

Giving Thanks for the Web of Interdependence

Much has been made this year of expressing gratitude to frontline and essential workers. Whether in healthcare, grocery stores, or other industries, these individuals put their lives on the line to serve others, forming a strong link in the web of interdependence we all share.

Yet expressing such gratitude often requires us to notice events from a different vantage point than our own habitual stream of thinking. In his [Meditations](#), Marcus Aurelius instructed himself: “Keep reminding yourself of the way things are connected, of their relatedness.” Aurelius pointed us to the often invisible connected nature of life: “All things are implicated in one another and in sympathy with each other.”

Unfortunately, when an individual or group acts selfishly, the natural sympathy Aurelius mentions is trampled. Such seems to be the case with teachers’ unions in Montgomery County, Maryland, whose self-focused efforts have kept the school district largely closed to in-person teaching, [James Bovard reports](#).

The heaviest impact of shuttered schools has been on minority students:

Since the county padlocked public schools earlier this year and shifted to unreliable ‘distance learning,’ there has been a 500%+ increase in the number of black junior high students failing mathematics and a 600%+ increase in Hispanic students failing. The percentage of black elementary school students failing English increased more than 350% and the percentage of Hispanic students failing increased more than 500%.

Schools can safely open and have been urged to do so by Maryland state government officials. Private schools have done

so successfully, but as Bovard writes, public school teachers prefer to “continue to collect full pay while taking zero risks and leaving the most vulnerable students far behind.”

Are there at-risk teachers? Of course, and special arrangements can be made for them. Presumably, though, most Montgomery County teachers shop at supermarkets and take other risks that come with daily existence.

The average salary of a Montgomery County public school [teacher is listed as over \\$60,000](#) on Indeed, while a supermarket clerk might [make \\$15 an hour](#). Each day hundreds of people pass through supermarket checkout lines. Perhaps, like me, you have noticed high-risk seniors among the supermarket workers serving diligently throughout this pandemic.

The risks supermarket workers take to serve us is many orders of magnitude larger than a schoolteacher who encounters the same students daily.

One wonders if these teachers need to see life in sympathy with others, asking themselves whether life is really about feathering one’s own nest. If everyone adopted the attitude of teachers’ unions, life would come to a halt, for we are indebted to an unimaginable number of other people.

Author, lecturer, and humorist, Jonathan Robinson has an antidote to the craven selfishness rampant among Montgomery County school teachers and others who shelter while being served by others. My telling of his humorous, apocryphal tale is [adopted from his print](#) and live versions, such as his [Google talk](#).

Robinson [heard of an Indian guru](#) who taught a “magical mantra” that “helped people develop an attitude of gratitude.”

After traveling 18 hours by airplane and four hours by rickshaw to learn the mantra, Robinson arrives at the guru’s ashram. Sweating, jet-lagged, and now extremely upset he waits

in line for five hours for his audience with the guru, who finally whispers in Robinson's ear, "Ah yes, my technique is the most powerful mantra on earth. Whenever possible, repeat the following words in your head. The magical mantra I give you is the words 'Thank You.'"

Agitated, Robinson replies, "That's IT!?"

The guru instructs Robinson: "No 'that's it' is the mantra you have been using, and that mantra makes you feel like you never have enough." The guru continues, "That's it' will take you nowhere, but 'Thank You' will quiet your mind and open your heart. So when you eat good food, say thank you! When you see your child, or a sunset or your pet, repeat the mantra 'thank you,' and soon you will have an attitude of gratitude for each blessing in your life."

The guru's wisdom finally reaches Robinson. On his trip home, he begins to notice the miracles of modern life, air conditioning, flush toilets, airplanes, computers, and he feels the words "thank you" swelling in his heart and forming on his lips.

"That's it" is the great mindset scourge of our time. "That's it" makes the whole of humanity less than the sum of its parts. We grumble as we perceive we are on the short end of the stick. "That's it" makes it difficult to view life in sympathy with each other.

In viewing life in sympathy with each other, gratitude arises for those who, like healthcare and grocery store workers, put themselves at risk to serve us. We see our place in life as serving others even as others serve us.

In viewing life in sympathy with each other, the education and mental health of children matters to teachers. Gratitude for the opportunity to teach diminishes demands to be sheltered.

Gratitude does not depend upon circumstances; gratitude is a

function of our state-of-mind. We did not create ourselves, and without others, we are doomed. Mutual interdependence is a fundamental truth of life. Gratitude for others taking risks to serve us calms our minds and opens our hearts, and we make better choices as we take our place in the web of interdependence.

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