

Gratitude assembly

One of my personal heroes lived about two thousand years ago. His name was Marcus Aurelius; he was emperor of Rome from 161 to 180AD, when he died at the age of 58. He kept a notebook at his bedside, in which he would write his private thoughts ó a personal record, meant only for his eyes. It has survived and you can read his words today. The book is called *Meditations*. Marcus wrote many wise and beautiful things, but this morning I would like to reflect upon just one of his many ideas ó the importance of gratitude. We need to think well, treat others well and be grateful, because ðVj g uqwndgeqo gu f {gf y kj vj g eqmwt qhku vj qwi j u.ö O ctewøcf xleg y cu ukø r rø: ðY j gp {qwctkug kþ vj g o qtpkpi vj kpmqh what a privilegi g kvku vq dg crkxg, vq vj kpm vq gplq{, vq mxxg ...ö We should all try to be grateful.

One of the great psychoanalysts was Melanie Klein, who emphasised the importance of two emotions in our personal development. The first was envy, the second gratitude. She defined envy as "the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable ó the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it". Envy exists in opposition to gratitude. Gratitude is inborn and is crucial in developing the primal relationship between mother and child. It is also the basis for the child perceiving goodness in others and in itself. "The sense of an object being available and freely given arouses care, consideration and gratitude as part of the life instinct." Gratitude is important because it uj cr gu vj g ej kf ø ecr cek{ hqt mxxg kþ subsequent relationships throughout life. Envy does the opposite, because envy destroys and desecrates that which is good.

We know we should feel grateful about the good aspects of our lives more often. But gratitude is rarer than it should be. Perhaps that is because gratitude can feel a little backwards looking and passive. When we are grateful, it is often in reflection of things past, undertaken at a moment of quiet. So often in our day-to-day lives we are dominated by striving: for better relationships, happier working lives, higher and greater achievements. The advocates of gratitude sound like they are recommending that we be content with how things already are. Gratitude could dg vcnrp cu cp gzewug hqt ceegr vpep qh vj g ucwus vq: -[qw f qpøvknng vj cvA Y gm dg i tcvghm vj cvkvkupøvuoqo gvj kpi o vej y qtug...ø

A love of gratitude is also at odds with the underlying attitude of modern society. Our society today promotes ambition and rewards an intense focus upon excellence. Restlessness is seen as the precondition of progress. Nothing should be eqpukf gtgf -good enoughø for very long. The idea of being content with what we have and who we are has come to feel strange and dangerous.

We need to challenge that approach, which is why I think it is so important to be grateful ó to appreciate what we have and to recognise the value of simple, natural things. Marcus Aurelius was a convincing advocate of gratitude because he knew so much about power and success. We take note when a Roman emperor, who has everything he could possibly want, points out that we should be deeply grateful for a sunny day, a tasty piece of fruit or a summer evening. This is not about being naïve and simplistic ó people who appreciate wonderful or beautiful things are not ignorant of suffering and they are not living in denial of the problems of the world.

They know all that, and have concluded that, ultimately, it is small, outwardly humble, but deeply significant things that make the journey worthwhile.

Why do we grow ungrateful in the first place? Fear may have something to do it. Many of us fear enjoying the present moment ó as if to pause to appreciate a flower or the movement of clouds over the horizon might make us vulnerable in some way. Further, we are very frequently tempted to go down the opposite path to gratitude, and embrace the emotion of envy. Social media and a thousand other influencers try to persuade us to look at ourselves and make an unflattering comparison with others. They do it because you are more likely to buy a product if you are feeling negative than if you are enjoying a happy feeling of gratitude.

To make things worse, we are prone to comparisons that are deeply unfair to our achievements and strengths. The problem is what the media presents as ~~þqto cix~~ The truth is that nothing you see or hear in the media is normal. No life is as perfect as it is presented on Facebook or Instagram. Remember, you are not an outlier: you are a normal person: they are the freaks and oddities, not us. Reject their false glamour.

In sonnet 29, Shakespeare is experiencing these feelings:

ōY j gp, kō f kii tceg y kj hqtwpq cpf o gpāu g{gu,

