

Gratitude assembly

One of my personal heroes lived about two thousand years ago. His name was Marcus Aurelius; he was emperor of Rome from 161 to 180AD, when he died at the age of 58. He kept a notebook at his bedside, in which he would write his private thoughts – a personal record, meant only for his eyes. It has survived and you can read his words today. The book is called *Meditations*. Marcus wrote many wise and beautiful things, but this morning I would like to reflect upon just one of his many ideas – the importance of gratitude. We need to think well, treat others well and be grateful, because “The soul becomes dyed with the colour of its thoughts.” Marcus’ advice was simple: “When you arise in the morning think of what a privilege it is to be alive, to think, to enjoy, to love ...” We should all try to be grateful.

One of the great psychoanalysts was Melanie Klein, who emphasised the importance of two emotions in our personal development. The first was envy, the second gratitude. She defined envy as "the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable – the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it". Envy exists in opposition to gratitude. Gratitude is inborn and is crucial in developing the primal relationship between mother and child. It is also the basis for the child perceiving goodness in others and in itself. "The sense of an object being available and freely given arouses care, consideration and gratitude as part of the life instinct." Gratitude is important because it shapes the child’s capacity for love in subsequent relationships throughout life. Envy does the opposite, because envy destroys and desecrates that which is good.

We know we should feel grateful about the good aspects of our lives more often. But gratitude is rarer than it should be. Perhaps that is because gratitude can feel a little backwards looking and passive. When we are grateful, it is often in reflection of things past, undertaken at a moment of quiet. So often in our day-to-day lives we are dominated by striving: for better relationships, happier working lives, higher and greater achievements. The advocates of gratitude sound like they are recommending that we be content with how things already are. Gratitude could be taken as an excuse for acceptance of the status quo: ‘You don’t like that? Well, be grateful that it isn’t something much worse...’

A love of gratitude is also at odds with the underlying attitude of modern society. Our society today promotes ambition and rewards an intense focus upon excellence. Restlessness is seen as the precondition of progress. Nothing should be considered ‘good enough’ for very long. The idea of being content with what we have and who we are has come to feel strange and dangerous.

We need to challenge that approach, which is why I think it is so important to be grateful – to appreciate what we have and to recognise the value of simple, natural things. Marcus Aurelius was a convincing advocate of gratitude because he knew so much about power and success. We take note when a Roman emperor, who has everything he could possibly want, points out that we should be deeply grateful for a sunny day, a tasty piece of fruit or a summer evening. This is not about being naïve and simplistic – people who appreciate wonderful or beautiful things are not ignorant of suffering and they are not living in denial of the problems of the world.

They know all that, and have concluded that, ultimately, it is small, outwardly humble, but deeply significant things that make the journey worthwhile.

Why do we grow ungrateful in the first place? Fear may have something to do it. Many of us fear enjoying the present moment – as if to pause to appreciate a flower or the movement of clouds over the horizon might make us vulnerable in some way. Further, we are very frequently tempted to go down the opposite path to gratitude, and embrace the emotion of envy. Social media and a thousand other influencers try to persuade us to look at ourselves and make an unflattering comparison with others. They do it because you are more likely to buy a product if you are feeling negative than if you are enjoying a happy feeling of gratitude.

To make things worse, we are prone to comparisons that are deeply unfair to our achievements and strengths. The problem is what the media presents as ‘normal’. The truth is that nothing you see or hear in the media is normal. No life is as perfect as it is presented on Facebook or Instagram. Remember, you are not an outlier: you are a normal person: they are the freaks and oddities, not us. Reject their false glamour.

In sonnet 29, Shakespeare is experiencing these feelings:

“When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least...”

What should we do instead? I would like us to take pride in cultivating a forgiving, hopeful perspective: in knowing how to be as good a friend to ourselves as we are to others. Such a perspective must be built around gratitude. We should be able to identify those things that have made a difference, that have enriched our lives. If they exist within ourselves, we should take pleasure in our achievement. If they come from someone else, we should be able to feel gratitude and express our thanks. If they come from the world around us, we should be able to take time to pause, and notice and appreciate. So if you found the strength to be kind to another, respect yourself for it. If someone did something for you, remember to say thank you. And be on the lookout for those little everyday wonders, which illuminate your life with happiness. And be grateful for them.

The big things are important. Of course, we should be grateful for our health, or our family, or our friendships, or our talents, or our capacity to love. However, I would like to finish by focusing upon some of the smaller things that we should be grateful for. Little things that improve our lives. Things that might be overlooked if we were not on the lookout for them. When I was writing this assembly, I asked myself what small things I was grateful for. I wrote down the first four things I thought of. They were: snow, bacon, birds coming to my bird feeder and the coolness on the other side of the pillow. I recently did a straw poll amongst the staff to ask what they were grateful for. They came up scores of wonderful suggestions. I share a small selection with you:

- Finding your way with an OS map
- An unexpected treat, such as being brought a cup of coffee during a lesson

- The peacefulness and wildlife round the school lakes
- The moment of silence that comes after you finish playing something on an instrument
- The cows in the fields around school
- When boys say thank you at the end of the lesson
- Bluebells
- Hearing music being played as I walk around school
- Uplifting bright, slanting, golden morning light
- When someone makes a cake and brings it in to share
- Clouds
- Grapes
- Dust in shafts of sunlight

May I suggest you do the same? What are you grateful for? Start to exercise those gratitude muscles. Find more and more things – and people – to be thankful for and build up your reserves of gratitude. The world out there wants us to feel envy. But how does the sonnet I quoted earlier finish? Like this:

“Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
 Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
 (Like to the lark at break of day arising
 From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven’s gate;
 For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
 That then I scorn to change my state with kings.”

Let us, like the lark at break of day arising from sullen earth, live like a Roman emperor by filling ourselves with gratitude.