CHAPTER 5

Receiving All Things with Thanksgiving

I am startled that God can make me so rich even with my own cheap stores.

—Henry David Thoreau

The unthankful heart . . . discovers no mercies; but let the thankful heart sweep through the day and, as the magnet finds the iron, so it will find, in every hour, some heavenly blessings.

—Henry Ward Beecher

Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into home, a stranger into a friend.

—Melody Beattie, *The Language of Letting Go*

In his epistles Paul insisted that those who have tasted the love of God are privy to an experience that cannot be grasped from the outside. To the Saints at Corinth he wrote, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Centuries later Bernard of Clairvaux, a Cistercian monk and advisor to five popes, memorialized this truth in verse:

> Jesus, the very thought of thee
> with sweetness fills the breast;
> but sweeter far thy face to see,
> and in thy presence rest.
>
> O hope of every contrite heart,
> O joy of all the meek,
> to those who fall, how kind thou art!
> How good to those who seek!
>
> But what to those who find? Ah, this
> nor tongue nor pen can show;
> the love of Jesus, what it is,
> none but his loved ones know.[1]

To know God's love as revealed through his Son is the crowning experience of life, according to Bernard and Paul. But to call it the "crowning experience" is to class it with lesser experience, and this diminishes it. What Paul at least had in mind was an experience that imparts light and meaning to every other experience, much as the sun imparts light to the earth. The visual splendor of terrestrial nature is not self-originating; it is announced by the sun, and thanks also to the sun that physically supports us from moment to moment, we are alive to witness that splendor. Analogously, the love of God is intrinsic to the makeup of the cosmos, according to Paul, and when we apprehend this truth, our everyday experiences suddenly catch fire in ways previously unimaginable. To those standing on the outside and viewing events with a critical eye, though, nothing changes. That, however, is just the point: "The love of Jesus, what it is, / none but his loved ones know."

"In the glowing hour of excitement," wrote the noted philosopher and psychologist William James in his discussion of religious conversion, "all incomprehensibilities are solved, and what was so enigmatical from without becomes transparently obvious. Each emotion obeys a logic of its own, and makes deductions which no other logic can draw. Piety and charity live in a different universe from worldly lusts and fears, and form another centre of energy altogether."[2] I would add that along with piety and charity, gratitude lives in not just a different universe from worldly wants and insecurities, but one vastly larger.

THE FULLNESS OF THE EARTH IS YOURS

A subtext here is that the meek shall inherit the earth. Those who are humble enough to feel small and reverential amid the wonders of the physical creation are given co-ownership of the cosmos, albeit by means of divine understanding that elevates the "least thing," whether a grain of sand, a fallen sparrow, or a humble servant of the Lord, to a level of profound worth. Unfortunately, however, our minds are habitually blinkered by zero-sum, legalistic thought: if I possess this plot of ground, you cannot, and here are the legal documents that establish my claim. As binding as such claims of legal entitlement may feel, they are rendered null and void by our inability to create what we profess to own. Merely having found ourselves on a planet of surpassing beauty, we have incongruously laid claim to it as if it sprang from our hard work and genius. But, of course, the pristine earth is no more our handiwork than are the stars, though, unlike the stars, it is within our reach and therefore subject to our exploitation should we come to see it merely as

an economic resource. The pity is that if we do see it that way, our vision of all else is similarly tainted. When looking up at the stars, Cecil Rhodes, who made his fortune mining diamonds in South Africa, did not feel to praise God; rather he was chagrined because he could not get at them, could not impose his entrepreneurial will on them. "The world is nearly all parcelled out," he stated, "and what there is left of it is being divided up, conquered, and colonised. To think of these stars that you see overhead at night, these vast worlds which we can never reach. I would annex the planets if I could; I often think of that. It makes me sad to see them so clear and yet so far."[3]

The restored gospel counteracts such thinking by replacing the idea of private ownership with that of stewardship. "You own nothing," declared Brigham Young, "I own nothing. . . . The Lord has placed what I have in my hands, to see what I will do with it, and I am perfectly willing for Him to dispose of it otherwise whenever he pleases."[4] Indeed, "not one particle of all that comprises this vast creation of God is our own. Everything we have has been bestowed upon us for our action, to see what we would do with it—whether we would use it for eternal life and exaltation or for eternal death and degradation."[5] Paradoxically, upon meekly acknowledging the Lord as the rightful owner and giver of all that we legally possess, we vastly enlarge our capacity to enjoy other things. Here two truths touch together: (1) "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof" (Psalm 24:1); and (2) God is a giver of "good" and "perfect gift[s]" (James 1:17)—he is, as Joseph Smith said, "more liberal in his views, and boundless in his mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive."[6]

God delights in blessing his children; he delights in sharing his creation with them, but of course such sharing

cannot occur if, feeling no dependence on God, they see the earth as something to be divided up, conquered, and colonized. Such is one way of owning the earth, but the other, more joyful way coincides with Henry David Thoreau's observation that ownership of the earth consists not in property records but in one's capacity to drink in the beauty of nature.[7] Thereby is the Lord's aim "to please the eye and to gladden the heart" satisfied against the backdrop of his pronouncement that "the fulness of the earth is yours" (see Doctrine and Covenants 59:16–18). We own the earth and cosmos already if we are humble enough to receive them with thanksgiving, a glad heart, and a cheerful countenance (v. 15). These virtues answer to the selfless, noncompetitive sharing of the universe that the gospel encourages and that in fact the universe affords: a sharing that is win-win, mutually edifying, and bound up in the everyday realization that we best enjoy the wonders of creation in the company of others. When we go sightseeing, we like to take others along.

To be sure, if we assume that nature's offerings are too thinly spread among too many people, then our picture of the world, and our everyday behavior, will follow suit. But this characterization runs counter to the Lord's declaration that "the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare" (Doctrine and Covenants 104:17). That is, full of the kinds of natural resources that the Lord delights to share with his children, as when "the hand of providence . . . smiled . . . most pleasingly" upon Jacob's people, enabling them to "obtain many riches" (Jacob 2:13). For the Nephites the problem was never one of too few resources, but rather that some people managed to accumulate and hold on to those resources more successfully than others, which inequality

led to pride, social stratification, and the persecution of those less wealthy.

If this is the path we choose, to let every person prosper "according to his [own] genius," as Korihor put it (Alma 30:17), we miss out on real happiness even when we do prosper. We miss out because we implement the wrong formula of ownership, one based on an incorrect understanding of physical reality. The universe is not a vast repository of goods waiting to be divided up, conquered, and colonized, but an expression of God's love. It embodies God's desire to share with his children his more abundant life—a life in which blessings snowball as they are shared and reshared with others.

This is the larger way of sharing spoken of in the scriptures and the way that motivates (or should motivate) all charitable giving. We believe that what we give to others is not just dribbled away until it no longer makes a difference; rather, God multiplies it toward ends larger than we envision. What we give, we ultimately give back to God, and he gathers our gifts into his work and his glory, which is to "bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). Thus our acts of kindness circle back to bless us, having first circulated into the cosmic economy of God's love.

OVERSTEPPING OUR MORTAL CONFINEMENT

That economy is on offer everywhere we look, although for most of us it has been iterated out of sight through deep familiarity. We are like fish that cannot take cognizance of the water that supports their movement and enables their oxygen intake. It is hard for us to see the ambient love of God whereby, as Paul said, we "live, and move, and have

our being" (Acts 17:28). All the same, it is right in front of us, at each moment reminding us—if we let it—that there is a bigger story in the offing than the one that now seems to delimit us. If we are looking for a physical sign of what God has in mind for us, all we need do is look skyward. There we may see the stars announcing God's promise of eternal posterity to Abraham and his seed. Or on a clear day, as the song says, we may see "forever"—an unending expanse suggesting unending life, according to the celebrated twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: "Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits."[8]

Some may dismiss this as wishful thinking, but only because they fail to grasp the proposition in all its bearings. Wittgenstein is remarking on the amazing fact that we are visually participatory in the vast cosmos despite the spatial and temporal limitations of the mortal experience. We lead an earthbound life for perhaps eighty years, but we escape the physical confinement of our mortal bodies as our perceptual faculties gather in the universe. Despite our mortal frailty and the body's tendency to self-implode, we are in many ways turned outward and are thereby attuned to rhythms that vastly exceed our brief stay on earth. Without this attunement, this consonance with the larger world, our perceptual experience would be confined to bodily function and whatever inner experience we might imaginatively muster up. Our lives, in brief, would be stunted and completely narcissistic, nipped in the bud before they were allowed to blossom, although not knowing anything different, we would not be the wiser.

While we often marvel at the universe and see it as evidence of God's existence, no less remarkable, and no less indicative of God's goodness, is our ability to drink in the majesty and beauty of God's creation. Thereby we see

through "a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12), a fact that suggests we are already partway home to God, for if Satan had his way, our existence would be fully shut up and cave-like. Instead it is partly given over to the possibility that we are destined for things larger than we know. Through the perceptual openings in our bodies, we peer in wonder at an unbounded world; indeed, we expansively mingle into that world, although so elemental is this aspect of our being that only poets seem to remember it. To follow Emily Dickinson:

> The brain is wider than the sky,
> For, put them side by side,
> The one the other will include
> With ease, and you beside.[9]

And Wallace Stevens:

> I measure myself
> Against a tall tree.
> I find that I am much taller,
> For I reach right up to the sun,
> With my eye.[10]

And this is just the start, the seeing darkly through our imperfect perceptual faculties. But it is enough to establish the readily forgotten point that we are cosmically wide-open beings, although, to be sure, we are heavily laden with mundane needs and proclivities. Amphibious beings, we are blessed to live in two realms, which in fact are "a compound in one": the hardscrabble, earthbound world of our bodily needs and the soul-stretching upper reaches of spirit, imagination, and perceptual experience. While the former realm is all about restraint and limitation, the latter prefigures ongoing, open-ended expansion—our gradual deliv-

erance from dark seeing by means of light that "groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day" (Doctrine and Covenants 50:24).

"If the doors of perception were cleansed," wrote the English Romantic poet William Blake, "everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite."[11] Our mortal weakness obscures our embryonic immortality; the "infinite [is hidden up] in the finite, the more in the less," as the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas remarked,[12] where it is hard to see and, when seen, generally rejected as inferior. According to Isaiah, the mortal Christ would have "no form nor comeliness; . . . no beauty that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2). He was the stone rejected by the builders of the temple (see Matthew 21:42; Acts 4:11). He came as a lowly servant, wrote Paul, "ma[king] himself of no reputation" and suffering an ignominious death, though he was "in the form of God" (see Philippians 2:6–8). He cast his lot with the poor, the outcast, the despised, the "least of these my brethren" (Matthew 25:40).

But except for his willing descent "below all things," Christ could not have ascended "above all things" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:6, 42). His abasement was the precondition for his resurrection and ascension into heaven. We undergo a similar passage, though ours is far less demanding because we enjoy the blessings that sprang into existence once he opened a path out of darkness. The wide-open world restates that opening. When we look up at the stars and planets, we see God "moving in his majesty and power" (v. 47). Or, during the day, we may see nothing but endless expanse, suggestive of eternal life. Even when we look at specific objects, we see things that "bear record" of God (Moses 6:63) and always with the sense that there is yet more to be seen.[13] Further, when we receive these things

with joyful appreciation, we enter with amazement into the Lord's delight. "But were it told me, Today, / That I might have the Sky" and its myriad contents, wrote Emily Dickinson, "my Heart / Would split" and "The news would strike me dead." And yet before she goes back behind her windowpane of conventional thought, she exults in what she sees:

> The Meadows—mine—
> The Mountains—mine—
> All Forests—Stintless stars—
> As much of noon, as I could take—
> Between my finite eyes—
>
> The Motions of the Dipping Birds—
> The Morning's Amber Road—
> . . . . . .[14]

This, however, is not the end, nor even the beginning, of God's generosity to his children as he lets them drink in his handiwork. The following fact is so close to home that it may never register: In our elemental viewing of nature we do not jostle or compete with each other for a place at the table. My wide consciousness of the world does not interfere with yours. William James made this point in an article entitled "Human Immortality":

> Each new mind brings its own edition of the universe of space along with it, its own room to inhabit; and these spaces never crowd each other,—the space of my imagination, for example, in no way interferes with yours. The amount of possible consciousness seems to be governed by no law analogous to that of the so-called conservation of energy in the material world. When one man wakes up, or one is born, another does not have to go to sleep, or die, in

> order to keep the consciousness of the universe a constant quantity.[15]

If we let each "edition of the universe" count as a universe, we find ourselves in a multiverse where universes freely coexist and interpenetrate. And as James points out, this multiverse (unlike the entropic universe given us by science) is not a zero-sum system regulated by space-time constraints and energy conservation laws. We will never have to worry about an overproliferation of consciousness. It seems that in this respect—the way my consciousness of reality does not compete with or crowd out yours—we already live in a wide-open world suggestive of heaven. That is, one that prefigures God's promise that all that he has will be ours (see Doctrine and Covenants 84:38).

COMING BACK TO GRATITUDE

The key, as noted earlier, is to receive God's creation with gladness and thanksgiving, a way of life that prepares us for the celestial kingdom, wherein all things are had in common (see Doctrine and Covenants 78:6–7). The earth and its fullness cannot be enjoyed in any other way, for it embodies the Lord's delight in blessing his children. His love is "water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:14). It cannot be bottled, monopolized, or commodified, but must by its own nature overflow—freely, spontaneously, "without compulsory means" (Doctrine and Covenants 121:46). The difficulty is that we lose sight of God's wondrous love as it spills into the world around us and eventually see everything by "the light of common day."[16] Our sense of awe atrophies as we grow into the zero-sum practices of human culture.

Helen Keller's experience is instructive in this regard. Having lost her sight and hearing in early infancy, she was able to drink in very little of the world's meaning until Anne Sullivan found a way to transmit it by code. Then by the miracle of language the world exploded into being. Rehearsing the experience, Keller wrote:

> We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word "water," first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, joy, set it free! . . . I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house each object that I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange new light that had come to me.[17]

Elsewhere she recalled that the "word 'water' dropped into my mind like the sun in a frozen winter world."[18] Helen may have been blind and deaf in a medical sense, but her sudden apprehension of a larger world full of signs and meanings was astonishingly vivid. She received the experience as a divine gift and came to regard her blindness and deafness as blessings that helped her hang on to that gift:

> To one who is deaf and blind the spiritual world offers no difficulty. . . . I am often conscious of beautiful flowers and

> birds and laughing children where to my seeing associates there is nothing. They skeptically declare that I see "light that never was on sea or land." But I know that their mystic sense is dormant, and that is why there are so many barren places in their lives. They prefer "facts" to vision.[19]

As Helen uses the words, *vision* refers to awakening or birth, while *facts* refers to propositions cut off from the wonder of their birth. Because her awakening occurred relatively late in life, she was able to hang on to it more successfully than most people do. Like the blinded Gloucester, she saw the world "feelingly" while feeling her way from one marvel to the next.[20] She remembered the sudden expansion of light that accompanied her entry into the world of sociality, communication, art, and science, while her friends merely attended to that world itself, missing the life-awakening "light that never was on sea or land." They, in her judgment, had forgotten the world-giving miracle, and as a result their sense of wonder had grown dim. They had, as William Wordsworth put it, transitioned from an early childhood when all the world seemed "apparell'd in celestial light" to a long adulthood marked by "the light of common day." Perhaps they had, to follow T. S. Eliot, simply grown tired of so much ecstatic radiance: "In our rhythm of earthly life we tire of light. We are glad when the day ends, when the play ends; and ecstasy is too much pain."[21]

Christ is "the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (Doctrine and Covenants 93:2). That light reveals the wonder of his love as we drink in the vast, magnificent universe from our tiny, earthbound vantage points. Of course, the revelation, the vision, dims if we do not receive it with joy and thanksgiving. But if we do, we become joint-heirs with Christ, receiving all that he

possesses within an economy of love where possessions multiply as they are shared.

This way of gathering up goods is so alien to our normal practice that the Lord patiently waits for us to put our trust in his arm: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye are little children, and ye have not as yet understood how great blessings the Father hath in his own hands and prepared for you." Further, he acknowledges our weakness but mercifully allows for it, all the while reminding us that there is no cause for despair: "And ye cannot bear all things now; nevertheless, be of good cheer, for I will lead you along. The kingdom is yours and the blessings thereof are yours, and the riches of eternity are yours." Finally, the Lord admonishes us to gratitude, for gratitude catalyzes the multiplication miracle that sweeps us into eternal life: "And he who receiveth all things with thankfulness shall be made glorious; and the things of this earth shall be added unto him, even an hundred fold, yea, more" (Doctrine and Covenants 78:17–19).

Not that we aspire to expand our personal sway and dominion, but that we are "added unto" as our everyday thinking and conduct begin to hum the miracles of God's love, one of which is that there is no bottom to that love. Those who pledge themselves to Christ, therefore, will receive an "everlasting dominion" that shall spring up "without compulsory means . . . forever and ever" (Doctrine and Covenants 121:46). And not just in the next world, but already in this world as heaven gently maps itself onto mortality. Thus all the way to heaven is heaven.

NOTES

1. Bernard of Clairvaux, "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee," *United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), https://hymnary.org/text/jesus_the_very_thought_of_thee.
2. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 286.
3. Quoted in *The Last Will and Testament of Cecil John Rhodes*, ed. W. T. Stead (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1902), 190.
4. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 10:298.
5. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:67.
6. Joseph Smith, History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843] [addenda], p. 4 [addenda], http://josephsmithpapers.org/.
7. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1973), 72–73. After nearly buying a piece of property, whose owner changed his mind at the last minute and offered to pay a ten-dollar fee for reneging on the transaction, Thoreau remarked that he had refused the fee. He then wrote: "I found thus that I had been a rich man without any damage to my poverty. But I retained the landscape, and I have since annually carried off what it yielded without a wheelbarrow. . . . I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk."
8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6:4311, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2001), 87. The song "On a Clear Day (You Can See Forever)" is from a 1965 musical with the same title.
9. Emily Dickinson, "The brain is wider than the sky," *Selected Poems* (New York: Gramercy, 1993), 24.
10. Wallace Stevens, "Six Significant Landscapes," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 74.

11. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *The Portable Blake*, ed. Alfred Kazin (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 258.
12. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 50.
13. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. M. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 67–68. See my article "Merleau-Ponty's Visual Space and the Law of Large Numbers," *Studia Phænomenologica* 6 (2006): 391–406.
14. Emily Dickinson, "Before I got my eye put out," https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52135/before-i-got-my-eye-put-out-336.
15. William James, "Human Immortality," in *William James: Writings, 1878–1899*, ed. Gerald E. Myers (New York: Library of America, 1992), 1125.
16. William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," in *Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250–1900*, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), 612.
17. Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1959), 23; quoted by Henri Bortoft in *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way toward a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, 1996), 312.
18. Helen Keller, *My Religion* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1960), 153–54.
19. Keller, *My Religion*, 157; spelling modernized.
20. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, act 4, scene 6.
21. T. S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" in *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World), 112.