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## What or Who?

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## What or Who?

Parents teach their children to say “thank you” when people give them a material gift, treat them with kindness, or provide them with some kind of service. But children also might receive the impression that some of the good things of life come to us from a vague and detached source when they hear adults say things like “thank your lucky stars” or when they state other expressions of gratitude that are impersonal. As adults, most of us have come to believe that, for all the gifts we receive, we only give thanks to persons, not things.

When we give thanks to God or to the many people whose words and deeds are supportive, helpful, caring, and respectful, even the most grateful among us might at times use distancing metaphors or vague general acknowledgments instead of direct expressions of our appreciation. If we let ourselves become so accustomed to the benefits we receive that we rarely articulate gratefulness, and fail to manifest it in some conscious manner, we can fall into the dark place of considering ourselves as “entitled.” We cannot experience gratitude if we see everything as owed to us. Gratitude, when sincerely expressed according to our personality, turns mere material goods that we receive, and ordinary words and actions of care that are given to us, into the most valuable of human experiences: love.

Much of the meaning and beauty in life is directly connected with the spirituality of giving thanks, since authentic gratitude is both interpersonal and related to benefits that are real. Though we are unique individuals, we live in an environment of relationships that enable us to become who we are. No one is really a “self-made” person, as none of us gave ourselves birth, nurture, and the human culture in which we have grown. When we reflect on even some of our basic functions, such as breathing, thinking, imagining and making decisions, we will become aware of the giftedness of such realities. While some might think that gratitude does not apply when considering our human capabilities, if we choose to see God as the loving giver of these same basic operations, we will experience innate joy in giving thanks.

Gratitude is so fully in keeping with our nature, that we experience joy when we exercise this gracious capability of our hearts. If we withhold giving thanks under the assumption that we entirely deserve what we have received, or have earned it, we neither receive nor give the satisfaction that arises from gratefulness. We might earn a salary or win a prize through our own efforts, but all the qualities that enable us to do so have come to us as gifts of God directly or through other persons.

Just as the American holiday of Thanksgiving does not oblige us in any way, gratitude is not an obligation imposed upon us by some rule of law. Rather, it is a reminder of our interdependence, as is every true religious exercise, whether public or private. There is nothing in our experience that we cannot rightly attribute to the surrounding yet detailed and particular love for us that has and is given to us by people and by God.

An everyday reflection question: For what shall we give thanks, and to whom?