

Maya Angelou in her book *Celebrations* says this: “Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayers.” That pillow of gratitude forms the foundation of today’s scripture.

The healing stories of Elisha and Naaman · Jesus and the 10 lepers · are ones we’ve heard many times. Today we’ll journey into these stories a bit differently. Let’s consider our homily time to be like the travel section of the newspaper. However, instead of going to specific geographic places, we will travel with our mind and heart into places of gratitude.

A couple of weeks ago I traveled to Seattle, WA for the Dawn of Interspirituality Conference. It was situated on 220 acres of pristine woodlands and farmland. 160 people from all over the world representing nearly every faith tradition were in attendance. There were presentations, breakout sessions, and times of sharing on many topics. My intention in going was to just be in the presence of people with rich and diverse spiritualities and to experience ritual and prayer from many faith traditions. This conference far exceeded my expectations. During this time I traveled into places of joy, surprise, pain, healing, and gratitude. I’d like to share some experiences with you that embody the message of today’s readings.

During the conference I had dormitory accommodations with 6 other women from Ireland, Oregon, Washington State, and California. There we were · all in our 40s and 50s · living again the college life of being dorm buddies! The late night conversations we traveled into were truly priceless and grace-filled, and I continue to smile and be thankful for them. I asked a couple of these women if I could share some of their stories, which I believe embody what traveling into gratitude is about.

One of my roommates, Melissa, shared that her spiritual practice is Buddhism and she worships at a United Church of Christ to experience community. One Sunday she received

communion and her experience was nothing short of extraordinary. As she took the bread into herself, she felt herself become one with it. She became the sacrifice and actually felt herself being poured out in loving service to others in that moment. Her experience during this ritual meal embodied who we receive—the body of Christ—poured out in loving service to others. Here was eucharist—articulated, shared, and lived in Melissa’s life. All of us who heard and felt Melissa’s sharing traveled into gratitude, for who she is and for her sharing of a deeper, more tangible expression of a Eucharistic meal. Until our conversation Melissa had never shared that experience because she didn’t know anyone who would understand her. I am thankful that Melissa risked sharing this mystical experience with us. I am grateful not only that Melissa enriched our faith but also that she felt appreciated and revered through our listening presence. Melissa was grateful she could share her experience and we were grateful to receive it. This travel into gratitude was profound for all of us.

A second story is about another dorm buddie, Amy. She had a different kind of experience, one that is a dark night of the soul. Amy is Catholic but left the institutional church about a year and a half ago. She had been very involved in her parish, and to have her beliefs and her community fall away into nothingness was quite unsettling. Traveling through this darkness has been a walk into searching, healing, and trust. Now she sometimes worships at a Jewish synagogue and recently found that she has some family roots in Judaism. Amy also shared with me how grateful she is to have found like-minded people at this conference who understand her. Although her path is still dark and unknown, she knows that our group and other people she met at this conference will prayerfully companion her into freedom and light. For that she is most thankful. I left for my plane quite early that Friday morning, and Amy was the only one awake. We embraced as she offered me blessings on my journey. I then offered her

blessings of peace and said: “Come home to yourself, wherever that is.” In that moment I, too, traveled into gratitude for who Amy is and for the gift of receiving her story.

As a third example, another woman I met at the conference shared with me her story of suffering sexual abuse for many years. She has been on a 20-year journey of inner healing. During our conversation she felt the final missing piece of her healing puzzle connect within herself, felt a tingling sensation throughout her body, and experienced profound healing. All her emotional and psychological work over the years came together in that unexpected moment of healing. She has traveled many miles within herself and is deeply grateful for her healing. She wants others to know that healing can and does take place. She will always be thankful for that moment in Seattle, and I, too, am so deeply grateful to have shared that profound healing moment from God with her.

In each of these examples—a mystical experience, a dark night of the soul, and a deep inner healing—the person was open and self-disclosing. In each case they felt listened to and revered by those who received their story. And in every instance they traveled into gratitude in some way. It is also important to note that the gratitude was reciprocal—those who shared their story, as well as those who listened to it, traveled into thankfulness.

I felt honored to receive these and many other stories that were brimming over with God’s grace. I feel deeply grateful that people could gather from all over the world to peacefully share and learn from one another’s faith traditions. As the conference progressed, I traveled even more deeply into gratitude—for who was there, for our meaningful sharings, and for the softening of rigid edges between our traditions. There was an acceptance of and appreciation for the unique beauty of each tradition. For that I am most thankful.

Each of us is traveling an inner path that is reflected in some way in our outward journey.
I invite you to take a reflective moment this week to look at where you are traveling and to notice whether gratitude is included in your travel itinerary.

Keep traveling. Healing awaits. And let gratitude be your pillow.

Scripture Readings—28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
2 Kings 5: 14-17
First Book of the Odes of Solomon 8: 1-6
Luke 17: 11-19

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