

BOOK REVIEW:

Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks

by Diana Butler Bass

Reviewed by Teresa Kaldor, CENetwork of the ELCA

In one of her most recent books, *Grateful*, Diana Butler Bass challenges us to look at gratitude from a new perspective. An accomplished writer, religious scholar, and respected commentator on contemporary spirituality, Bass uses historical research, deeply personal anecdotes, and recent events in American politics to explore the complex nature of gratitude for both individuals and communities.

Bass starts with a personal confession of how she has struggled throughout her life with expressing gratitude. She is not alone. Surveys of Americans find that a majority of people feel gratitude on a regular basis and yet there seems to be little evidence of it in our current culture. The author continues by exploring the concept of gratitude, finding that it includes a wide range of emotions as well as actions taken in response to gifts received (what she calls the ethics of gratitude). In addition, gratitude is both personal and communal. For Bass, it is essential to have all these aspects of gratitude for the health of the individual and for the well-being of our society.

She warns against the type of transactional *quid pro quo* gratitude so prevalent in Roman hierarchical society and still found in business and power politics today. Instead, Bass calls us to practice “*pro-bono* gratitude.” The author explains that we do this, “[n]ot because we expect anything in return, not out of a reciprocal obligation, but simply because it is the right thing to do and spreads benefit to the entire community.” (p. 165) While this is not an overtly religious book, Bass does point out that God is the ultimate source of all gifts and we as Christians are called to spread those blessings to each other. Seeking to instill habits of gratefulness in her own life, Bass shares, in her epilogue, habits to cultivate personal gratitude and suggestions to foster gratefulness as part of our communal life.

In a time of strident politics, increased racism, a pandemic and economic fallout, this book seems especially relevant. Gratitude can be hard to come by when we focus on what we don’t have, what we have lost, what society says we need. We are, in reality, the beneficiaries of gifts on a daily basis; we need to take the time to recognize them. As recipients of God’s unending grace, giving thanks should be at the core of our life of faith even in the midst of difficulties. Bass contends, “Gratitude is defiance of sorts, the defiance of kindness in the face of anger, of connection in the face of division, and of hope in the face of fear.” (p. 185)

As Christian educators, we can help individuals as well as our communities nurture gratitude as a spiritual practice, focus on the abundance of gifts and our response, and take action which embraces

all rather than demands reciprocity. Diane Butler Bass has offered a thoughtful book to inspire us to incorporate gratitude in our daily life and help us find a path forward.

For individual and small group resources for this book, check out:

- Seven-Day Guide to Gratitude, companion to ***Grateful*** www.dbb2021.wpengine.com
- HarperOne Small Group Guide for ***Grateful*** www.smallgroupguides.com
- The Work of the People 6-session Grateful Curriculum which includes short videos with Bass along with discussion/prayer practice guide. www.theworkofthepeople.com
- Links for podcasts, visit [Resources for Reading and Studying Grateful | Diana Butler Bass](#)

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