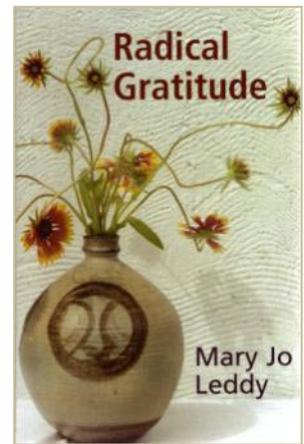


Mary Jo Leddy – Radical Gratitude

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Notes by Alison Morgan May 2009

A wonderful book, full of insight about how to have a healthy relationship with God in the midst of a society which offers other values. She's a Canadian Catholic who lives and works with refugees. Book includes her own poetic meditations. She acknowledges, amongst others, Walter Brueggemann.



1. Beginnings

'I believe that each one of us has at least one significant word to say with our lives. This word is who we really are, who we are meant to become, our calling in this world. Within this word lies the secret of our happiness, the source of our power, and the mysterious point of our being. Through this particular word of our lives we bring the one thing still wanted and awaited in the world, the one thing necessary that no other can give. A particular grace. It is not easy to identify the word, which both concentrates and extends one's life. More obvious to a few, it is usually a long process of discovery for most. Like Jacob we each have an angel to wrestle with, the messenger who reveals our true name which is both wound and blessing.' 1

Book recommends gratitude as an all-encompassing attitude to life. Ingratitude is ingrained in our economic system and in the worldview that has shaped our imagination for more than 200 years. This book is an invitation to ponder gratitude as the most radical attitude to life – one which dissolves the boundary between 'spiritual' and 'material' concerns. Spirit is not different from matter, it is more than matter. It's about ordinary grace, about living an alternative to a driven, consumed and consuming existence. It's about liberation for those who live in a society which is supposed to be the most liberated in the world (US), which is given over to the pursuit of happiness and is nonetheless chronically dissatisfied. Our economic system is based on expansion, which depends on stimulating consumer desire – which creates perpetual dissatisfaction as a habit of being.

Radical gratitude begins when we stop taking life for granted; it arises in astonishment at the miracle of creation, in the recognition of what we have rather than what we don't have. The meaning of life is that we are created for God; specially important in a culture which has lost a common sense of what it is for. In the absence of an overarching common vision, the goal of getting more has filled this social vacuum. In the experience of radical gratitude we know the origin and purpose of our lives.

The church sustains us in gratitude, reminding us that our culture is not the centre of the world and cannot serve as the sole arbiter of significance.

2. Perpetual dissatisfaction

Her experience of being asked by a newly arrived refugee 'who lives there' – in the garage. Realisation that the car, the engine which drives our economy, has also become a vehicle for our identity, happiness, meaning. We don't drive it; it drives us. In advertising we find it symbolises everything we could and should want. It's advertised as an identity – we will expect to be someone by having this car, or that car. In the past identity has come from membership of family, tribe, nation – now it comes from the brand names we wear, what we eat, what we drive. We are seduced by advertising which converts spiritual desires (identity, meaning, happiness) into cravings for things, for a lifestyle rather than a life. The car carries more than passengers; it becomes so freighted with significance that we assume it needs shelter and protection. The problem is not the car but what we make of it.

We live in a culture of money. The average American watches 26 hours' TV a week, which is 13 years in a life time, and 3 years of solid advertising. Through TV and other adverts we are bombarded by 16,000 brand name logos every day. Even those who shun TV have to live in a world shaped by people who have had their consciousness altered by advertising. The result – our culture is constituted through craving. Without consumption there would be no production and no profit; people have to keep wanting more. The problem isn't in the shopping – it arises when we think we are buying identity, meaning, purpose. These things have to be discovered, they can't be purchased. The craving spills over from material possessions to a craving for better experiences, more fulfilling relationships, more information, self-knowledge, even more spirituality – there's a thriving business in selling spiritual things.

Consumerism works only as long as we are even slightly dissatisfied with what we have. It's not a natural dissatisfaction; it's culturally induced. We work harder and longer in order to get just a little bit more. 'I don't have enough' becomes 'I am not enough' which becomes 'I am not good enough'. That produces a sense of powerlessness. 'In other words, the economically induced dissatisfaction in the culture of money not only drives us to shop, it also produces a profound dissatisfaction with one's very self, one's very soul, the core of one's being.' It leaves the inhabitants of the most powerful society in the world feeling generally powerless and vaguely guilty. That produces the sense our lives do not matter, the sense that we can't make a difference. That produces either hyperactivity or paralysis. It creates dissatisfaction with other people, with work, the world, the church. It prevents us from seeing the goodness in others, and makes us judgmental.

Can we be freed from this culture of craving? It helps to view the religious responses forged in other situations of captivity – the most helpful are those associated with the experience of Babylonian captivity. The prophets did not tell people they were victims of a superpower; they spoke the unpopular message that the people were in captivity because of the choices they'd made, because they'd worshipped what they'd produced, idols. They had been led into captivity because their leaders had believed they could buy and sell meaning, identity, happiness. The problem wasn't the economic activity itself; it was their worship of it. Isaiah was a poet; he recalled the vision of another way of being. Poets and thinkers began to ponder an alternative view of life, based on a God who creates. They wrote their own creation story – Genesis. It's a story which tells of a world created out of nothing but love, for nothing but love.

3. Radical gratitude

Waking each day – how we begin a day affects how we live it. 'In this culture, it's not easy to awaken to the marvellous gift of each day and to recognise that it is not necessarily so.' We tend to take things for granted; and that works against gratitude.

'I tend to imagine the HS as a Great Blue Heron'... Stories of gratitude. 'When we stop taking life for granted and recognise it as a gift that is *enough*, we are transformed at a deeply spiritual level of our lives'. 53. Slowly our chains begin to drop. Exercise – review your life and stop at any point with the prayer 'if I had only.. this but not that, it would have been enough'.

We are afflicted with ingratitude. Because we take the basic gift of life for granted, we can assume our lives are what we have made of them; and we are not satisfied with what we have made of them.

The poor may have a special awareness of God's love because they have fewer illusions that they can earn the notice of others or buy their affection and care.

The longer we live ungratefully, the more we strengthen the claims of a culture that takes everything and everyone for granted. As we take others for granted, so we become anxious that we too will be taken for granted.

The Eucharist is the great act of thanksgiving.

4. Creative power

Gratitude begins as small and as real as a child. It enters the world as wonder as simple as a flower.

If we are not convinced that what we do and say makes a difference, then spirituality will become another attempt at escapism and work a dispirited form of activism. We alternate between escape (holiday, retreat) and return to drivenness. Such a pattern of escape and return will continue as long as we remain convinced that gratitude as an attitude is powerless to bring about real change in the world in which we live. Some people feel so powerless externally that they seek power inside themselves, changing the inner world of the self. Cp ad for Second Debut, a skin moisturizer: 'if you can't change the world you can at least change your moisturizer'...

Power is understood in many ways. It's sometimes attributed to individuals, sometimes to groups. Rarely do we think that an idea, such as truth, has power. Like money, it invites us always to want a little bit more. The Enlightenment saw information and reason, science as power; surprise was an attitude to be eliminated, and astonishment, awe, faith and trust were consigned to those who had not yet learned how the world worked. Knowledge became the new source of power and science its tools. So the modern world creates a curious and conflicting experience of power – on the one hand we imagine we have mastery over the world, and on the other we experience ourselves as merely part of some great

machine or system that can be controlled by others. Modernity simultaneously generates images of human beings as all-powerful and nearly powerless.

The great moral issues of our day are ones of control – birth, death. Abortion, designer babies, assisted suicide. Diets and exercise are ways of taking control (though most would not dream of fasting or other forms of spiritual self discipline). Being out of control seems worse than death; we fear unruly teenagers and the tremors of old age.

The result of all this – we know we are not happy, but because we do not seem to be dying or poor, we just continue to cope. How much control do we need? We don't know. But we do know we need to live with mysterious realities that are beyond our control – love, friendship, meaning, purpose, a reason to hope. The world we seek to control has a tendency to shrink... And as our sense of power and our ability to dream decreases, so our resentment increases. And some small part of God's dream for the world dies.

Some of those who feel powerless will inevitably turn to violence. High school shootings. Terrorism. Others embrace the moral high ground available to victims; we can't change things, we must suffer together.

How we think about power is important. Perhaps we should see it in Einsteinian terms, not as a pie to fight for a piece of but as energy. Then we could think about how to activate it. If power is not a thing, it cannot be possessed by an individual, only activated in relationships, when people come together. When power is actualised in relationships, astonishing results may come about – a small project may grow in influence beyond anything we may have imagined. We may become part of something greater and grander. Add in our relationship with God and the horizons expand even more. Relationship with God can be a great source of creative power within a group.

Once we have overcome our false sense of powerlessness, we can assume some sense of power, limited but nonetheless real. Not over birth and death; but over the humble things we *can* influence. Jesus is our example. His power was not something he claimed as a possession, or something God gave him as a donation. It was the energy that was activated through his relationship with God. He didn't hoard power and dole it out as needed; in the act of his speaking, the power of God became audible. As he touched, the energy of God transformed those who were in need. Throughout history, Christians have tried to tame and control the power of Jesus, to institutionalise it. What is left may be authority, but not the power to heal and transform the world. After his death, some of the disciples were tempted to return to their life of powerlessness. But they heard the word, they went out and they made a difference. What can we learn?

- We experience power by being in relationship with God
- We experience power when 2 or 3 are gathered in his name
- This kind of power has to do with the quality of relationship
- Prayer is the sustained interaction with God that provides the condition for participating in the power of God
- A prayerful community of faith provides the condition for sustained interaction between people and God.

5. The point of our being

Our lives are starting to resemble a TV series – episodic, with no overall narrative structure. We can't find the storyline. It's hard to live a consequential life in a culture that lives on episodic meanings. Modernity offered the myth of progress; but his and other lifelines no longer seem strong enough to pull us out of the cultural currents of consumerism. We need to know why we are here and what we are for.

Progress is a myth, accepted even by Christians who supposedly lived by another storyline. The value of a better life seemed obvious; the point became how to get it. We thought we could get it by working hard and being smart. But the myth of progress is built on a radical dissatisfaction with the past and the present; it undercuts any attitude of fundamental gratitude. It's focussed on the future; the past has become obsolete, and the present is being consumed on the way to the future. We do everything for the sake of a better future – save, sacrifice, work.

That hope is now receding. Even within the church, cultural optimism has shaped our thoughts and left us vulnerable to disillusionment when it doesn't work out as we hoped. The myth of progress also creates nostalgia. In the meantime we move from believing things will get better and better to at least hoping we can have more and more. 'where once the vision of modernity was a vast and grand view of history without end, it has now become merely the unending process of consumption, the consumption of everything including time itself.' 113. American foreign policy is determined by the needs of the economy – what's best for trade. That leads us to support dictatorships and abandon human rights; the needs of the economy don't demand democracy but they do demand a stable world order.

Crisis of the middle classes – people defined by the process of becoming middle class, that is by discipline and delayed gratification. There used to be a point, a satisfaction in knowing you were making a difference as a schoolteacher or nurse or doctor. But gradually people became willing to exchange job satisfaction for more money in less satisfying jobs. Dissatisfaction set in and they were no longer willing to delay gratification. People who had sought a life found a lifestyle instead. And yet people have to be united by something. Often it's now little more than a sense of common enemies. The church can't be against the evils in a culture; it has to be for something.

If we stop taking our lives for granted, we can recognise our mere existence is a miracle. We can embrace the certainty that we were created for a purpose. Consider the man who walked by 3 men who were laying bricks. What are you doing? One man said, I'm laying bricks. Another said, I'm earning a living for my family. The third said, I'm part of building a great cathedral.

6. Living with Spirit

It's not that difficult to recognise the need for gratitude, to embrace the conviction that we are most truly ourselves when we act as though we are from God, with God and for God. What matters is whether we choose to change our lives so that they can be rooted in and founded on such insights. Spirituality is not whole, substantial or sustaining until it makes a difference in our lives and in the world. We learn what things are by living them. Gratitude can liberate us in this culture, but we must consciously choose the practices that will liberate gratitude. Principles:

- Begin before you are ready – it's only our cultural illusions that say we should wait for the perfect moment, the ideal situation
- Practice gratitude – at the beginning and end of each day, at mealtimes, on Sundays
- Gather with like-spirited people – liberation does not mean freedom from, autonomy, escape. We cannot be liberated alone; gratefulness grows in relationship. Many in the USSR fought for freedom, and have ended up with shopping.
- Live more simply; to say 'it is enough' liberates us from the demands of the consumer culture
- Look for good examples
- Think with the mind of your heart – gratitude is more than a feeling, it's an attitude
- See from the centre and the edge – learn from the perspective of the poor
- Be connected to a longer tradition / wider community
- Find a beloved community
- Contemplate the face of the world

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