



Gratefulness

## Gratefulness Embraces Parkinson's

TIM ROBERTS | 9 REFLECTIONS

Gratefulness helps us return to ourselves, restoring our equilibrium and helping us to beyond what's broken to the beauty and wholeness of life.

I was diagnosed with Parkinson's just over three years ago when I was 50. Receiving the diagnosis from a matter-of-fact doctor was a traumatizing experience, and I felt that my life and my family's identity had collapsed. Life was difficult and still is difficult, yet something amazing is beginning to happen. I have slowly started to shift my attitude from the anger, fear, and loneliness brought on by the Parkinson's and the grim predictions of a Parkinson's future to a more body-based feeling of gratefulness for the wholeness of life as I experience it second by second.

I have discovered not only profound wonder and indebtedness for the gift of my life and relationships but also a physical softening in the area of my heart and a growing ability to feel with my body joy, awe, and the interconnectedness that is hidden in plain sight all around us. I feel in a very real and physical way that, as Chögyam Trungpa said, there is no such thing as an underdeveloped moment. Each moment is actually a continually flowing river of love and creativity pouring through all of existence and through us because we are not set apart from this river of life, no matter our circumstance or diagnosis. I continue to learn that gratefulness is a personal, physical, and soulful opening to the life that surges all around us and to the life that is beating our heart and living us. The more I allow gratefulness to wash through me, the clearer I become and the more ease expands within me.

Gratefulness is a portal through which life gazes at itself.

Although living in gratefulness is still something I need to practice, fleeting

---

Photo by Tim Roberts

experiences of a richer fabric of existence have begun to reveal themselves. One beautiful evening, in the honeyed glow just before twilight, I was gazing into a rose. For a fraction of second something relaxed within me, and I got the distinct impression that it was actually the universe looking through my eyes at the rose and the universe looking back as the rose at me. Gratefulness is a portal through which life gazes at itself.

This moment with the rose stopped me in my tracks — and then it was gone, probably because mental tension reasserted itself. I don't know how to describe the depth of the experience, though — it was as if the same deep response was taking place in the rose that was taking place in me, and together we were responding to the ancient echo of creation that still resonates — provided we are not too cluttered by the hectic and highly intellectualized lives that so many of us lead.

Gratefulness is a transparency of the heart. But it is one thing to be grateful for a rose or a sunset or something else beautiful and non-threatening, and it is quite another thing to be grateful for challenging life events, for example Parkinson's. I am working at it. Gratefulness offers me the energetic space to do this because it allows me to notice hostile thoughts arising before they lock into place and trigger restrictive habits; gratefulness is also able to hold tenderly life's paradoxes without prematurely trying to shut them down to immature solutions that are misleading.

I relate to Parkinson's ...as an alienated aspect of my stifled creativity that needs gentle integration so that it can ignite my soul's creative fire.

Supported by my gratefulness practice I have started to build a relationship with Parkinson's. I relate to Parkinson's in four ways: as an initiation into love, humility and courage; as a much needed teacher offering learning and wisdom; as a manifestation of distress in need of compassion and love; and as an alienated aspect of my stifled creativity that needs gentle integration so that it can ignite my soul's creative fire. I don't manage to sustain this all the time. But I intend to love completely, so this must include loving what seems unlovable. I refuse to divide myself by making Parkinson's my enemy. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "No man could look upon another as his enemy, unless he first became his own enemy." Gratefulness is a simple and profound way of building such a relationship with life, and it is a powerful healing force that is always available if we are willing to risk redefining ourselves and just slow down and open up.

In chronic disease, when so much is wrong, people can lose sight of what they actually need. Gratefulness helps us return to ourselves, restoring our equilibrium and helping us to see beyond what's broken to the beauty and wholeness of life. Gratefulness even helps us recognize a new story of our life with fresh purpose and sustaining motivations that nourish and in so doing nourish others. The more we are steeped in gratefulness, the more it absorbs us until we start to radiate it from within.

Through gratefulness I had a surprise. I thought the greatest crisis of my life was Parkinson and in many ways it is. But I have been shocked to realize that I had been living with an invisible crisis equal to the Parkinson's: the contemporary epidemic of isolation and separation fueled by materialism, consumerism, urgency, and stress. I was living this shallow and clichéd way, disconnected from the present moment and dissociated from my body.

Gratefulness seems to relax the psyche and loosen those tight defensive patterns that many of us have grown up with and don't even notice but through which we are constantly evaluating and interpreting life and judging ourselves.

In the space of isolation and disconnection, no one can be authentic and no one can really live magnificently because we are too self-protected. Thanks to gratefulness, I feel different — more a part of life, less a spectator, and capable of increased intimacy with living. Gratefulness seems to relax the psyche and loosen those tight defensive patterns that many of us have grown up with and don't even notice but through which we are constantly evaluating and interpreting life and judging ourselves. It is these defensive patterns that alienate us from our True Self, and gratefulness can slowly dissolve these tendencies and relax us back to wholeness.

This very relaxation opens us to life's infinite creativity, and this is transformation of the highest order. Gratefulness to me is a gateway to an embodied and conscious life. Like many people these days, I was so compressed by stress that I had lost touch with my heart and mistrusted my own goodness. This meant I couldn't expand into life, and more than anything life seems to want to expand itself through us so that we become ever more transparent to unity.

I am delighted that now I wake up eager to bathe in gratefulness and radiate what love I have to the world. I feel very lucky to be part of life, and I'm confident that, as Zen master Dogen said, we are all connected, and so I pray that my gratefulness will somehow help you.

The true person is  
not anyone in particular,  
but, like the deep blue colour  
of the limitless sky,  
it is everyone, everywhere in the world.

-Zen master Dogen, (1200-1253)

---

Tim Roberts writes: I live with my wife in New Zealand and we have three wonderful daughters and one special granddaughter. I enjoy nature, the peculiar quality of the sunlight here, the native birds, the wild beaches and the older wood lands and I love taking our dog out for walks whenever I can.

## **Dedication**

I am especially grateful to Brother David Steindl-Rast who models this way of living so elegantly.

## **References**

Ryokan, Dewdrops on a lotus leaf: Zen poems of Ryokan. Translated by John Stevens

Dogen, (1200-1253) Zen poems of Dogen. Translated by Steven Heine

Robert J. Miller, ed, Gospel of Thomas (67): The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version, Polebridge Press 1994