

Our roots go deeper than we know – a reflection on the power of gratitude,
by Jason Espada

In every traditional culture, we find parents and elders teaching their children gratitude, and the essence is always the same, that of cultivating a sense of appreciation for what we've received. Parents don't do this for their own sake, instead they do it as a gift to their children. They do it because they've known these blessings themselves, and know that this is what will sustain future generations.

When I compare how I feel when I have gratitude for my teachers, for my ancestors, and for the natural world, with those times when I lose this sense, there's a great difference. When I'm not aware of these gifts in any kind of tangible way, I feel impoverished, and living in a shadow that is the absence of joy.

I think many people feel this way sometimes, and what's more, what it means to have gratitude is not something that is talked about much in this culture, and so I thought to sketch out a few ideas about it here, for those who might like to pick up on this theme, and awaken more thankfulness in their lives.

I marvel sometimes at the gift of friendship, and how it is a sustaining power in our lives. We may have only spent a short time with someone, years ago, but our time together was graced with a special quality that has stayed with us. Thinking again of that friendship brings that power to the fore. We are nourished by that love on a spiritual level, and it is this energy that gives us strength for all we would accomplish in the world.

We've received love, support and encouragement from our parents and teachers, and the quality of that love is something profound. Remembering that gift, we can't help but be moved, grateful, and dedicated to living a righteous life. Thinking of the lives of our parents and teachers, and spiritual ancestors, and of what they have offered us, we can see that they in turn were nourished by their own parents and teachers. This is what they received, and passed on to us, this love, encouragement, strength and wisdom.

When I say our roots go deeper than we know, I'm thinking of how we don't often look into the richness of what we have with us now. Generations have brought us to where we are now, and their sustaining power is here for us to know, and to be upheld and inspired by.

If we forget, we feel weak, easily intimidated by life. When we remember again who we are, and how we got here, we can't help but feel optimistic, and dedicated to caring for the needs of this time, and those of future generations.

To take just two examples of the vision and commitment that has come before, and that has brought us to where we are today, we can think of our modern education, and of the civil rights movement.

A century ago, ninety percent of the people in this country lived in rural areas. The recorded rate of literacy, even then was already high, but the level of education, compared to today was basic. During the last century, access to public libraries and to higher education has increased to the point that we almost take it for granted. Compared to a hundred years ago, many more of us have opened the treasury of learning.

It's only because people in previous generations saw the great value in public education that we have these advantages today, which are almost impossible to measure. All the knowledge of the arts, history, science and technology, and philosophy has come to us because of the efforts of generations of educators. Most of their names have been forgotten, but we have all this nourishment for our souls because of their love, vision and dedication.

When I look for examples of true heroes and spiritual ancestors in modern times, I can see that there were many great souls who only just recently came before us in the Civil Rights era. People who study that history know the names of Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Ralph Abernathy, Bob Moses, and A. Phillip Randolph. Looking further, we see that each of them were nourished and sustained not only by their fellow workers for human rights and dignity, but also by the labors of people like Ghandi, Emerson and Thoreau.

Every step the marchers were taking during those dangerous, difficult times was moved by love, and strengthened by those who went before them. They

were encouraged to keep going towards justice, dignity and equality by those in their past, and by their hope for the future.

This same gift, this same power is what we've received, those of us who are heirs to their legacy. This is something that lives, something that we can touch again, when we remember them with gratitude for their great vision and efforts. And then, considering what we've received from them, how can we do anything other than try to take the next step to advance the cause of human rights in our own times?

It is this way too when we have the great fortune of connecting with a spiritual tradition. All those who have come before us, right down to our own teachers, have not left us. They have passed forward the gifts of their practice to us. Praise and gratitude awakens the sense that this really is so. Something of their power, kindness, compassion and commitment is with us now, and this is something we can celebrate and draw from every day.

Like a tree, through its roots, drawing up the sap of nutriment, breath by breath, we can reach down and feel our whole body fill with the health and strength, light, courage and love that is their gift to us.

We can remove ourselves from all these virtues when we hold the idea of ourselves as separate from all this – from each other, and from all our ancestors. This mistaken concept isn't something we would ever consciously plan to do – instead it's the character of a delusion – a result of miseducation, that persists, until it is unlearned, seen through and discarded.

There's a scene in the movie *Amistad*, where the character of John Adams is talking to an African man he is representing in an American court, and telling him how there's been a setback in the trial. At first the man, Sikey, doesn't understand, but then, when he does, he goes into a frenzy, and it's not until days later that Adams can talk with him again. When he does, he sees that Sikey is relaxed and smiling.

He tells John Adams that he knows everything will be alright now. I remember he said,

'I spoke with my ancestors last night'

'I called them all into myself, and they assured me of our victory'

'I am the whole reason now that they lived'.

We can assuredly say the same thing about our spiritual ancestors – those who came before us and struggled to make this world a righteous place. The power of their work did not end with them, but is with us now. They had their work, the work of their time, which was not our work; and now we have our own work to do, in order to pass this same gift forward to our children, and the coming generations.

When you look at religions throughout different cultures and over time, you often see this gesture of looking back with admiration, and appreciation, with love and rejoicing at the gifts we've received. This brings it more clearly into the present, as a palpable force, as a revered energy and direction, by which we can live our lives. From gratitude, naturally comes works, effortlessly in a way, as the overflow of our heart of love.

Just a small illustration here: In May of 2012, I had the chance to chop some wood for my host of that year. Now, it had literally been decades since I'd lifted an ax to cut wood, and the pile of wood was taller than I am, but I felt so much thankfulness for all the kindness of this person, that, in a couple of weeks, I'd chopped and stacked it all. And what's more, to tell the truth, every hour of doing it was blissful. I could tell, even while working at it, that such is the fruit of gratitude.

Those who think in theistic terms have God to thank for all they receive. They have the energy of grace, conceived of as coming from their Creator, to draw from and to live by, to cherish, to savor, and to share. How excellent! Those who do not think in terms of God have no less to be grateful for. They too have abundant resources of love, strength, courage, purpose and guidance to delight in and to draw from and share throughout their lives.

I mark now as something really unfortunate when gratitude is glossed over, its depth and power as a practice and way of life not recognized. I think of jaded children and adults, having only superficial lives, with little joy to them. It doesn't have to be this way.

If we say we have counted our blessings, but then somehow remain unmoved, not uplifted and strengthened, then I know we've missed the vital point of gratitude. We've all received many gifts, by being here, and they are alive, and with us now.

May we all know the true measure of our heritage, to be living now, on this extraordinary earth; and *all* our noble ancestry, and with this energy, may we continue to work, in our own way, for the sake of our children, and our children's children.