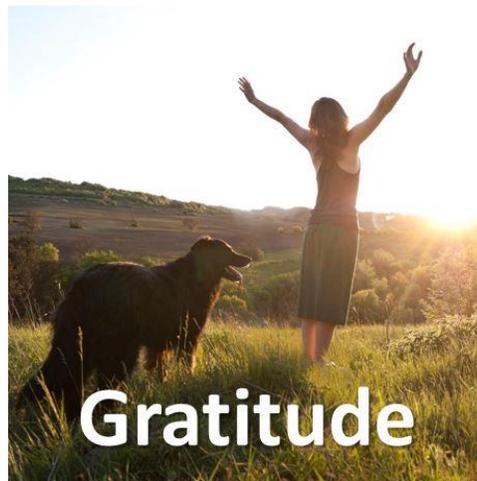


The Traveler Within



Walking Life's Path With An "Attitude of Gratitude"

"Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet."

– Thích Nhất Hạnh

Before we depart on our next expedition within I want to thank those of you who I've met around town in the last few weeks who've made a point of letting me know how much you enjoy *The Traveler Within* and that you look forward to reading it weekly. I appreciate the encouragement and I'm inspired to be as much of a contribution to the wonderful community here in SMA as you are. Bless you.

This week I want to explore what I feel to be one of the most important virtues of a *wise life traveler*, that of *gratitude*. As the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhất Hahn points out in his quote, those who walk the path of life with the awareness that their every step can be in gratitude not only "*kiss the Earth with their feet*," their footsteps blaze a trail for others to follow in by stepping into and elevating their own *Attitude of Gratitude*.

Gratitude from the Latin word *gratus*, means "*thankfulness, grace and praise*." To walk within the light of praise, grace and thankfulness, now that's first-class travel. But what does it mean to be grateful? Many people confuse the virtue of gratitude with the opinion of approval. If we approve of something or someone we can offer thanks and praise quite easily, but the gesture is conditional because the moment we disapprove our humble gratitude is often trumped by an ungrateful attitude.

I recall one Thanksgiving Day driving to my relative's house and spotting one of those church billboards with the catchy messages. It read, "*Gratitude is the ability to say grace just before eating crow*." While *crow* is a far fly from *turkey*, the message landed in the nest of my heart.

I could *feel* the ungrateful attitude swelling as I approached the house thinking about my Aunt Lota, the family alcoholic who was mean to me, my Uncle Elmo who threw me into the deep end of our swimming pool when I was 8, and another family member who pilfered all my Mother's money and jewelry just before her death. *Give thanks to them? They don't deserve my gratitude!* But then another silent voice from within countered, *"Val Jon, gratitude and its sacred practice of grace do not operate upon what people deserve, they are born of the spiritual devotion to serve.*

Within this truth I realized that if I showed them no compassion or understanding then I'd be demonstrating much the same ungrateful attitude they foisted upon me. I'll never forget the advice that arose within me . . . *"Who among us will stand up within our better selves in the true spirit of thanks-giving and show kindness to the calloused, compassion to the criminal and wisdom to the fools?"* We had a wonderful Thanksgiving that year, albeit I ended up leaving early due to running a bit short on kindness, compassion and wisdom.

The take-away here is that *Gratitude* isn't about achieving a state of perfect grace, it's about committing ourselves to the practice of aspiring to grace. Engaging in the practice of grace by being willing to eat a little crow, sputter out a few feathers of annoyance now and then and bow our heads in humility is an exercise well worth it. Why? Because what many people don't realize is that being ungrateful, spiteful, opinionated and generally unwilling to live their life with an open heart, produces mediocrity at best and misery at worst. Nobody, even ourselves likes to spend time with a negative and ungrateful person.

Perhaps *"kissing the Earth with our feet"* is a bit more gratitude than we can muster in our every step, but perhaps the next time we put our foot down onto the ground of arrogance or blame we can gently lift it up into an Attitude of Gratitude. After all, the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.



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