



The Great Gesture That Unites Us, by Brother David Steindl-Rast

I recognize, I acknowledge, I am grateful; in French these three concepts are expressed by one term: “Je suis reconnaissant.”

I recognize the special quality of this joy: It is a joy freely granted to me as a favor. I acknowledge my dependence, freely accepting as a gift what only another, as other, can freely give to me. And I am grateful, allowing my emotions fully to taste and to express the joy I have received, and thus I make it flow back to its source by returning thanks. You see that the whole person is involved when we give thanks from our hearts. The heart is that center in which the human person is one: The intellect recognizes the gift as gift; the will acknowledges my dependence; the emotions, like a sounding board, give fullness to the melody of this experience.

It may be that my intellect insists on suspicion and does not allow me to recognize any favor as favor. Selflessness can not be proved. Reasoning about another person’s motives can only take me to the point where mere intellect must yield to faith, to trust in the other, which is a gesture no longer of the intellect alone but of the whole heart. Or it may be that my proud will refuses to acknowledge my dependence on another, thus paralyzing the heart before it can rise to give thanks. Or it may be that the scar tissue of hurt feelings no longer allows my full emotional response. My longing for pure selflessness, for true gratitude, may be so deep and so much in discrepancy with what I have experienced in the past that I give in to despair. And who am I anyway? Why should any selfless love be wasted on me? Am I worthy of it? No, I am not. To face this fact, to realize my unworthiness, and yet to open myself through hope to love, this is the root of all human wholeness and holiness, the very core of the integrating gesture of thanksgiving. However, this inner gesture of gratitude can only come to itself when it finds expression.

Expression of thanks is a [...] spiral in which the giver receives thanksgiving, and so becomes receiver, and the joy of giving and receiving rises higher and higher. The mother bends down to her child in his crib and hands him a rattle. The baby recognizes the gift and returns the mother’s smile. The mother, overjoyed with the childish gesture of gratitude, lifts up the child with a kiss. There is our spiral of joy. Is not the kiss a greater gift than the toy? Is not the joy it expresses greater than the joy that set our spiral in motion?

But notice that the upward movement of our spiral signifies not only that the joy has grown stronger. Rather we have passed on to something entirely new. A passage has taken place. A passage from multiplicity to unity: we start out with giver, gift and receiver, and we arrive at

the embrace of thanks expressed and thanks accepted. Who can distinguish giver and receiver in the final kiss of gratitude?

Is not gratitude a passage from suspicion to trust, from proud isolation to a humble give and take, from enslavement to false independence to self-acceptance in that dependence which liberates? Yes, gratitude is the great gesture of passage.

And this gesture of passage unites us. It unites us as human beings, for we realize that in this whole passing universe we humans are the ones who pass and know that we pass. There lies our human dignity. There lies our human task. The task of entering into the meaning of this passage (the passage which is our whole life), of celebrating its meaning through the gesture of thanksgiving.

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