

Literature Resources and Excerpts on Gratitude

- “What Do We Know”: Poems and Prose Poems
Mary Oliver
ISBN: 0306812061

An Excerpt from “What Do We Know”: Poems and Prose Poems by Mary Oliver

In this collection of 40 poems, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mary Oliver draws our attention to the wonders of the natural world. Here is a poem on the spiritual practice of gratitude.

7. Matins

Now we are awake
and now we are come together
and now we are thanking the Lord.

This is easy,
for the Lord is everywhere.

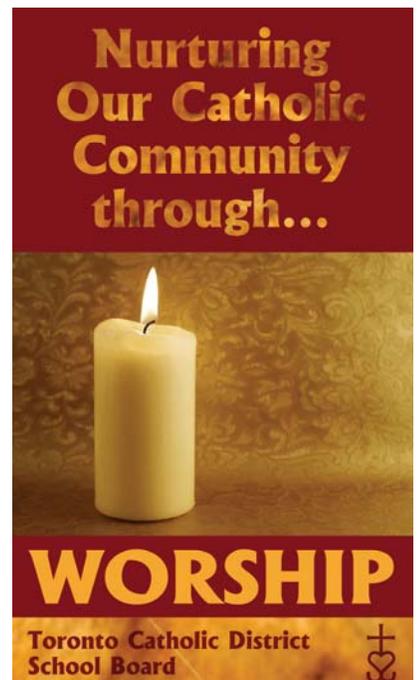
He is in the water and the air;
He is in the very walls.

He is around us and in us.
He is the floor on which we kneel.

We make our songs for him
as sweet as we can

for his goodness,
and, lo, he steps into the song

and out of it, having blessed it,
having recognized our intention,
having awakened us, who thought we were awake,
a second time,



having married us in the air and water,

having lifted us in intensity,
having lowered us in beautiful amiability,

having given us
each other,
and the weeds, dogs, cities, boats, dreams
that are the world.

- *The Gospel According to Oprah*
Marcia Z. Nelson
ISBN: 0664229425

An Excerpt from *The Gospel According to Oprah* by Marcia Z. Nelson

Religious journalist Marcia Z. Nelson presents Oprah Winfrey as a compelling and successful spiritual teacher. Here is an excerpt on gratitude.

Gratitude is said to be a virtue, but I find it helpful to think of it as a practice. Unlike playing the piano, meditating, or playing sports, the practice of gratitude is easy and painless. You practice it each time you thank someone.

Gratitude is like a muscle that needs to be used often. Even if a feeling of gratitude isn't there, practice helps. Practice brings about the sentiment.

In Oprah's gospel, gratitude is recognition of abundance, an acknowledgement of blessings. There is more than enough to go around, and getting a portion of that kindles gratitude. Gratitude measures the distance between have-not and have, and is a reminder of the journey of life.

Gratitude has been a repeated practice and subject on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Oprah has referred to the gratitude journal she keeps. In a gratitude journal, the writer lists five things each day to be grateful for. Keeping the journal provides daily practice. Oprah says she took the lesson of gratitude from the 1995 best-selling book *Simple Abundance* by Sarah Ban Breathnach, who has appeared on a number of shows.

Prayer also gives practice in gratitude. Author Lauren F. Winner writes that saying grace transforms a meal into a celebration. You don't have to pray, but it will help you celebrate. The grateful person knows that she lives well. 'Saying grace suggests not only the *grazie* of thanksgiving but also the clam, gracious elegance of living fully and well,' Winner writes.

M.J. Ryan counts gratitude among what she calls modern virtues. Modern virtues — qualities of heart and mind including patience, kindness, gratitude, and generosity — can be cultivated, she says. Gratitude is noticing what's right and cultivating that recognition often and regularly. 'Is it driving to work, saying something at the dinner table, keeping a journal? The trick is to find the one that you will do.'

- *With Burning Hearts:*
A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life
Henri J. M. Nouwen
ISBN: 1570751161

In this meditation on the Eucharist, Henri J.M. Nouwen ponders the spiritual practice of gratitude. In this excerpt, he contrasts it with the problem of resentment.

The question is whether our losses lead to resentment or to gratitude. Resentment is a real option. Many choose it. When we are hit with one loss after another, it is very easy to become disillusioned, angry, bitter, and increasingly resentful. The older we become, the greater is the temptation to say: 'Life has cheated me. There is no future for me, nothing to hope for. The only thing to do is to defend the little I have left, so that I won't lose it all.'

Resentment is one of the most destructive forces in our lives. It is cold anger that has settled into the center of our being and hardened our hearts. Resentment can become a way of life that so pervades our words and actions that we no longer recognize it as such.

I often wonder how I would live if there were no resentment at all in my heart. I am so used to talking about people I do not like, to harbouring memories about events that gave me such pain, or to acting with suspicion and fear that I do not know how it would be if there were nothing to complain about and nobody to gripe about! My heart still has many corners that hide my resentments and I wonder if I really want to be without them. What would I do without these resentments? And there are many moments in life in which I have the opportunity to nurture them. Before breakfast I have already had many feelings of suspicion, jealousy, many thoughts about people I prefer to avoid, and many little plans to live my day in a guarded way.

I wonder if there are any people without resentments. Resentment is such an obvious response to our many losses. The tragedy is that much resentment is hidden within the church. It is one of the most paralyzing aspects of the Christian community.

- *Radical Gratitude*
Mary Jo Leddy
ISBN: 1-57075-448-9

There is a pervasive ingratitude that hovers over society as a whole and many individuals. Consumerism is at the heart of our discontent. No matter what we have now, it is never enough. We are programmed to want more, better, or different. The billionaire Howard Hughes was once asked how much money it would take to make him happy and he reportedly replied, "Just a little more." Sadly enough, our craving even seeps into our spirituality. Consider the yearning many people have for the latest books, CDs, retreats, or even expensive tours of holy sites.

Leddy believes that ingratitude is "ingrained within every social class within the culture of money" and that it lies at the root of our "difficulty in loving God beyond guilt and in loving others freely." In contrast, the author salutes certain exemplars of gratitude including Albert Camus, Ety Hillesum, and Dorothy Day. Of course, Jesus is the prime example of radical gratitude, and the Eucharist is Christianity's prime ritual of thanksgiving.

Film Resources

- "Babette's Feast", a Danish film, winner of the 1987 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, is set in a small community whose devout members discover that they have reasons to be grateful for both the needs of the flesh and the needs of the spirit.
- "It's a Wonderful Life", Frank Kapra, 1946
- "Harvest of Fire" portrays the friendship between two very different women, a FBI agent and a widow, is enriched by the practice of gratitude in an Amish community.