have chosen to claim the World.

the Night.
My Barns.
My Laws.
My Stomach.
My prayers

and church Services.

My “bible Studies”
My “worship Songs”
My Writings

as My mother.
I recognize you not
I receive you not –

get behind
Me!

you are too dangerous
too difficult

for everyone knows
that Mud Pits are more comfortable
than mangers

temples more splendid
than crosses.

love is messier
than Murder.

and Cedars Of Lebanon are stronger
than any shrub that may come from a mustard seed.

and Tablets Of Stone are easier to receive
than grace.

Woman, I don’t know him!

Thirty Pieces Of Silver are more enticing
than promises of a kingdom I cannot see.

or so i tell myself
and so the prince of the world
tells Me

and Bread is tastier
than flesh.

yet
it is flesh
off of which I live –

    My own Flesh.
    I know you not.

It is My choice.

But still
you persisted. you tricked Us
you birthed Us
    yet
then allowed Us – Mortal Flesh –
to birth you

And deny your glory
We could not.

    give Us Barabbas!

We did not claim you
We did not
ask for this.

We did not
    ask
    want
This
    for everyone knows that wine
    is easier to swallow

than Blood.

    and as the cock’s cries
    resound in our ears
and You bend down
to write in the sand,
our stones
cannot help but fall
from our clenched fists
we did not receive You

we do not receive You.

You are not
our Mother
Father
Brother
Sister
Teacher
Friend
Lover

and we are not broken.

we are fine.
Trastevere, across the Tiber from the main part of Rome, is a maze of cobblestone streets and tightly packed buildings. It is the kind of place where tourists can easily get lost, where even buildings and piazzas you’ve encountered before look new and foreign when you emerge from a canyon of a street which was so narrow you thought it must have been an alley. All but the most detailed maps neglected to name many of the streets of Trastevere, whose alleys, which the maps don’t even show, have alleys of their own. In this labyrinthine neighborhood, across the river from all popular the sights of Rome, I found what I was looking for on my trip to Rome.

On my second day in Rome, where I traveled over winter break with the Methodist College Fellowship, the group’s inexperience with the bus system led to our stumbling upon the Basilica of St. John Lateran. It would seem that one of the five major basilicas of Rome, its cathedral, in fact, would not take you by surprise. But the side entrance, while grand, is not as awesome as it was when the world was only 450 feet tall. When we entered, I was struck by the scale, grandeur and age of the cathedral. I shuffled around the sanctuary unable to stop whispering “Wow!” every few steps. Right then I realized that I might be in trouble on this trip since, never having
taken Latin or Greek, I could only decipher names and dates, and the names meant little. The names that did have meaning to me were those underneath the twelve statues lining the center of the space up to the altar, indicating the Disciples, minus Judas, plus Paul. The statues were giant, muscular, intimidating men, more Achilles than Apostle. Each of the statues reinforced a second type of illiteracy; each figure had symbols that, for the most part, meant nothing to me. Peter held the Papal keys, which I understood, but Bartholomew seemed to be holding the skin of a man, which left the entire group puzzled. At the time however, I was visiting finely decorated churches, decorated in a way to tell the story of Christianity, a story I claimed to know and yet found myself completely unable to understand.

The Coliseum was the only place in all of Rome that had explanatory signs giving the significance of what you were seeing, not for the amphitheatre, but for the traveling exhibit on the Iliad that it was hosting. My favorite piece was a pot that depicted Hector saying farewell to his wife and son before his ill-fated battle with Achilles. His son is sitting on his mother’s lap, reaching out to play with the crest of his father’s helmet. It’s a touching scene, made more so by the knowledge that Hector is about to die for his kingdom. The depiction of Greek and Trojan heroes in the exhibit reminded me of the Apostles in the basilica of Saint John Lateran. The story I had come to Rome to understand more completely, I was reminded that I knew little about, while my knowledge of the ancient Greek story deepened.

This brings us back to Trastevere. I worried about going to Santa Maria in Trastevere because the guidebook warned about the square in front being full of drunks, beggars and stray dogs. The worst part of the trip to me was dealing with people who were begging on the street. I knew, for various solid and convincing reasons, the guidebooks and our trip leader advised us not to give people money. On the other hand, Jesus didn’t qualify his command to give to the poor. Since we were there in the off-season for tourism, there was only one beggar and she was right in front of the door to the

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3 It turns out that Bartholomew was holding his own skin. He was skinned alive and crucified upside-down in Armenia, and later became the patron saint of tanners and leather workers.
church. I solved my conflict between wanting to help the beggar and the command not to give them money by putting the Euros I would have given to her into the bread for the poor box in the church. Then I wandered around the church examining the art. The apse of the church had several large mosaics. The first was a small strip of sheep on a blue background. Twelve of the sheep faced right, but the thirteenth sheep in the center faced left. I immediately thought of Jesus, both fully God and fully human, both shepherd and sheep. Then I thought of the sacrifice that God saved Abraham from making, which He enacted with His own Son to save us all. Then, above this mosaic was another, the “Coronation of the Virgin” with Mary at the right hand of Christ, surrounded by saints. In the mosaic, it looked to me like Jesus had his arm around his mother, though I’m sure he didn’t. But they looked so peaceful, like a family gathered for a portrait. Just as Andromache and Astyanax lost Hector, Mary lost Jesus. Both men are revered as heroes for their sacrifice, but one in a warrior tradition, for honor and personal glory, the other, in a wholly new tradition, for the salvation of others and so men and women no more may die. I felt like I was beginning to overcome my illiteracy.

I walked over to the church’s bulletin board and looked at the upcoming events. The oldest church in Rome was still in use today. In this space had been nearly two thousand years of baptisms and funerals, confirmations and marriages, hopes and fears, happiness and desperation. Though I knew none of the people who had used this space to worship, we were linked in community. I felt a connection to these people here and those who follow Christ elsewhere; Protestant and Catholic, two thousand years ago or today, we are linked through Christ, through the Eucharist, into one grand community. While I was reflecting on this feeling, the woman from outside entered the church and tithed from what was given to her into the poor box. I had found what I was looking for.
Contemporary calls for gratitude in many Christian churches in the U.S. go something like this: “All that you have is not yours; it is your heavenly Father’s. You did not earn it; rather the Father gave it to you.” Indeed, this can be very difficult for many American Christians to swallow, especially because we live in a culture that emphasizes individual accomplishment. The “American Dream” is based on the premise that if you work hard you will earn good things in life. Indeed, most Davidson students worked hard in high school to get into a school like Davidson and many of us do not consider being a Davidson student a blessing, but an achievement. I acknowledge that the life of gratitude described above can be difficult, but after participating in the Journey to Nicaragua over spring break, I no longer believe it is sufficient.

Christian gratitude is not just about being grateful for what you have, but also about being outraged at what others do not have. There is no doubt that there is much poverty in the world. Almost three billion people, half of the world’s population, live on less than $2 a day.\footnote{Shah, Anup. “Causes of Poverty.” Global Issues. \url{http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Poverty.asp} Accessed 28 March 2007. Last updated 15 February 2007.} While in Nicaragua, I encountered men, women and
children who live in conditions I would not deem acceptable for ani-
mals, let alone people. At least 1,200 people live amongst the burn-
ing trash and hazardous waste in the Managua City Dump. In
response to this injustice, our gratitude for water, food, shelter,
clothing, health care, education and even material possessions must
be accompanied by some kind of questioning of the intense pover-
ty throughout our world.

Questioning world poverty leads us to examine why we
have all that we do. Yes, our lives are filled with many blessings
from God, but our lives are also filled with many things we have at
the expense of others. The wealth of our nation has come at the
expense of developing nations. Our individual wealth and many of
our possessions have come at the expense of people, like those I
encountered in the dump, living in the Third World. True gratitude
requires the recognition and elimination of excess in our lives and
aims to close the gap between the rich and the poor. Gratitude can
NOT be thankfulness for what we have when it comes at the
expense of the poor. Oscar Romero summed this nicely by saying:

The rich must be critical amid their own sur-
roundings of affluence: why they are wealthy
and why next door there are so many poor. A
wealthy Christian will find there the beginning
of conversion, in a personal questioning: why am
I rich and all around me so many that hunger?²

Gratitude, as it is often used today, has become an expres-
sion of our complacency with excess and wealth at the expense of
the poor. If we attribute our wealth, success and possessions to
God, then they cannot be excessive or at the expense of the poor.
When we attribute our wealth to God, we do not listen to his call to
live in a more just way. We assume God is not calling us to elimi-
nate the excess of our lives because we believe our wealth is a gift
from Him. Gratitude in many Christian settings has become a
copout. This interpretation of gratitude does not challenge us to live

a life that serves “the least of these” as Jesus calls us to do (Matthew 25:31-46).

We must resist the temptation to join this line of thinking, but how? I believe the first step is seeking awareness and becoming mindful of how we individually and collectively contribute to world poverty. From a point of awareness, we will, through reflection and prayer, come to understand how God calls us to live a thankful life which struggles to eliminate poverty and injustice. We will come to understand how we are called to use the gifts He has given us. For different people this life of true gratitude will look differently. Some will be called to give their possessions away and live a life of simplicity, others will become active in Non-Profit Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations in the United States and abroad, some will work with the poor directly, others may be called to preach liberation theology and social justice, etc. There is no formula for living a life of gratitude. I cannot tell you exactly what to do. I’m not even sure how God’s call for real gratitude will manifest itself in my life, but I’m glad finally to be listening.

At the heart of Islam is the teaching that one should praise
and be thankful to God in every circumstance.

Muslims answer the question, “How are you?” with the Arabic phrase “Alhamdulillah,” which means, “Praise and thanks be to God.” In fact, the first verse that is recited in prayer five times a day for Muslims is “Alhamdulillahi rabbil ‘alamin.” The English translation is “Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds.” This response reflects the acceptance that God, who is loving and kind, cares for all his creatures with unbounded tenderness, mercy and wisdom. Regardless of whether we interpret our situation as easy or difficult, Muslims believe that every situation we face is placed before us by God for a reason and that ultimately in that reason there is good and benefit for us. For this we are thankful to God.

The Qur’an teaches that human beings were created by God for the purpose of being grateful to him. “It is he who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when you knew nothing, and he gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affection so that you may give thanks (to God)” (Qur’an 16:78).

The Qur’an also explains that one of Satan’s main aims is to keep people from being grateful. After God sent him out of the garden for his arrogance and disobedience, Satan vowed in response: “I will lie in wait for them (human beings) on your straight way.
Then I will assault them from in front of them and behind them, from their right and their left. Nor will you find, in most of them, gratitude (for your mercies)” (Qur’an 7:16-17).

Most faiths emphasize being grateful to God as a means of worship. At the essence of Islam is the teaching that those seeking inner peace must develop patience and trust in God such that they are thankful to him in every situation.

According to Islamic belief, one reason God allows people to undergo difficulty and trials during their lives is to test who will remain grateful to him. People who remain thankful, even in the face of great hardship, enter into a state of intimacy with their Lord. They attain an inner peace that protects them from the storms of the outside world.

Most of us can easily list many blessings for which we are thankful. We also tend to find it easy to list the difficulties in our lives. We often think that if God would just fix our problems for us, then we would be completely content. Our challenge is to learn always to be thankful for and content with God’s bounties, even in adversity.

Gratitude to God does not arise from the removal of external stressors; rather, it is an internal state of the heart. This state is achieved consciously by continuous struggle and effort as we reflect on the blessings and mercy of God and strive to block out the whispers of negativism and discontent that keep our souls in a state of ingratitude.

Being grateful to God is essential to our well-being in life. A heart filled with thankfulness has no room for self-pity or despair. With the understanding that praise and thankfulness is due to God in every circumstance, souls find contentment and hearts find peace.

“I think one of my biggest regrets would have to be the time
in college that I didn’t go to that Billy Joel concert when I had the chance.” Father John, a thin man in his late forties, stands at the front of the classroom. He is doing one of the things he loves most—teaching history. We always spend the last few minutes before lunch discussing anything from sports to music to politics to Father’s own stories. “Now the World Series of ’73, that was a great one!” Father knows the winner of every World Series and Super Bowl for the past fifty years or more, along with every other piece of sports trivia. He knows about every band or singer even from long before he was born. Father can name all of the presidents, the years they served in office, and how they died or what their current occupation is. If he were ever to appear on “Who Wants To be a Millionaire?” I am certain that Father would win the million dollars and be the quickest to give it away, yet I cannot think of a single person who deserves it more.

As the bell rings, Father lingers in the classroom to catch a snatch of personal conversation with us as we make our way out the door to lunch. “So, Harry, losing faith in A-Rod yet?” Fr. John asks my friend Harrison, a broad smile breaking out underneath his dark moustache streaked with gray. Father always gives Harry a hard time because the boy is such a Yankees fan.
Nearly every day during lunch Father comes into the cafeteria, making his way around to the different tables to visit with students and grab a few chips or pretzels out of lunches here and there. I know that sometimes these few morsels are his only lunch. Sometimes he will be passing around food. “Do you want to try these new, dark chocolate M&M’s, Lauren?”

Amongst teaching, acting as headmaster and dealing with his own parish, Father rarely has a moment to himself just to relax, unless you count running on his treadmill at five o’clock every morning. If only the rest of my classmates knew that he is the main man responsible for our class’s being able to graduate without the school’s closing before our senior year.

It is finally the end of the day and time for cross country practice. I make my way through the foyer where all the students are hurrying out to enjoy every possible moment of the September sunshine. I catch a glimpse of Father in between the throngs of backpacks and khaki uniforms, standing out in his black clerical clothing like a cardinal in the midst of sparrows. He stands there calling, “Have a good evening, Sarah!” and “Good luck on that driver’s test tomorrow, Ben!” to every student. He is no longer wearing his sweatshirt, a sure sign of the warm temperature outside because Father is always cold. He has undone his white collar and it hangs loosely on his neck. He is the only priest I have known to do that, but Father John is also the only priest I have known who actually looks just as normal without his clerical clothing, in his Green Bay Packers sweatshirt and jeans.

After a hot and sweaty practice, I slip into the cafeteria to refill my water bottle. I hear the rustling of bags and scraping of chairs. I turn to see Father John changing the trash bags and carrying out the bags full of garbage. “Hey, Ellen, did you have a good day?” he asks cheerfully as he picks up some napkins and wrappers off the floor. He shows no sign of feeling that it is strange for the headmaster to be taking out the garbage and cleaning up the cafeteria. “I miss college cross country!” he cries after I describe where we ran in practice that day. “I think the beginning of races is the best part. Next you’re at Rocky Grove on Tuesday, right?” Father always knows each of the sport teams’ schedules by heart. I prepare to leave. “Ellen, have a great night, okay?” he calls. He is now closing
the windows. Driving down the hill to leave the school around five that evening, I see his red CR-V still sitting in the parking lot.

It takes a unique person to believe his biggest regret would be missing a concert. Father John is the perfect example of a person who remembers that he has twenty-four hours in a day just like everyone else, including Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln, and puts every minute to good use. However, he never receives even half the thanks that he deserves in his position that requires a lot of tough love. Things like figuring out how to pay the heating bill and the teachers each month, dealing with the Diocese in showing that his school should not be closed, and handling rebellious students and parents. Yet Father persists in trying to live the Gospel, in never losing his calming yet stimulating presence, and in spouting trivia. I have seen Father John frustrated, angry and disappointed, but I have never seen Father John weak.
His two hands greenly fingered each lucky bead.
One by one, he whispered their technicolor prayers.

His silver savior dangled from its polished womb.
High above, the patient Mother listened well:
*Mother Mary, Mother Mary, please hear my humble plea!*

In each emerald pearl, he drowned his worldly thoughts
Till all grew calm beneath the glassy surface.
The figure of a shamrock still lingered inside his mind.

By the end, all fifty-nine sang out to Heaven,
Their hymns impeded distraction’s sad return.
Finished, he loosened the sterling bonds of faith from his hands,
And bore the cross and chain to his pocket with an *Amen.*
Availing is a publication of the Religious Life Council of Davidson College in cooperation with the Davidson College Chaplain’s Office.

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