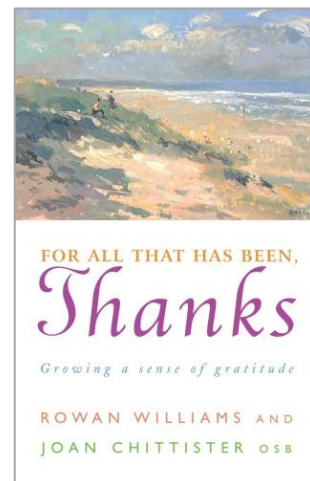


Rowan Williams & Joan Chittister OSP

For All That Has Been, Thanks: Growing a Sense of Gratitude

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Notes Alison Morgan, Feb 2022

Series of essays/meditations, mostly by Chittister, a Benedictine. Big topics, helpful thoughts, at times profound.



Introduction JC

The presence of God in life requires conscious contemplation. What interests you most about the spiritual life, she asked RW. 'I find myself coming back again and again to the meaning of alleluia.' Here begins the book – how to say alleluia in the midst of a life which contains both gain and loss, joy and sorrow.

DISCOVERING WHAT WE ARE

Faith JC

The events of 11 September 2001 forced religion ('Allah be praised') to the forefront of the West's attention. God became a major story. Why? Other disasters have been just as tragic; why put God in the dock for this one? The answer cuts to the core of the spiritual life. It might be that deep down we are still substituting a kind of magic for faith. 'God we make a cornucopia of human desires, a vending machine of human delights.' We coax him to be on our side and call it faith. But faith is the belief that God is leading us to become in tune with the universe; it's confidence in darkness, the willingness to trust, to see him at work in others as well as in ourselves. For all those things we sing alleluia.

Doubt JC

Churches have been far better at giving answers than they have been at receiving questions. Those for whom the questions persist have to choose – either to allow our spiritual lives to be capped at adolescence, or to follow our questions to the centre of the mystery. All great spiritual models of the past found themselves at one point or another plunged into darkness, into the certainty of uncertainty; they wandered, wavered and believed beyond belief. 'The problem with accepting truth as it comes to us rather than truth as we divine it for ourselves is that it's not worth dying for – and we don't. It becomes a patina of ideas inside of which we live our lives without passion, without care.' Doubt is the beginning of real faith.

Wealth JC

Wealth obscures vision; fear of loss, wanting more, being used to excess and the emptiness it engenders. An alleluia for wealth has nothing to do with money, but rather to do with the way we deal with it, what we do with it and how and why. The security holy wealth looks for is the fruit of the good practices it takes to keep on making enough money to give it away to those who need it more.

Poverty JC

Poverty can be simply deprivation. It can also be practised by religious groups as a protest against greed or a model of dependence on God. But poverty can make us grateful – a new book or toy becomes a treasure if you don't have lots already. And poverty is a well-worn road to humility – we know our place in the world when we barely have a place at all. It fosters imagination and inventiveness, and brings a spiritual vision the lack of which may end up corroding the wealthy society in which we live. For 2/3 of the world, it's normal.

Differences JC

We herd, follow, copy others, blend in. Sameness becomes a security blanket, the chameleon the model. But somewhere along the line we must become who we are meant to be as individuals, persons put on earth to contribute as well as take. We must say alleluia to life. It's in our respect for the differences of others that we grow, and in being ourselves that we become truly alive. Learning that comes from knowing the values of

another people, culture, faith can reshape our own; it humbles and frees us. We don't have to either impose or avoid the worldview and values of others.

Divisions JC

Election of George Bush created polarising divisions between Democratic and Republican; and they became not just political but also moral – everything is either good or evil. Nothing has been the same in the US since the toppling of the twin towers. Disunity was everywhere, between previously happy families and communities. But fixed views create, effectively, colourless souls; division of opinion invigorates thinking, creativity comes out of differences. We fear difference because we fear it will bring division; we dislike different ideas in others because they challenge our own vision and values. Being able to think differently from those around us, being able to function lovingly with people who think otherwise is the ultimate in human endeavour.

Conflict JC

Iraq. 'We have no weapons of mass destruction,' the Iraqi PM said; 'but no, you can't inspect us.' The hair triggers of power were cocked and readied; people furious with 19 terrorists lost sight of the thousands who would be the targets of the kind of unjust justice they needed. World conflict sees the opposition of enemies who have never even met, fighting for someone else's agenda and talking about 'liberty'. It's not much different between individuals conflict makes us examine our best beliefs and our most pernicious responses to them. It makes us ask, what kind of country, what kind of person do I really want to be? The way we handle conflict brings us face to face with ourselves – it should be a source of strength, teaching us to resolve difficulties. 'When the only resolution of a conflict is the complete humiliation or destruction of the other, we have long abandoned righteousness in favor of unmitigated power.'

Sinners RW

There are a lot of us around... Sin isn't defiance or naughtiness, 'it's just the condition of being seriously wrong about reality and living against the grain. The committed sinner is the equivalent of the person who is convinced that you can make trains run on black coffee and is determined to go on trying, however much the evidence stacks up in favour of the more usual options. Sin is bound to be, in the long run, deeply frustrating and, objectively speaking, very boring indeed.' When someone says they're a sinner, they mean they have noticed something is wrong; they have become an uncommitted sinner, to the extent that they know the world is bigger than their mistakes. To say alleluia for sinners is to say alleluia for the beginnings of honesty. We trivialise it – but it's about being at odds with reality. Paul understands it as a climate of thinking and behaviour which is bad for others and bad for us.

The early church came up with the 7 deadly sins not as a narrow list of things we shouldn't do but as a health chart or reality check – is our behaviour characterised by these things? Evil is different – not just inhabiting the cloud but affirming that this is good or normal. The good sinner is aware of living in a bigger world than she can see, of being in some ways a slave to illusions; she wonders how it came to this, how she got there; and learns humility.

Saints RW

Actually the same people are sinners. Paul calls the people he's writing to 'saints' when they're clearly just the kind of shambolic failures we recognise rather easily. Being holy isn't a characteristic, it's being in a particular kind of relation to God that allows certain things to happen. 'Holiness is as little a characteristic of a person as light is of a window. Put the window in a particular place and the light comes through put a person in a particular place and God comes through.' To say someone is a saint is not to say that their weaknesses or failures don't matter, or don't exist; 'it's just that they are consciously and courageously standing in a place where the light comes through.'

We live in a cultural climate which expects people to be good or bad; we dress up celebrities and politicians as good, then reinvent them as villains or victims, then restore them to popularity. So there is no sense of a single life, with good and less good elements, mistakes and betrayals, shame and sorrow, recovery, self-knowledge – life becomes a succession of disconnected tableaux.

The people Paul addresses as saints are not extra good; 'they are simply people who have come to live in the vicinity of Jesus and to breathe the same air. It makes their failures and betrayals all the more evident; it may even at times push them into more extreme mistakes. And it doesn't make them automatically popular with those around... it's just that they are awake; they can't pretend that the world hasn't changed.' 'What we need isn't people who are at the top of the class in Being Good, but people who show us the glorious and troubling difference of God.'

BECOMING WHO WE ARE

Genesis RW

His family history, the family farmhouse, the family Bible. 'We need, apparently, to be able to put our lives into a larger context, a longer story, recognising that we can't really tell our own stories without involving this bigger perspective – and that there are things I shan't understand about myself unless I look further. This needn't be a matter of searching for deep psychological currents or compulsions, family curses or family genius, but just the sense of what made my parents who they were, what sort of things made them hopeful or afraid, what they saw out of their windows... so that I can see better what they were passing on to me before I was conscious of it.' We need to know where we come from.

So it's natural that the Jewish and Christian story begins firmly at the beginning. 'Genesis' in Gk means 'becoming'; it's the book about how we became the way we are. The Bible itself starts as a family Bible. But it's not a story of ancestral triumphs, but one about leaving home; about failure, exile, journey. The further back we look at our story, the more clear it becomes that we are never at home – or that being at home is not about place but about trust in God.

And it's about landscape too – if God summons Abraham from Mesopotamia, and recalls the people of Israel from exile, he's also waiting in the new landscape of Palestine, to meet him there. 'Home is God's company: something that can only be discovered as the history of disruption and exile unfolds.' Jerusalem and the temple become the marks of divine presence and involvement; but when they settle there and forget God's requirements they have already spiritually become exiles from the company of the God whose land it has become.

Genesis sets the tone for the whole of the Bible, and we do no justice to scripture if we try to reduce it to stories of infallible discernment by impeccable heroes.

Life JC

'To define life by its pastoral moments only – the goal of a feel-good society – is to understand very little about life at all. Life calls for stronger stuff than that. Life is dirge as well as symphony, lament as well as hymn.'

'Life, we come to understand, is simply the process of growing into God' – but it's 'a process of stops and starts, moments apparently without meaning and times that test the fiber of the soul.' It's not the process of becoming perfect, that's not ours to have, and to seek it is to court failure. It's about consciousness, which makes the most mundane elements of life glorious; knowing there is nothing meaningless in life, that everything we do is bringing us closer and closer to where we're going, even when we don't know where that is. 'Then we surrender our notions of greatness or perfection and find that simply the process of allowing ourselves to become fully human is more than enough to make life worthwhile. We may be ants on a rock in space rather than giants astride the continents... but we come to realize we are blessed ants.' When we realise our own smallness, we can begin to cling to the greatness of God.

Life is three things: physical existence, emotional development and spiritual growth – with all the many diversions we practice to avoid the real thing.

Unity JC

Unity is not all being of one view or on one side (that's Hitler or the invasion of communist Cuba), it's a commitment to becoming one people who speak in a thousand voices; not external control but internal commitment. It's born out of differences: it frees, enables, supports, and listens. It means enabling people to speak without fear or hesitation. 'For the freedom to ask question without reprisal in the face of contrary concepts, sing alleluia.'

Otherness JC

American fear of bogeyman countries – reaction of friends when she said she was going to Russia. How kind the Russians turned out to be. We look for differences and call them bad, rather than simply different. The world is a profusion of differences in concert.

Past JC

The past is never really past; we live it every day of our lives. Wherever we are, we are the product of where we've come from. It's 'a storehouse of memories that have formed us and shaped us and prepared us for worlds far beyond the one in which we grew.' But it's also the awareness that what we have survived before, bested

before, done before, we can do again. 'The best proof we have against destruction and despair is our memories of having wrestled with life before now – and prevailed.'

Peace JC

Tiananmen Square. A powerful force. 'Ambition wilts in the face of peacefulness. The peaceful person knows the grace of being content with who he or she is. No titles or tenure are needed to assure such a one of his or her worth; therefore no one and nothing can threaten it.' Pride, the need to supersede another, to consume more of the light than others, that too fades in the face of peacefulness. Peace comes by accepting who we are and what we have as being enough.

Suffering JC

We lose house, job, savings – this changes our lives but does not eat us up from the inside out, because we do not blame ourselves. A second kind of suffering comes from things we do to ourselves, things of our own making that plague us for years. These are the kind that tear us apart for years. But it also gives us compassion for others. 'When we become part of that small population who are isolated from the joy of the rest of the world by pain, we alone are able to speak the language of grief that the other needs to hear.' Psalm [30] – in my good days, I thought I would never be disturbed; until we have borne the blows of life, it's easy to be superficial. Suffering leads us to focus on worthier things than status or property or social contacts.

Crises JC

Story of climber who fell into crevasse, hand trapped, there for days, amputated it with penknife to get out. Crisis is common. Everyone falls into a crevasse someplace along the way of life. Everyone has to amputate something to survive it. Sometimes the crisis comes as financial loss that change a lifestyle or a sense of security. Sometimes it comes in terms of public reputation, the corners we cut at tax time or the relationship we never meant to have. Sometimes it comes as divorce or job loss that leaves us with no home, no one to love, nothing to call success. All of life has changed and found us wanting. Where is God now?

But there are still alleluias. Darkness is a time of confusion; suffering a time of endurance; but crisis is an eruption point, the junction of the ordinary and the cataclysmic, the place in life where change comes with a vengeance. It tests the deepest parts of the self. The alleluia moment comes when we realise life is not about one thing but many, about parts of ourselves we have not recognised, and parts of the self that need to go. Through crises we discover what we are.

Exodus RW

If Genesis shows us what kind of god we have to do with, Exodus spells it out in history – the history that made God's people not just an ethnic unit but a community that becomes distinctive because of the balance and equity of its relationships.

It's said that the best tool of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed – 'if you can convince someone that their subjection is not only normal but in everyone's real interests, you are likely to be very safe.' Slaves and slave owners assumed it was the default position. But is it any better to be dictated to by God?

Yes: because God is not another individual defending his private interests, but the life that animates everything. So when we say we can only become ourselves in relation to him, we aren't talking about subjection to a tyrant – it's more like learning to swim, and having to understand the sea in order to do so. If we won't follow the rhythm of the divine ocean, we won't learn to swim. Real sin is actually hard work, going against the current. 'Real freedom is the freedom of the swimmer in the water or the performer caught up in the music – a freedom to find strength and joy in responding to the rhythm of what's actually there.' And this is what the giving of the law is all about.

Justice, in scripture, cannot be reduced to fairness; it's about a whole climate of social health, the kind of life that rests on trust. Justice isn't 'giving people their rights, it's living and acting in such a way that God's passionate care for and involvement in each person's welfare becomes visible.' That's why we are encouraged to give thanks for the Law.

We've done odd things with the concept of freedom – identifying it with the right to accumulate possessions, to enjoy unrestricted pleasure/gratification, to choose everything from cars to sexual partners. The Exodus vision gives us a jolt. To be free is in fact to accept responsibility, to agree to swim on God's tides. It's not easy.

GROWING INTO THE UNKNOWN

Friday RW

The weekend is a gift from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. But Friday is also a day of loss – we still eat fish... We bring our sinfulness fully into the light in a day of bereavement in which Jesus suffers what we fear to suffer and deserve to suffer; leading into a day in which we remember God's rest, and know that there is nothing left in the universe that can take any further the encounter of God and humanity. Both our working week, and God's working week, end on Friday.

Death JC

The trigger of despair – or the answer to despair? Once we have known death, up close and personal, despair can barely touch us again. Death teaches that life ends only when it ends; that we go on when others die. 'We wake to an empty dawn on the one hand, and a new invitation to life at the same time'. Death is an alleluia moment. We thank God for those who have died, but also for our own new life. We must now choose whether to give in, or to take on the rebirth of ourselves. Death brings newness as well as loss. 'Change throws us open to the universe in a giddy kind of freefall that teaches us faith, that exercises our trust.' Death changes the landscape of both present and future. We gain a new perspective – do the things we thought mattered really matter? And then we get ready for our own death – we decide, in the face of a loved one lost, what kind of person we want to be at the moment all moments end. Death brings growth.

Future JC

'Future, it seems, is the unseen magnet of life before which we all stand helpless and impotent' – it stops thought as well as starts it. If this doesn't happen, or does, then it's all over for me. It calls for trust, it's a panacea for some and a threat to others. 'It is at the edge of the future that we walk off the side of a cliff into the arms of God. The spiritual challenge of the future resides in being able to accept it before we know it.' And it's not what happens, but the attitudes we take to it. Charles Colson went through a prison sentence and came out to a completely new future. So the function of the future is not the achievement of the goals and dreams of the present, but rather to keep us growing beyond our own small designs for ourselves.

Henry Ward Beecher: "No matter what looms ahead, if you can eat today, enjoy the sunlight today, mix good cheer with friends today, enjoy it and bless God for it. Do not look back on happiness - or dream of it in the future. You are only sure of today; do not let yourself be cheated out of it."

Darkness JC

Her wonderful mother got dementia and became someone else. Darkness is the period of life when nothing goes as we expected. It consumes and envelops us, but it also makes us look at life all over again. It insists we become new, find a new way to be in the world. It asks us to choose: to continue as we are, or to go on differently. She chose to cut the emotional bonds to her mother, still care for her but go on differently. She learned to be alone.

God JC

The tsunami in 2004 raised the question: where was God? The greatest outpouring of God-talk over a natural disaster since the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. It was the wrong question. The question is, why praise a God who allows this? The answer is obvious: God made the world, but left it for us to finish. We exploit its riches but we don't put seismic warning systems in place... We can't do what we want to the globe and get away with it.