
Perspectives

Saying Grace: Transforming People, Transforming the World

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Abstract

This essay describes how the grace-saying act can be a vital source in the renewal of communities and the created world. I show how it has become difficult in modern times to appreciate this act's practical and religious significance or perform it with much sincerity. I also argue that the loss of blessing and thanksgiving has a lot to do with the destruction of the world and its neighborhoods. I propose that as we learn to understand and then recover this practice, we will also participate in the healing of the world. Saying grace introduces us to a new understanding of ourselves as creatures placed in a world of gifts.

Thanksgiving is the experience of paradise.

Alexander Schmemmann

Among many of the world's great faith traditions, the eating of food is accompanied by some form of a grace-saying act. To say grace is a complex act, expressing gratitude and devotion. It is also an act that aims to clarify humanity's place in the world. In offering thanks or a blessing, people aim to show that they do not take their food and their lives for granted.

In this essay, I work specifically within a Christian context, recognizing that different faith traditions have their own unique vocabularies and ways of clarifying humanity's place in the world. These alternative ways should certainly be explored (I leave that task for others), since diverse exploration will contribute to the depth and significance of this act. I

argue that the daily practice of saying grace, when properly understood and undergone, has the potential to transform the way we think about ourselves, our world, and our place within it. When we offer a blessing upon our food, we do not merely pronounce a few pious words, but rather commit ourselves to the nurture, protection, and celebration of the gifts of creation. Insofar as our grateful speech and action are genuine, we participate in the healing of the world.

Saying grace occurs at mealtimes because eating is among the most intimate ways we know for joining our lives with others—other people, animals, plants, local habitats, and ecosystem processes—and with God as the source of life. Here we encounter and take in life's gratuity and fragility, its beauty and costliness. Opposed to the whirl and speed of postmodern life, saying grace is the patient and focused time in which we become mindful of our place in the world. Eating is not simply a physical act. It is also a spiritual practice whereby the deep and sacramental significance of life is daily learned. This sacramental understanding forms the basis for an ethic that promotes the health and well-being of people and creation together. When we say grace, we acknowledge our membership in creation and testify to the conviction that, as eaters, we are responsible for what we eat, how we eat it, and who we eat with.

In the first section, I describe in preliminary fashion what saying grace means and why it has become difficult in modernity/postmodernity to appreciate this act's significance. Following this account, I then develop in some detail the practical and spiritual dimensions of the grace-saying act. I conclude with a brief account of how this practice leads us into a rich and compelling account of what it means to be a human *creature*, and thus forego our aspirations (indeed, our perennial temptation) to be a god upon the earth. An account of human creatureliness, especially as it is daily made evident in our saying grace, forms the basis for a true understanding of people as interdependent and responsible beings, charged with caring for each other and the whole of creation.

To say grace, or offer a benediction of thanksgiving over our daily meals, is the highest and most honest expression of our humanity. In this act, we show that we are committed to taking our rightful place within the world among each other and before God, and demonstrate that we do not take our place and our sustenance for granted. Here, around a table and before witnesses, we testify to the experience of life as a gift to be received and given again. We acknowledge that we do not and cannot live alone, but are the beneficiaries of the mysteries and kindnesses of grace upon grace. In our grateful speaking and acting, we seek to be

worthy of and faithful to a comprehensive life that is incomprehensibly given to us.

Practices of blessing, thanksgiving, remembrance, attention, affection, and delight—all marks of the grace-saying act—define us as creatures made in the image of God, creatures that not only ingest and digest their food but eat with a sense for food's significance as the medium of life and love. When eating is enfolded within the language of grace, and when food itself is experienced as the concrete manifestation of God's abounding and incomprehensible love, then the opportunity exists for us to dine with God as 'the fountain of true delight' (Bonaventure 1956: 14). Insofar as we commune with God, the very sensation of life is transformed, so that we are equipped 'to see what is most beautiful, to hear what is most harmonious, to smell what is most fragrant, to taste what is most sweet, and to embrace what is most delightful...' (1956: 24). Our perceptive and receptive faculties are transformed so that we now encounter the world and each other as concrete manifestations of God's love. In short, when we say grace with our entire being, say it honestly and with considered appreciation for its deep significance, we participate, however imperfectly, in the paradise of God.¹

We are created to commune with God, the sustaining source of life. This is our deepest hunger. Nothing else can truly reach or fully satisfy our hunger because whatever food we might eat is not the source of its own life but points beyond itself. We want to experience and know the *liveliness of life* and the *loveliness of love* expressed in creation. As the source of all life, God meets us here and now as 'divine love made food, made life for man. God *blesses* everything He creates, and, in biblical language, this means that He makes all creation the sign and means of His presence and wisdom, love and revelation: "O taste and see that the Lord is good"' (Schmemmann 1973: 14). When we return our blessings, we acknowledge that we are creatures who can join our hands with God's work of care in the world. We commit ourselves to the celebration of gift upon gift.

1. The extent and intimacy of our meeting God through creation was most powerfully and daringly (since it verged on pantheism) expressed in the writing of the ninth-century Irish theologian John Scotus Eriugena, who said (in *Periphyseon* III, 678D): 'We ought not to understand God and the creature as two things distinct from one another, but as one and the same. For the creature is subsisting in God: and God, manifesting Himself, in a marvelous and ineffable manner is created in the creature, the invisible making Himself visible and the incomprehensible comprehensible, and the hidden revealed...and creating all things He is created in all things and making all things is made in all things...and He becomes all things in all things' (quoted in Manoussakis 2007: 33).

It is important to appreciate that the trends and practical patterns of our current culture do not encourage our saying grace. Many people, if they can recall the practice at all, see it as a quaint relic of a bygone age in which people were too stupid or simple to appreciate that we produce and purchase our own food. Others are embarrassed when acts of thanksgiving are uttered in public, perhaps feeling some humiliation or guilt at the thought that we should lower our heads before we raise our forks. How did this happen, and why should we be trying to rehabilitate this daily and deeply profound practice?

One way to understand the erosion of the grace-saying act is to chart the transformation in the way we think about human subjectivity or, more precisely, the gradual shift from an estimation of ourselves as subjects properly so called (as those exposed to or contingent upon others, and thus answerable to them), to the current position where we are all spectators or shoppers of life, beholden to no one, but masters of all that we can afford. As moderns or postmoderns, we live in a world of our own making and according to schedules that serve decidedly self-chosen aims. In this world without belonging there is no appreciation for diverse places or for life's dynamism and resilience as the manifestations of grace. Life is whatever we make of it. Identity is a feature of what we can afford. We are the sole sources of value and meaning. There simply is no need or time to say grace.

In a postmodern world, the world of the spectacle (Guy Debord) and simulation (Jean Baudrillard), what previous people would have understood as a concrete world—the place of life-giving, biological and geo-physical contexts, and social and ecological webs of relationship—simply disappears or is hidden behind image after image, sign upon sign. Freed from any stable relationship with a signified, where the sign structure points to a distinct referent in the world, the signifier becomes its own referent, and this autonomization becomes the basis of semiological domination... Signification is now radically relativized, and anything can pass as “meaning” or “reality” (Best and Kellner 1997: 99). Here, food products are a feature of highly stylized packaging, having no referent to gardens or farm fields or farming communities or ecological processes (all highly vulnerable). Food has been reduced to a sign—a marketing label or brand—without depth or reference to the sources of life. This is a hyper world, a virtual world, in which we are little more than ignorant and hapless spectators at the mercy of image consultants, product specialists, and marketers.² It is a world in which the experience

2. Guy Debord summarized this process by observing: “The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the *total occupation* of social life. The

and the saying of grace have become difficult since it is now nearly impossible to distinguish contrivance from reality.

Another way to frame this development is in terms of the eclipse of creation.³ We do not appreciate the members of life *as creatures*, as beings made and sustained by a Creator, altogether the concrete manifestation and reflection of divine love and concern. The world has been hollowed of all iconic significance. Rather than pointing to a Creator, creation becomes in modernity autonomous, a self-subsisting and self-regulating realm called 'nature'. Deprived of its origin and telos in God, the natural world can be made and remade (and unmade) to suit whatever purpose we desire. For us, things are simply what they appear to be or what we want them to be. They have no deeper, sacred significance, and so are easily (and forcibly) reduced to political, economic, social, even religious, idolatries.⁴ Given that our idolatries often clash, we should not be surprised that our habitats and communities reflect the violence and destruction of battle after battle, war after war. To speak a benediction of thanksgiving in these contexts verges on the ridiculous.

Unless...our saying grace can become a means to the recovery of a better world, a world reflective of health and fecundity, governed by care and celebration.

It has never been easy to say grace. Though we may be familiar with traditional or stock phrases—in my house growing up we said '*Segne Vater diese Speise, uns zur Kraft und dir zum Preise*' ('Bless dear Father, this, our food, given for our strength and to your praise')—the danger is that our formulas will be merely formulaic. Saying grace, if it is to be authentic and not simply ornamental, is something we work out and practice in the diverse dimensions of our days. Saying grace has the potential to redefine us, to refocus our desires and redirect our practices, because it turns our attention and our minds to a world appreciated as gift and blessing. Most properly speaking, we say grace best when we say it with our whole being and not only with our mouths. When we daily offer a

relation to the commodity is not only visible, but one no longer sees anything but it: the world one sees is its world. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship extensively and intensively' (quoted in Best and Kellner 1997: 81).

3. The story of this eclipse is complex. I describe it in *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (2003).

4. For a lucid account describing the reduction of nature to an idolatrous realm, see Foltz 2004. This modern scientific account moves in the direction precisely opposite to what St. Bonaventure recommended when he spoke of creation as a vestige 'in which we can perceive our God' (1956: 13).

benediction on the grace of our lives we bear witness to a wide-ranging set of intellectual, emotional, and practical dispositions that aim to receive and handle the members and memberships of creation in a distinct, life-honoring way. What does this way look like, presuppose, and entail?

At the heart of our saying grace we find the expression of thanksgiving. Though easily reducible to the quick word 'thanks', thanksgiving, when properly undergone, is a deep and expansive gesture that has the effect of taking us beyond ourselves, leading us into the richness of the world. To be thankful presupposes that we appreciate and know what we are thankful for, having devoted considerable effort to enumerating and understanding the great diversity of others—ranging from micro-organisms in the soil to bees to flowers to apples to parents to friends to glaciers to water to sunlight... (the list goes on and on)—that intersect and feed into our living. At root, when we offer thanks for the members and memberships of creation, we acknowledge that without them we could not be, let alone thrive. We confess that our health and happiness are entirely dependent on their well-being and integrity. We demonstrate the basic knowledge that we belong to others, and then see in our belonging a need for humility, responsibility, and celebration. We understand that we cannot be thankful for another if we are at the same time knowingly engaged in its destruction.

Genuine thanksgiving is considerably harder to come by in our time. The main reason for this difficulty has to do with changes in the way we have set up our practical and daily living. As suburbanites or exurbanites we encounter others in a highly mediated fashion. What I mean by this can be understood if we turn our attention briefly to two dominating features of contemporary life: technology and consumerism. Technology has become the ontology of our age, the primary means by which things signify and have meaning.⁵ By this I mean that technological devices are now not only a ubiquitous presence in domains of communication, transportation, mechanics, home-making, education, and entertainment, but also that many people believe technology will save us from whatever ill or danger may come our way. Whether through I-Pods, cell phones, video and computer screens, climate-controlled buildings and cars, or the unending buttons and dials we merely push and adjust, the way many of us encounter and engage each other is indirectly through some

5. The literature on the philosophical and theological significance of technology in the modern age is immense. I have benefited most from Albert Borgmann's *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (1987) and Bronislaw Szerszynski's *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* (2005).

other medium (that most people do not understand how these media work does not seem to bother us). These media, by necessity, crop and frame (and shield us from) the world. What we know of each other is thus a feature of what the technological device (and its inventor) allows and which gadget we can afford.

Life has always been mediated in some way, most basically through our language, concepts, and traditions. Our situation is unique, however, because the technological forms of mediation we live through are so focused on establishing us as the supreme center of significance (the power latent within our technologies so easily misleads us into thinking that we are the only power that counts, and that we can use it to modify the world at will). Surfing the net, watching television, listening to the radio, turning the ignition—everywhere the message is clear that our desires and wants are the only ones that matter. Rather than finding in others or the world around us various forms of resistance or integrity or sanctity, and so brought to a realization of the world's limits and fragility, we expect the world in an instant, on demand, and at a cheap price. We are becoming more impatient with others and with life, unwilling to take the time and effort to understand and learn more deeply. Rather than working sympathetically with others or trying to fit harmoniously within shared habitats, we impose our designs and will through media blitzes, bulldozers, and bombs. Failing these resources, we simply log off.

Within this technology-driven context, gratitude is rendered obsolete, not only because we think we deserve all that we have (or are told we should have), but because almost everywhere we look we find reflected back a magnification of our desires and the exaggeration of our own might. The integrity of others is dissimulated insofar as they are made to fit within or contribute to previously selected, often self-serving, aims. Though others abound in our technological world, they do not appear on their own terms.

A similar kind of disappearance of others occurs within the worlds of consumerism. The character of contemporary forms of shopping has made us the most ignorant and ungrateful consumers the world has ever known. The sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman has summarized one aspect of the problem very well:

Consumer society manages to render non-satisfaction permanent. One way of achieving such an effect is to denigrate and devalue consumer products shortly after they have been hyped into the universe of the consumer's desires. But another way, yet more effective, hides from the limelight: the method of satisfying every need/desire/want in such a fashion that it cannot but give birth to new needs/desires/wants. What starts as a need must end up as a compulsion or an addiction. And it does, as the urge to

seek in shops, and only in shops, solutions to problems and relief from pain and anxiety... (Bauman 2005: 80)

Here we can see how the acquisition of a product, rather than leading to gratitude, actually contributes to our anxiety and distress.

The ignorance (and helplessness) that follows from a consumer-driven life is also readily observed. For instance, fewer and fewer of us know where life's goods come from or appreciate what their real costs and value are. Consuming in relative darkness, we can hardly become advocates for a just or merciful world. This point can be made by focusing specifically on the food industry. Depending on where you live, much of the food that we eat was grown or produced at least 1300 miles away.⁶ This means that we have little idea under what conditions our fruit, vegetables, or meats were made available to us. We do not know how the soil and water or animals were treated, nor do we know if the workers involved in production were paid a fair wage or worked in safe conditions. The result is that we eat with profound ignorance. We cannot really be thankful for this food because we know next to nothing of the geo-bio-chemical and human stories at work within them. Nor can we become advocates for food safety and communal and ecological health. Food has been reduced to a commodity that will, we presume, always be available at the store, provided we can muster the credit card swipe.⁷

It is also difficult for us to be thankful for food since so many of our food items reflect narrow human intentions and control. Because much of today's food industry is devoted to profit maximization, and depends on distant transport and a long shelf life, a lot of what we eat bears little connection or resemblance to its life in the ground. Aside from a few vegetables, fruit, and meat, most food is highly processed, laced with artificial flavors and preservatives. Indeed, reading the labels and ingredients lists of food products, you will be struck by how little of them you can pronounce, let alone recognize as food. What our food industry has done is gradually sever the link between us and nature. Food, rather than reflecting a biological home or natural process, represents the intention of a multinational corporation. Whatever nutritional needs we have can be met by a factory and store. In this context, the best that we can do is be thankful for the executives and marketers who 'improve' nature and promise 'to feed the world'.

6. For a description of the ecological problems related to a global food market, and encouraging words about local food economies, see Halweil 2004.

7. The natural and social histories of North American food have been treated masterfully in Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006). The story of international food systems has been analyzed by Paul Roberts in *The End of Food* (2008).

To live in a technologically driven, consumerist world is to live in a fairly insular world, an abstract world often cut off from any reality that might challenge, question, or resist our own. This world is driven by and limited to our own needs and desires. It is bereft of any deep sense of another's integrity, and without responsibility for others, because in it others are engaged in terms of what they can do for us. As Wendell Berry (2002) neatly and precisely put it, most of us live the economy of the one-night-stand. We are all in it for pleasure. We all do it in the dark. We do not ask questions. And we prefer not to know real names and true costs, or make lasting commitments.

The shallowness of our living conditions will inevitably lead to shallow gratitude, to gratitude that is ignorant and merely formulaic, if it appears at all. It will also lead to a world in which the experience and saying of grace becomes exceedingly thin. How can the grace-saying act be deeply meaningful if that over which we give thanks is unknown? Clearly, then, if we want to rehabilitate authentic modes of saying grace, we are going to need to alter some of our most basic priorities and patterns of being in the world. Our forms of thinking, speaking, and acting are going to need to reflect a much deeper engagement with the complex, and ultimately mysterious, forms of reality all around. They are going to need to reflect radical openness and availability and responsibility to others so that we can again receive each other as gifts and, in so doing, learn to appreciate the many contexts for gratitude.

The fundamental, and most practical, way for this transformation in life and thought to occur is for us to develop a sense of vocation and good work. Far too many of us are in menial or highly specialized jobs that make it very difficult for us to see how what we do fits within a larger, life-giving context. Work is not tied to livelihood, to the provision or production of things we clearly need or can share. We feel our work does not matter much, and so are inclined to perform it with less care than we should. Work that is vital, and that serves general purposes of livelihood (rather than someone else's bottom line), helps us appreciate our belonging to a community (we work to meet someone's needs, using help that others have already given us) and to creation (we work to insure the continuing health and vitality of the world). Good work is work that draws us deeper into the world and into community. It expands our knowledge, sympathy, and skill so that we work with less waste and destruction, and to greater personal and communal benefit.⁸

8. My understanding of work is influenced by several of Wendell Berry's essays, especially 'Going to Work' (2003), along with Hall 2003, Gill 1983, and Hughes 2007.

Clearly this understanding of work runs in a direction contrary to the movable, flexible, and highly vulnerable forms of global economic life.⁹ To work with care, we simply must understand the places in which we work, and we can only do that if we commit ourselves to specific habitats and communities. Staying put, we will then be able to see, and also correct when necessary, the harmful effects of what we have done. We will have a clearer sense of how our work benefits our neighborhoods, and how we are also benefited by the many gifts of creation and communal insight that feed into our work. We will also find real reasons to celebrate. Our work, in short, will become a form of prayer (as the Benedictines understood it in their motto *Laborare est Orare*) that feeds seamlessly into the more focused times when we say grace.¹⁰ Our work and our prayer will bear witness to a profound transformation in sensibility, and produce a sensitivity that no longer takes the gifts of life for granted.

In some respects, Martin Heidegger was aware of this need for a deeper sensitivity when he called for a new/old form of thinking after the end of philosophy. By this 'end' he did not mean the cessation of philosophizing or the closing of philosophy departments, but rather the fulfillment or completion of Western forms of reasoning as they have been realized in various forms of technological and industrial control. What he sought and tried to inaugurate (whether successfully or not) was a form of thinking closely tied to thanking, a form of thinking that did not end in utilitarian and pragmatic considerations.

In developing his account of thinking as thanking and thanking as thinking, Heidegger first observed common etymological roots that involve a close cluster of relationships between *denken* (thinking), *danken* (thanking), *Andenken* (remembrance), and *gedenken* (recollection). The Old English noun for 'thought', he tells us, is *thanc* or *thonc*. True thought is always about this *thanc*, the 'thanks' we offer through our thought. As we investigate this *thanc* we move not only into a personal feeling but embark upon a whole set of practical dispositions that cultivate a 'steadfast intimate concentration upon the things that essentially speak to us in every thoughtful meditation' (Heidegger 1968: 140). Memory is crucial here, not simply as the ability to recall previous thoughts, but more importantly as the practice of devotion that abides with others, and as the habit of attention that remains fixed on 'the gathering of all that concerns

9. For a very helpful analysis of this development see Bauman 1998 and Bauman 2000, especially Chapter 4.

10. I have developed this theme in 'Attention and Responsibility: The Work of Prayer' (2005).

us, all that we care for, all that touches us insofar as we are, as human beings' (1968: 144). Memory fixes our concentration upon all that is contiguous with us, all that intersects and nurtures our being. Thinking abides within and is inspired by these intersections of what we can call our mutual interdependence.¹¹ Authentic thinking is a form of mindfulness in which we attend to and appreciate the significance, what some might call the 'graced' character, of the many others that sustain and nurture our living.

If we are to move in the direction of a thankful thinking, our first priority must be to relearn the many ways in which we practically and bodily depend on each other for life. How this is so becomes evident as we trace an authentic grace-saying act. How would genuine thanksgiving be manifested in this mundane act of blessing? A good start would be to list the many items of food on our plates, and then try to identify and understand the biological and social histories they contain. This effort would be salutary because it would take our minds, imaginations, and affections beyond the store and processing plant to the soil, water, and sunlight that in fact form the indispensable matrix for life, growth, and death. Following these histories, we would quickly realize that, cheap food prices notwithstanding, the costs of life are extremely high. For us to eat and live, countless organisms and microorganisms must die. Indeed, for anything to eat, immense and indescribably complex patterns of life and death must be at work. Though life may be a gift freely given, it is anything but cheap.

Eating, if we are paying attention, introduces us to the deeply mysterious and miraculous character of life. The miracle begins in the ground beneath our feet. Hans Jenny, the leading soil scientist of the last century, confessed that after decades of study, soil remained a mystery in terms of how death is transmuted into new life. Though soil is hardly an organism, it is the carrier of life's nutrition and restoration. It is a complex matrix that perpetually welcomes and transforms death into the conditions for new life. As such, it is deserving of our gratitude, even

11. We should recall here Aristotle's treatment of the four causes as integral to human understanding. In knowing a thing's material (the physical elements that come together to make a thing), formal (the specific shape or design of a thing), efficient (the dynamic processes at work in the thing enabling it to be the thing that it is), and final (the purpose or goal the thing serves) causes, we are able to understand that thing's place in the world and thus also its meaning. But to know the four causes presupposes our sustained and intimate engagement with the world. On Aristotle's view, deep understanding of the sort that leads to gratitude presupposes patient, attentive, and practical know-how.

reverence!¹² If we are to get into a position where we can be grateful for soil, and thus also take better care of it, we have to stop seeing it as mere inert matter that does not matter. Soil is not a thing, but a complex web of relationships that succeeds because of multiple, dynamic associations that we have barely begun to understand. It is in terms of these relationships that life's possibilities emerge. As William Bryant Logan has pointed out, soil is a continuous and necessary experiment at the boundary of organic and inorganic life, which means it is more like a living system than a mere collection of inert matter and chemical elements. It is an experiment in hospitality because what we see in dirt is a perpetual 'making room' for new life to flourish and grow (Logan 1995: 19).¹³ Insofar as we fail to understand soil in this complex manner, we are fundamentally ignorant. As ignorant and without understanding, it is difficult for us to be grateful or to see soil as deserving of our concern, care, and celebration.

Soil today is being wasted at an alarming rate. Signs abound—ranging from unprecedented levels of soil erosion to ever-growing soil toxification rates—that we do not appreciate soil, or see it as an indispensable matrix for the growth of much of our food. We are oblivious to its fragility and, closely tied to it, the fragility of our food supplies. Without even knowing it, and owing to the frantic oblivion that characterizes so much of our living, the conditions for a healthy world are undermined.¹⁴ Soil degradation is a perfect example of how the thoughtlessness of our living leads directly to a world over which the inspiration to say 'thank you' is being undermined. Putting an end to this and other destructive trends will require the thoughtfulness implied in every grace-saying act.

If we are to say grace truly, we will not rest content with descriptions of food as a commodity, or eating as a mechanical function. Thoughtful eating, eating that is focused around thanksgiving, will eventually lead us to a sacramental understanding of life. By this sacramental

12. For a more personal look into Jenny's life and work, see Stuart 1984.

13. Compare the poetic and theological observation of Wendell Berry, who says: 'The most exemplary nature is that of the topsoil. It is very Christ-like in its passivity and beneficence, and in the penetrating energy that issues out of its peaceableness. It increases by experience, by the passage of seasons over it, growth rising out of it and returning to it, not by ambition or aggressiveness. It is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. It keeps the past, not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise. Death is the bridge or the tunnel by which its past enters its future' (1969: 19).

14. Sir Albert Howard, the grandfather of modern organic farming, made the definitive case for the connection between soil vitality and plant and animal life in *The Soil and Health* (2006 [1947]).

understanding I mean the realization that the reality of this life, the nourishment of our eating, is not exhausted by the stuff we consume or eat. Far from being a denigration of materiality, a sacramental sense sees in things a depth and mystery that forever exceeds our comprehensive or practical grasp. Though I may munch on an apple, the life of the apple (including all the lives that fed it), and its ability to feed my life and keep the flow of life all around going, is not extinguished or exhausted by my bite. Whatever I eat over and over again introduces me to life's vitality, mystery, and sanctity, what we might call the inexhaustible and forever fresh liveliness of life.¹⁵

We are not accustomed to thinking of the 'liveliness of life'. The dominant modes of scientific teaching encourage us to think matter is all there is, and so do not equip us to contemplate the life of matter, its inspiration, animation, and maintenance.¹⁶ But this is precisely what deep reflection on food does: it takes us beyond (without disparaging) the food stuff itself to the mysterious, incomprehensible source of liveliness, the life of life. As theologians put it, attention to the thingly character of things eventually brings us to God as their ineffable source. 'All that exists is God's gift to man, and it all exists to make God known to man, to make man's life communion with God' (Schmemmann 1973: 14). Whether we appreciate it or not, whenever we eat we commune with God as the life given in our life. We experience the world as the place of gift or, as theologians put it, *creation*, the 'work of God's hands'.¹⁷

Food is not a proof for God's existence. It is, rather, one powerful means for helping us see the world as not exhausted by its materiality. Spiritual reality, far from being opposed to the material, fills out the material so we can experience it in all its richness and mysterious depth. Without the spiritual, what we have been calling the life of life and the divine source of fecundity and nourishment, the material would be reduced to dust and ash. It would be matter that does not really matter in any ultimate sense. But to see with this sacramental sense requires utmost attention and patience. We must give up the spectatorial glance that so much characterizes our own time, and commit ourselves to the divestiture of egocentric desires. It is crucial that we do this because so much of our perception is clouded by fantasy or fear. We see what we

15. The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins understood this well when he spoke in his poem 'God's Grandeur' of 'the dearest freshness deep down things'.

16. The first chapter of Kass (1994) does an excellent job of demonstrating the reductionism of science as it relates to our inability to think food with spiritual or moral depth.

17. It is important to note that Biblical Hebrew has no equivalent for the modern term 'nature'. It speaks always of the world as 'God's creation'.

want to see or are afraid to see. As we look carefully into any particular food item, we can then discover the many traces of others at work in it. As John Muir once put it, 'When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find that it is bound fast by a thousand invisible cords that cannot be broken...' (quoted in Nash 1987: 85). The thoughtful, thankful eating gaze constantly takes eaters beyond themselves and beyond the things they eat into the rich, nutritious mystery of life.

As we begin to appreciate the complexity and interdependent character of created life, we will also appreciate why memory is crucial to the grace-saying act. When we offer thanks, we remember as best we can the many memberships that constitute and fortify our lives, and note that these memberships have their life as a grace received. Our remembrance, however, is no mere recalling for the sake of display. Rather, we remember so we can pledge ourselves to the celebration, maintenance, and nurture of the creatures and processes that nourish us. When we remember truly, we also commit ourselves to the re-membering of organisms and communities that have been dis-membered by our greed and carelessness. We seek the health of wholeness and interdependence that comes from diverse creatures living in dynamic and vital relationships with each other. Thanksgiving thus becomes an act that unites us in solidarity with the creation in which we move. It confirms our status as creatures among others, always dependent and, given our unique capacities, answerable to others concerning how well or justly we fit in.

Having seen how saying grace involves us in a much richer and deeper understanding of our place in the world, we are now also in a position to appreciate how the grace-saying act fundamentally transforms the way we think of ourselves. Contrary to the modern liberal view that prizes individual autonomy, saying grace alerts us to the fact that, *as creatures dependent upon others for food*, the freedom (and escape?) from interdependent need we desire is ultimately an illusion. We are always beings that *need*. We do not live alone, nor can we expect to live on our own terms. Insofar as we eat, drink, and breathe, we are necessarily and beneficially dependent on the gifts and sacrifices of others. To become completely independent, assuming that were possible, would be to precipitate death. Our bodies live *through* other bodies and never alone. This is why we must follow Berry's observation: 'There is, in practice, no such thing as autonomy. Practically, there is only a distinction between responsible and irresponsible dependence' (Berry 1977: 11).

As the knowledge of our interdependence and responsibility grows, a humble sensibility will be its inevitable accompaniment. As a virtue,

however, humility has fallen on hard times. People are invariably suspicious of claims to humility because such claims are often indistinguishable from shows of false modesty and ploys for power. Moreover, it seems that calls for humility are easily confused with a rather depressing or contemptible view of humanity. Humility, on this view, encourages self-loathing, and thus does little to inspire people to be better. But is this what spiritual writers like St Bonaventure or Bernard of Clairvaux meant when they counseled us to recognize 'our own unworthiness'?

The true sense of humility follows from an understanding of people *as creatures*.¹⁸ This means humility is not a disposition we work ourselves into by effort. It is, rather, the dawning realization that who we are is inseparable from where we are, and that where we are shows us to be utterly dependent on the grace of God and the sacrifices of others. The reason so many people lack an authentic sense of humility is because they are not paying attention to the places—the vast and indescribably complex network of memberships—and communities of organisms that make up our home. If they were attentive, they would quickly see the hubris in all claims to self-standing. They would also see the destructive potential latent in every forgetting of the fragility of our life-giving homes. When we say grace, we practice the mindfulness that calls us into an appreciative awareness of our communities and homes.

The humble person will thus hardly be the meek one who stands by as the memberships of creation unravel and are destroyed. To be humble is also to become a defender of the gifts of creation, and an advocate for the health of the world. When we understand that life does not need to be but nonetheless *is* the expression of an unfathomable grace, then our humble grace-saying act becomes a witness to a better world in which we all take seriously our responsibilities to nurture, care for, and celebrate the gifts of food and nutrition, companionship and help. The pretense of all claims to be self-standing captains of our own fate is exposed as the arrogant and naïve sham that it is.

The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann says that just as grateful eating is an introduction and invitation into the depths of life, so is it also an invitation to bless God and to offer the world and oneself as an act of praise. This is because 'thanksgiving is the power that transforms desire and satisfaction, love and possession, into life, that fulfills everything in the world, given to us by God, into knowledge of God and communion with him' (Schmemmann 2003: 188-89). When we say grace, we do not merely say a few words over our food. Rather, we are

18. I have developed this theme in 'The Touch of Humility: An Invitation to Creatureliness' (2008).

transformed so that our eating of life is also a sympathetic participation in the ways of life. Thanksgiving becomes the means through which we elevate and hold before each other the sanctity and grace of the world. In our thanksgiving, we acknowledge what we receive as a precious and costly gift that is to be cherished, protected, and celebrated.

Practically speaking, this means that as we give thanks for our food, we will also make sure that the food we eat is not a desecration before God. We will boycott and resist those forms of food production that cause unnecessary suffering to animals and that degrade our soils and watersheds. We will support gardeners and farmers that grow food in a healthful and careful manner. We will even learn to grow some food ourselves so that we can see, smell, touch, and taste first-hand the miraculous and fragile processes of birth, growth, death, decay, and rebirth going on all around us.

Human life most becomes its own when we celebrate the sacrament of life, when we transform mundane eating into an act of solidarity with creation and communion with God. Schmemmann continues: 'to offer food, this world, this life to God is the initial "eucharistic" function of man, his very fulfillment as man' (1973: 34). This offering is not without hardship, for as we pledge ourselves to the restoration and celebration of life we will invariably encounter those who maim and destroy life because of their intense, anxious desire to hoard or profiteer from it. They will not look kindly on our efforts to serve and conserve life. But it is not only others we need to worry about. We must also confront and tame the many desires within that seek to seize upon life and treat it as a possession rather than as a gift. In a consumerist world, a world driven by the profitability (to some) of simulated signs, it will be difficult to resist the temptation to take the world by force. This is why we will need the help of each other as we learn the art of saying grace. We need together to develop the sensory capacities and the sympathies and affections that will enable us to see and smell and touch and taste the goodness of God made manifest in our daily bread.

Life is a miraculous, inexplicable gift. It exceeds all economies of exchange. We stand within it, beggar-like, unable fully or properly to receive it because whatever we would claim or take already exceeds our longing and comprehension. The best that we can do is make our lives into an offering to others, not for purposes of repayment (we could never know what sufficient payment would be) but as the effort to overcome the sinful pride and aggression that otherwise would bring life to a halt. In this self-offering, we do not often know what we are doing. Nor can we predict or control what the offering will accomplish. What we can do is open ourselves, commit our talents and wallets, to the

many dramas of life going on around us, trusting that our offerings can enrich the multiple memberships of which we are only one part. We cannot know definitively and beforehand if our gestures, unwittingly, contribute to creation's dis-memberment. But in the act of thanksgiving, we at least express our commitment to remember as best we can, and through this remembering bring healing to creation and praise to God as the life of our life.

Nothing before God belongs to us as our own, if not our ability to say *thank you*. What may appear as the most tenuous, the most slender of all possibilities is in truth the highest and most extensive: the praise that *responds* to the divine giving is the essence of human speech. It is in speech that the gift is received, and that we can give something of our own, in other words ourselves (Chrétien 2004: 123).

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