

Complicating Gratitude

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I can remember celebrating Thanksgiving when I was in elementary school. Every year, we wrote things we were grateful for on paper leaves and taped them to a tree – or some similar activity. We wrote things like friends, family, pets, games, food and water, art supplies, and vacation places. It felt simple then – everything I had, I felt that I could and should be grateful for. I thought that feeling grateful was all that I was expected and called to do.

But gratefulness to many of us in Young Adult Group feels more complicated. We are grateful for family, friends, and community. But I, like many of us in Young Adult Group, am white and the history of white people is littered with stories of ways we have damaged, separated, or destroyed the families and communities of native people and people of color. Though I know little of the history of my ancestors and the lives they led in Germany, Russia, the Ukraine, and later, the United States, I assume that the presence of my family on this planet was made possible, in part, by the destruction of other families. Can we be fully grateful for families, communities, and ancestors who we know have caused pain.

We are likewise grateful for the resources we have access to that meet our basic needs... clean water, healthy food, housing, etc. But so many people don't have those things. Can we be fully grateful for things we have that so many lack?

And I know I am not alone in my feelings of uncertain gratefulness for the comforts I enjoy that are not necessities. I have clothes that I rarely wear. I've set the thermostat higher than it needs to be. I purchase more fresh vegetables in winter than is environmentally advisable. I watch movies when I could be staying abreast on the news. Should we feel gratitude for our excesses and guilty pleasures?

When we face these realities, what are we to do? Is gratitude misplaced? In the face of hunger, sickness, and suffering, perhaps gratitude is the only appropriate response. To not feel gratitude would be to take for granted, which only contributes to feelings of scarcity and overconsumption. Feeling gratitude does not mean we must be complacent, as I was in elementary school; it can fuel our justice work. Feeling gratitude for how our needs are met can inspire us to work to make sure that everyone has their needs met, too.

Feeling gratitude does not have to exclude other emotions. We can be grateful for the existence of comforts us in our lives as we simultaneously yearn for our wants and actions to better align with the needs of the world, for a self that finds pleasure in the comforts given away rather than received. Likewise, we can be both deeply grateful for our ancestors, families, friends, and communities and deeply sorrowful at the heartbreak that has been perpetrated and experienced by those ancestors, families, friends, and communities.

May we feel gratitude for the ways in which we and others have been blessed. May we grieve the ways in which we and others have suffered and continue to suffer heartbreak. May both spur us into continued work for justice.