# Ruminations

**A Seasonal/Quarterly Spiritual Formation Resource from Zoe-Life Explorations**

**[especially designed as a guide for personal or small group retreats-devotions]**

Issue 5 November, 2019

## *Thanksgiving: The Power & Promise of Gratitude*

by Jim Reiter

D+: it was an eye-opener of a grade—knocking the wind out of me!

The formal assignment had been to write a "critical review" of one of our readings in a Church History class. It's not that I thought I deserved an A. But, a D+!?! Surely, there'd been some kind of mistake.

There was. It was mine.

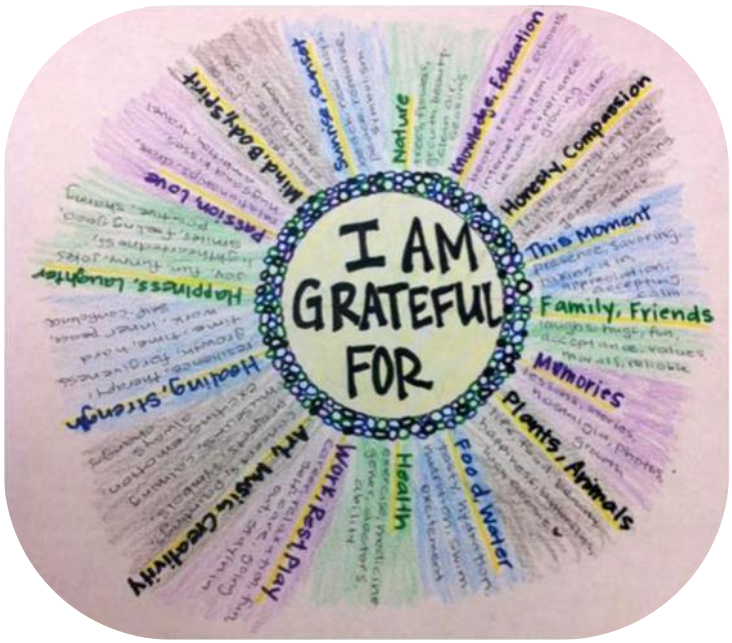
"The assignment was to write a 'critical review'," the professor explained. "That means assessing a book for its weaknesses *and* its strengths. All you did was focus on what you saw as deficient in the book."

Yes, that was my mistake and that was one of the big lessons I learned that first year in Seminary: being "critical" does not mean being "negative" as much as it means looking at both sides objectively.

It is, I'm inclined to wonder, a mistake that too many make—especially in our culture: reducing healthy criticism to negative censure and "tearing things apart." (Surely, it's heightened and amplified amidst the current climate of uncivility!)

Here, the Church can be perceived as a part of the problem. Across the years, for example, I have encountered a host of folks who rail against — even run away from — the notion and practice of confession. "All they [prayers of confession] can do is inspire guilt and make you feel bad about yourself": the words of one former church member.

To be sure, confession can be good for the soul — the equivalent of seeing the holes or deficiencies in an essay or an argument. But, left unchecked, left to itself, confession alone doesn't make the grade. There's got to be more for holistic living. There has to be a counterbalance.




"Gratitude Mandala" from Nicole at InktopiaKids.wordpress.com

Enter praise and thanksgiving: the art of gratitude, of seeing and naming and proclaiming the good in life and living, in others, in creation,... In the critical review of life and living which is worship and prayer, acknowledging what's right and good in thanksgiving is as important as confessing what's in need of adjustment.

As we enter November (what, for me, is a Season of Gratitude—beginning as it does with All Saints Day and ending on a note of Thanksgiving), we dedicate this issue of *Ruminations* to the art and power of gratitude. Employing Wesley's quadrilateral, we'll explore...

- the Scriptural witness
  - a chorus of voices from our Christian Tradition
    - reasonable claims about the place and importance of gratitude in our lives
      - practical exercises/ disciplines that will help us to better experience the power of gratitude

Altogether, it is our hope that this buffet of readings (designed with multiple sittings and settings in mind) will foster greater clarity about the meaning and nature of gratitude, a deeper appreciation of it's value and power, and a fuller experience of it in our life and living.

We offer a variety of explorations (retreats and programs) at Zoe-Life—aimed at facilitating deeper [spiritual] life understandings and experiences for individuals and faith communities. (For an overview of and more information about these seminars and workshops, go to zoe-life.net... and click on the "Explorations" tab.) Not to be overlooked in this work of spiritual formation are the spiritual disciplines or "holy habits," as Bill Hinson called them.

And among these? The powerful act of being grateful, of counting our blessings!

# Defining Gratitude: The Witness of the Scriptures…

A thorough study of gratitude and thanksgiving in the Scriptures eludes us—being beyond the scope of this offering. As one commentator has written, "The Bible is full of encouragement to be thankful to God. The words *thanks*, *thankful*, and *thankfulness* occur more than one hundred times, spread throughout the Old and New Testaments. Many biblical characters model thankfulness for us." (Baab)

As an aside, we encourage a prayerful engagement of a few of the most prominent of gratitude texts found in the Scriptures (as well as those embedded in the article, inset right):

- Psalm 95
- Psalm 100
- Psalm 103
- Luke 17:11-19

Here, at best, we can convey the basis of our [current] understanding of gratitude. When coupled with the input fof voices from Church Tradition (cf, next page), the Biblical witness has us arriving at the following definition:

***"Gratitude is the soulful (i.e., whole-being) impulse and ethic of recognizing the goodness (or Godness?) and Grace in all things and circumstances— companioning with and promoting love and joy and peace in our lives and living."***

Noteworthy here are the affirmations that gratitude is...

- a whole-being response (and not just a matter of lip service)—the Psalmist affirming that gratitude is a matter of "all that is within me" (Psalm 103:1)
- an impulse (welling up from within) and an ethic (something that can be commanded and obeyed)
- inclusive of all times and things (hence, Paul's call to be thankful in all circumstances)
- a partner to peace (so that, again, Paul will affirm its connection to the "peace that passes all understanding")

The relationship of gratitude to both grace and joy in this definition is illuminated by an interesting word study by Ann Voscamp (in an interview about her book, One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are):

> This is the word that can change everything: eucharisteo—it comes right out of the Gospel of Luke: "And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them … " (Luke 22:19 NIV). In the original language, "he gave thanks" reads "eucharisteo."
>
> The root word of eucharisteo is charis, meaning "grace." Jesus took the bread and saw it as grace and gave thanks. He took the bread and knew it to be gift and gave thanks. Eucharisteo, thanksgiving, envelopes the Greek word for grace, charis. But it also holds its derivative, the Greek word chara, meaning "joy." Charis. Grace. Eucharisteo. Thanksgiving. Chara. Joy.

Gratitude and thanksgiving are central motifs in Pauline theology (Pao, 2002). Pauline thanksgiving focuses on who God is and what God has done for his people. There is also a strong imperative component to gratitude in Paul's letters where the phrases "be thankful" or "give thanks" occur multiple times in multiple contexts. Christians are called on to live lives of thanksgiving as a glad acknowledgment of God's gener-osity which then provides a model for how Christians are to deal with each other. Christians are urged to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18), "give thanks to God the Father for everything" (Eph. 5: 19-20), present prayers and petitions "with thanksgiving to God" (Phil. 4:6-7) and separate themselves from those who have been ungrateful (Rom. 1: 21-22). Ingratitude, the failure to acknowledge God as Lord of all and to worship him, is a profound spiritual failure and seen as the root of all sin (Luther, 1959). In Paul's writings there is a strong link between the awareness of grace and the resulting experience of gratitude, in that a theology of grace that emphasizes God's unmerited favor cannot fail to lead to an ethic whose basic motive is gratitude. At least since the Augustinian era, this bond between grace and gratitude has been the foundation of entire systems of theological ethics, as in Calvin's Eucharistic theology (c.f. Gerrish, 1993; Wainwright, 1980). Within these perspectives it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to envision gratitude without first presuming the need for divine grace. Gratitude as the human response to divine grace permeates understandings of what it means to be a human in a right relationship with God.

—excerpts from *Robert A. Emmons & Teresa T Kneezel "Giving Thanks: Spiritual and Religious Correlates of Gratitude"* Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 2005, Vol. 24, No. 2, 140f.

Deep chara joy is found only at the table of the euCHARisteo; the table of thanksgiving. The holy grail of joy: God set it in the very center of Christianity. The Eucharist is the central symbol of Christianity. Doesn't the continual repetition of beginning our week at the table of the Eucharist clearly place the whole of our lives into the context of thanksgiving?...

This is the crux of Christianity: to remember and give thanks, eucharisteo.

—Interview with Voscamp (at theologyofwork.org)

Along similar lines, still one other pastor-commentator concludes—with greater clarity precision:

> "He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them" (Luke 22:19)… In the original language that small phrase would sound more like this: "He took the bread and knew it to be a gift from God and he gave thanks and it produced deep satisfying joy."

# Defining Gratitude: A Sampling of Voices from Church Tradition

*If the only prayer you said was "thank you," that would be enough.*

—Meister Eckhart

*Gratitude is more than a mental exercise, more than a formula of words. We cannot be satisfied to make a mental note of things which God has done for us and then perfunctorily thank Him for favors received.*

*To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything He has given us—and He has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of His love, every moment of existence is grace, for it brings with us immense graces from Him. Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder, and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference…*

*We live in constant dependence upon this merciful kindness of God and thus our whole life is a life of gratitude – a constant response to (God's) help which comes to us at every moment.*

—Thomas Merton

*May God protect me from gloomy saints.*

—Saint Teresa of Avila

*We ought to give thanks for all fortune: if it is "good," because it is good, if "bad" because it works in us patience, humility and the contempt of this world and the hope of our eternal country.*

—C.S. Lewis

*God is always coming to you in the Sacrament of the Present Moment. Meet and receive Him there with gratitude…*

—Evelyn Underhill

*When it comes to life, the critical thing is whether you take things for granted or take them with gratitude.*

—G. K. Chesterton

*Q1: What is the chief end of Humans?*
*A1: Our chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.*

—The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647)

*It is only with gratitude that life becomes rich.*

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*Prayer is, for me, an outburst from the heart, a simple glance darted upwards to Heaven; a cry of gratitude and of love in the midst of trial as in the midst of joy!*

—St. Therese of Liseaux

*It seems to me in the light of the Divine Goodness, although others may think differently, that ingratitude is the most abominable of sins and that it should be detested in the sight of our Creator and Lord by all of His creatures who are capable of enjoying His divine and everlasting glory. For it is a forgetting of the gracious benefits and blessings received.*

—Ignatius of Loyola

Gratitude, the affirmation of a bond between giver and receiver, is central to the human-divine relationship. As long as people have believed in God, believers have sought ways to express gratitude and thanksgiving to this God, their ultimate giver. Gratitude is thus a universal religious sentiment, evident in the thank offerings described in ancient scriptures to contemporary praise and worship music. The idea that one should reflect upon the abundance of God's gifts, and express that in thanksgiving and praise is a theme that permeates texts, prayers, and teachings of Biblical faith. In both Jewish and Christian worldviews, gratitude is the appropriate response to the benevolence of a creator whose purposes are the well-being of the world and its inhabitants (Plantinga, 2000). Because of its centrality in Christian theology, it would not be an exaggeration to say that gratitude is *the heart of the gospel.* Not surprisingly, then, Reformationist Martin Luther referred to it as "the basic Christian attitude" and theologian Karl Barth remarked that "grace and gratitude go together like heaven and Earth; grace evokes gratitude like the voice and echo" (cited in Boulton, 2001).

"A true Christian is one who never for a moment forgets what God has done for him in Christ, and whose whole comportment and whole activity have their root in the sentiment of gratitude" writes John Baillie in his 1961 Gifford Lectures (Baillie, 1962). The idea that gratitude is not only central among Christian virtues but in fact at the heart of the faith has a long history in classical writings (Edwards, 1746; Kempis, 1441) and is a theme in modern devotional writings (Browning, 1992; Foster, 1992; Roberts, 1991) as well. Understanding God to be the giver of all gifts and the ultimate foundation for thankfulness, Christians gratefully acknowledge their dependence on Him and rejoice in the gifts that only He provides. Christian gratitude is not merely a sentimental feeling in response to a gift, but is a virtue that entails an obligation or sense of indebtedness. An indebtedness to others enables followers of Christ to share a common bond, which shapes not only emotions and thoughts, but actions and deeds.

—excerpts from *Robert A. Emmons & Teresa T Kneezel "Giving Thanks: Spiritual and Religious Correlates of Gratitude"* Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 2005, Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 140

*Gratitude goes beyond the "mine" and "thine" and claims the truth that all of life is a pure gift. In the past I always thought of gratitude as a spontaneous response to the awareness of gifts received, but now I realize that gratitude can also be lived as a discipline. The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy.*

—Henri Nouwen

# The Witness of Reason...

## • A Host of Articles and Studies Highlight the Scope and Depth of Benefits Related to Gratitude...

**Gratitude improves physical health....**

- **Overall,** Grateful people experience fewer aches and pains and they report feeling healthier than other people, according to a 2012 study published in *Personality and Individual Differences.*
- **Grateful people are also more likely to take care of their health.** They exercise more often and are more likely to attend regular check-ups with their doctors, which is likely to contribute to further longevity.
- **Grateful people sleep better.** Writing in a gratitude journal improves sleep, according to a 2011 study published in *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being.* Just 15 minutes jotting down a few grateful sentiments before bed may foster longer and deeper sleep.
- **Gratitude is a Stress Buster.** It's no secret that stress can make us sick—linked as it is to several leading causes of death, including heart disease and cancer... and claiming responsibility for up to 90% of all doctor visits. Gratitude, it turns out, can help us better manage stress. "Gratitude research is beginning to suggest that feelings of thankfulness have tremendous positive value in helping people cope with daily problems, especially stress," Dr. Robert Emmons says.
- **Gratitude is an Immune Booster.** Grateful people tend to be more optimistic—a characteristic that researchers say boosts the immune system.

**Gratitude improves social-relational health...**

- **Showing appreciation can help you win new friends**, according to a 2104 study published in *Emotion.* The study found that thanking a new acquaintance makes them more likely to seek an ongoing relationship. So whether it's a "thank you" to a door held or a quick note to a co-worker, acknowledging other people's contributions can lead to new opportunities.
- **Gratitude enhances empathy and reduces aggression.** Grateful people are more likely to behave in a prosocial manner, even when others behave less kind, according to a 2012 study by the University of Kentucky. Study participants who ranked higher on gratitude scales were less likely to retaliate against others, even when given negative feedback. They experienced more sensitivity and empathy toward other people and a decreased desire to seek revenge.

**Gratitude improves psychological health...**

- **Gratitude reduces a multitude of toxic emotions**, ranging from envy and resentment to frustration and regret. Research confirms that gratitude effectively increases happiness and reduces depression.
- **Gratitude improves self-esteem.** A 2014 study published in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* found that gratitude increased athlete's self-esteem, which is an essential component to optimal performance. Other studies have shown that gratitude reduces social comparisons. *(continued on page 5)*

Although Christians have probably known for a long time that blessings come from learning to be grateful, independent researchers are now discover -ing the same thing—there are a host of benefits for those who are consistently grateful. According to the University of California in Berkeley, research-ers have found that regular expressions of gratitude result in:

—a stronger immune system and lower blood pressure
—a higher level of positive emotions
—more joy, optimism, and happiness
—acting with more generosity and compassion
—feeling less lonely and isolated

The Greater Good Science Center, in collaboration with the University of California in Davis, is in its second year of a three-year project to "expand the scientific understanding of gratitude, particularly in the key areas of health and well-being, developmental science, and social contexts." Among the things they hope to discover is "the role of gratitude in youth development." They want to know, for example, "if there is a critical period when the capacity for gratitude is best transmitted from an older to a younger generation." They also want to know "to what degree gratitude is predictive of positive outcomes such as school success, overall well-bring, community service, resiliency, healthy behaviors, and less risk taking."

The studies the university is pursuing were prompted in part by research into the relationship between gratitude and health by Dr. Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology at U.C. Davis and author of the book *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make you Happier*. Some consider Emmons to be the world's leading scientific expert on gratitude.

Emmons says that there is a distinction between *feeling* grateful and being grateful. "We don't have total control over our emotions," Emmons said recently, "but being grateful is a choice, a prevailing attitude that endures and is relatively immune to the gains and losses that flow in and out of our lives."

Emmons emphasizes that people ought to be grateful under all circumstances. That doesn't mean that we have to be thankful for all circumstances. But finding what we can be grateful for in the midst of even dire circumstances is not just helpful—it is essential if we want to have a healthy response to what life brings.

—Richard Lentz, "The Science of Blessings"

*(continued from page 4)*

Rather than becoming resentful toward people who have more money or better jobs (a major factor in reduced self-esteem), grateful people are able to appreciate other people's accomplishments.

- **Gratitude can play a major role in overcoming trauma.** A 2006 study published in *Behavior Research and Therapy* found that Vietnam War Veterans with higher levels of gratitude experienced lower rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. A 2003 study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that gratitude was a major contributor to resilience following the terrorist attacks on September 11.

**Gratitude and Morality...**

- According to the authors of one study, "We are proposing that **gratitude typically results from and stimulates moral behavior**—that is, behavior that is motivated out of concern for another person. We liken gratitude to other moral affects such as empathy, sympathy, guilt, and shame."
- In still another study, authors report: **"Grateful people report themselves as being less materialistic and less envious.** In particular, grateful people report being more willing to part with their possessions, more generous with them, less envious of the material wealth of others, less committed to the idea that material wealth brings happiness. Apparently, material success is not a very important factor in the happiness of highly grateful people."

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Sources (from which most of this article was "cut and pasted"):

Amit Amin, *The Science of Gratitude: More Benefits Than Expected; 26 Studies and Counting* at HappierHuman.com

Elizabeth Heubeck, *Boost Your Health With a Dose of Gratitude*, at WebMD (https://www.webmd.com/women/features/gratitute-health-boost#2), January 2006

Amy Morin, *7 Scientifically Proven Benefits of Gratitude That Will*

## And, then, There is the Corollary: Complaining... and Disease

Repeated complaining rewires your brain to make future complaining more likely. Over time, you find it's easier to be negative than to be positive, regardless of what's happening around you. Complaining becomes your default behavior, which changes how people perceive you.

And here's the kicker: complaining damages other areas of your brain as well. Research from Stanford University has shown that complaining shrinks the hippocampus -- an area of the brain that's critical to problem solving and intelligent thought. Damage to the hippocampus is scary, especially when you consider that it's one of the primary brain areas destroyed by Alzheimer's.

While it's not an exaggeration to say that complaining leads to brain damage, it doesn't stop there. When you complain, your body releases the stress hormone cortisol. Cortisol shifts you into fight-or-flight mode, directing oxygen, blood and energy away from everything but the systems that are essential to immediate survival. One effect of cortisol, for example, is to raise your blood pressure and blood sugar so that you'll be prepared to either escape or defend yourself.

All the extra cortisol released by frequent complaining impairs your immune system and makes you more susceptible to high cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease and obesity. It even makes the brain more vulnerable to strokes.

Since human beings are inherently social, our brains naturally and unconsciously mimic the moods of those around us, particularly people we spend a great deal of time with. This process is called *neuronal mirroring*, and it's the basis for our ability to feel empathy. The flip side, however, is that it makes complaining a lot like smoking -- you don't have to do it yourself to suffer the ill effects. You need to be cautious about spending time with people who complain about everything. Complainers want people to join their pity party so that they can feel better about themselves. Think of it this way: If a person were smoking, would you sit there all afternoon inhaling the second-hand smoke? You'd distance yourself, and you should do the same with complainers.

—Travis Bradberry, (guest author at www.entrepreneur.com),
*"How Complaining Rewires Your Brain for Negativity"*

## • And, Finally: The Gratitude & Joy Connection

The relationship between joy and gratitude was one of the important things I found in my research. I wasn't expecting it. In my 12 years of research on 11,000 pieces of data, I did not interview one person who had described themselves as joyful, who also did not actively practice gratitude.

For me it was very counterintuitive because I went into the research thinking that the relationship between joy and gratitude was: if you are joyful, you should be grateful. But it wasn't that way at all.

**Instead, practicing gratitude invites joy into our lives.**

Practice is the part that really changed my life, that really changed my family and the way we live every day. When I say "practice gratitude," I don't mean "the-attitude-of-gratitude" or feeling grateful, I mean *practicing gratitude*.

**These folks shared in common a tangible gratitude practice.** Some of them kept gratitude journals. Some of them did interesting things like at 1,2,3,4 or 12:34 every day they said something out loud that they were grateful for in their lives. (One of things we do as a family is say grace at dinner. And so now, after learning about practicing gratitude, **after grace we go around and everyone says something that they are all thankful for.)...**

**There is a great quote by a Jesuit priest that says, "It's not joy that makes us grateful, it's gratitude that makes us joyful."** I guess I was just amazed to see that bubble up in my research so quickly. It's life changing.

—Brené Brown, "*On Joy and Gratitude*"
at Global Leadership Network (at globalleadership.org)

# Experiencing Gratitude...

For all the ways that Scripture, Tradition and Reason point to the nature and power of praise and thanksgiving, there is no substitute for experiencing them. Here, all else is validated… and stamped upon the depths of our souls.

We encourage you, then, to invite the Holy Spirit into your practice of one or more of these exercises in gratitude:

- **Gratitude is rooted in an environment of mindfulness and awareness**. Committing to regular times of silence, solitude, and stillness help us to observe Life and Grace… as well as our noticing our default reactions.
- **Standardize one or more gratitude rituals—as, e.g,…**
  - ⇒ **Saying grace at each meal—**taking time to look around (making eye contact with others), hold each others' hands, affirm the full Grace of the mealtime at hand.
  - ⇒ **Writing thank you notes** (ideally, a handwritten note that takes some time to write and send). Think of those who have blessed you—during the day, in the week/month, over a lifetime,…
  - ⇒ **Maintaining a gratitude journal.** A commitment to writing down good things each day makes it more likely that we will notice good things as they happen.
- **"Turn down distracting noise"**—setting boundaries to the grumbling all around.
  - ⇒ Limit your viewing/reading of the news to a set time and place. (How many times do we need to watch/hear the same stories?!)
  - ⇒ Begin and end your engagement of the news with a prayer—affirming that God and Grace are in it all… and will have the final say.
  - ⇒ Take control of social media. (Did you know you can "snooze" some folks (chronic complainers) on Facebook for a month? You're not "unfriending" them. You are, though, setting a healthy limit.

In 2008 a young Australian woman, Hailey Bartholomew, found that she wasn't enjoying life. She described herself as feeling lost and stuck on a treadmill. It was almost inexplicable. She was married to a man she loved and had beautiful children who held her heart. So why was she feeling so down about her life? Hailey sought the counsel of a nun, who advised her to spend time each day reflecting on something for which she was grateful. Hailey began a project called "365grateful". Every day she took a photograph of something for which she was grateful.

It changed her life, for it allowed her to see things she had never noticed. Hailey had always thought of her husband as unromantic. One day she took a picture of him serving up dinner, the thing which she was grateful for that day. She noticed for the first time that the largest portion of pie was placed on her plate. She realized that the largest portion was always placed on her plate and that this was one small but profound way her husband showed his care for her. Hailey had found mothering a "boring job", but as she took photos of her children holding out their hands to her, playing and exploring, she discovered how much joy and wonder there was in her world. Through the art of gratitude Hailey found herself lifted out of her rut and celebrating life.

—gleaned from 365grateful.com and a TED talk by Hailey (by storiesforpreaching.com)

- **Engage (perhaps sharing with friends, family,…) in one or more creative outlets which foster gratitude:**
  - ⇒ Create a "Gratitude Mandala" (see page 1… other samples can be found on the internet)
  - ⇒ Photograph a joy-a-day (ala Hailey Bartholomew's story, above)… It's easy with our phones these days!
  - ⇒ Try you hand at writing a piece of poetry —focused on gratitude
  - ⇒ Create a playlist of favorite "gratitude" songs/hymns

# For Further Reflection/Study: Resources Related to Developing a Rule for Living

In addition to resources embedded throughout this issue, we recommend the following book and web sites:

- Leach, Michael (editor), The Way of Gratitude: Readings for a Joyful Life, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2017.
- Two web sites stand out for the depth and quality of their focus on gratitude:
  - ⇒ Gratefulness.org (inspired by the life and teachings of Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB… a treasure trove of educational and support resources for the practice of grateful living)
  - ⇒ "Expanding Gratitude" Initiative at the Greater Good Science Center (at UC Berkley, in collaboration with UC Davis)… this $5.6 million, three-year project seeks "the expansion of the science and the practice of gratitude."
- Finally, there is TEDblog's post on "A Non-Cheesy Guide to Gratefulness: What to Read and Watch"

***The mission of Zoe-Life Explorations is to facilitate experiences and conversations which promote the spiritual formation of individuals and Faith communities.***

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