

How do you give thanks without religion? Easily and often



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GUEST COMMENTARY

This is a season for a lot of gratefulness. The beauty of trees and skies. Cool, crisp, star-lit nights. Migrating birds and sleeping bears. A time for many to gather with family for the national holiday. But how can someone without family give thanks? And how can someone without faith offer thanks? Good questions.

Thanksgiving is the perfect holiday for believers and unbelievers to celebrate. This shouldn't be too shocking, since a national day set aside for appreciation seems ideal for everyone regardless of religious belief. I hear the objections: "That makes no sense! We gather to give thanks to GOD! Holiday means HOLY-day, so if you don't believe, this day isn't for you!"

I hear you; really I do. But since we're Americans too, allow me to show some ways that secular citizens can still be thankful people. This may also be encouraging for nonreligious neigh-

bors who can often feel a little left out of celebrations.

If a person has no family, or is far from their family, they can still find someone to say thank you to, and something to be thankful for. They can thank their loved ones. They can thank people doing compassionate work — in nonprofits, for example — for all the good done throughout the year. They can wave a "thank you" to a stranger simply for giving a parking space, for a friendly smile or for opening a door out of courtesy (this still happens sometimes!).

Freethinking people can always be thankful for freedom of speech, freedom of thought and the freedom to not believe what someone else believes. This doesn't have to be an angry rejection. It can be a positive acknowledgment that liberty is a wonderful gift from our founders, our defenders and all those who have worked to preserve our basic human rights.

We can't forget there are many who aren't feeling very grateful this time of year. Many of our neighbors are still unhoused, addicted, struggling to find support or anyone who cares. I lost both

my parents in this darker time of year. It can be quite depressing.

There are no magic words to make us or another person thankful. Yet contentment is possible when the small things are appreciated — if we take the time to notice.

Simply breathe. Take a walk. Listen to the wind, the birds, the howl of coyotes, the babble of a baby. Be appreciative, and show it. Why not? Thank someone and they usually thank you a right back. That's a gift, isn't it?

There is always something to be thankful for in Nature. I take heart in the enthusiastic words of naturalist John Muir, who, in one day in the mountains, was delighted by three wild friends: a "restless fussy fly with gauzy wings," a bear who appeared as a "rugged boulder of energy" and a grasshopper who danced for him as a "crisp, electric spark of joy."

At sundown, the weary mountaineer returned to camp and scribbled in his smoky journal, "Thank you, thank you all three for your quickening company. Heaven guide every wing and leg. Good-night friends three, good-night" (from "My First Summer in the Sier-

ra").

"Ah-ha!" you might say. "See! He says 'heaven guide.' He was thankful to God." Well, yes, he was that too. Muir was a believer and he often spoke of the divine, of spiritual things. He had the Bible memorized.

Yet in his journals Muir made a startling statement: "No synonym for God is so perfect as Beauty ... all is Beauty!" As for heaven, the wild Scotsman felt he was already sauntering the paths of paradise. He said that even the most fervent preacher might awaken in mountain beautyland and "fancy himself in heaven."

Whether we gather or not this Thanksgiving with family or friends or the wild things of the forests or mountains, the most important thing, in my mind, is that thankfulness is fundamentally natural, and, grateful people make gratefulness contagious. Isn't it a happy thought that every one of us can find that "crisp, electric spark of joy" in each day throughout the year?

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