

on gratitude

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scripture readings: 1 Timothy 4:4-5; Ephesians 5:15-20; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Philippians 4:6-7

Albert Schweitzer once aruged that “The wealthy are not those who manage to fill up their barns, but those who thank God.” (“Es sind nicht die die Reichen, die viel in ihren Scheunen sammeln, sondern die, welche Gott danken.”) Harvest Festival is the ideal festival to reflect on the role of gratitude in our own lives and faith tradition. The various passages from the apostle Paul’s letters illustrate the central role he attributes to thanksgiving. It resonates with many of the Psalms attributed to David, remind us not to forget to give thanks to God for the blessings we received. I think it would be fair to say that Paul considered his whole life and ministry as one long thanksgiving, a continuous response to the gift of new life he received through his dramatic encounter with Christ. Not feelings of fear or guilt, but tremendous gratitude made him want to share this gift of life with more people. His heart was overflowing with gratitude and became a major driving force for his vision and passion. In some ways it echoes the sentiments of the philosopher Cicero who praises gratitude as the greatest of all virtues and the parent of all the other virtues.



The beautiful harvest table of this morning invites us to reflect on experiences of abundance and of fullness in our lives and to give thanks for the moments of harvest in our own lives.

Does such an experience automatically lead to a sense of gratitude, to a prayer of thanksgiving? Certainly not. We have to acknowledge:

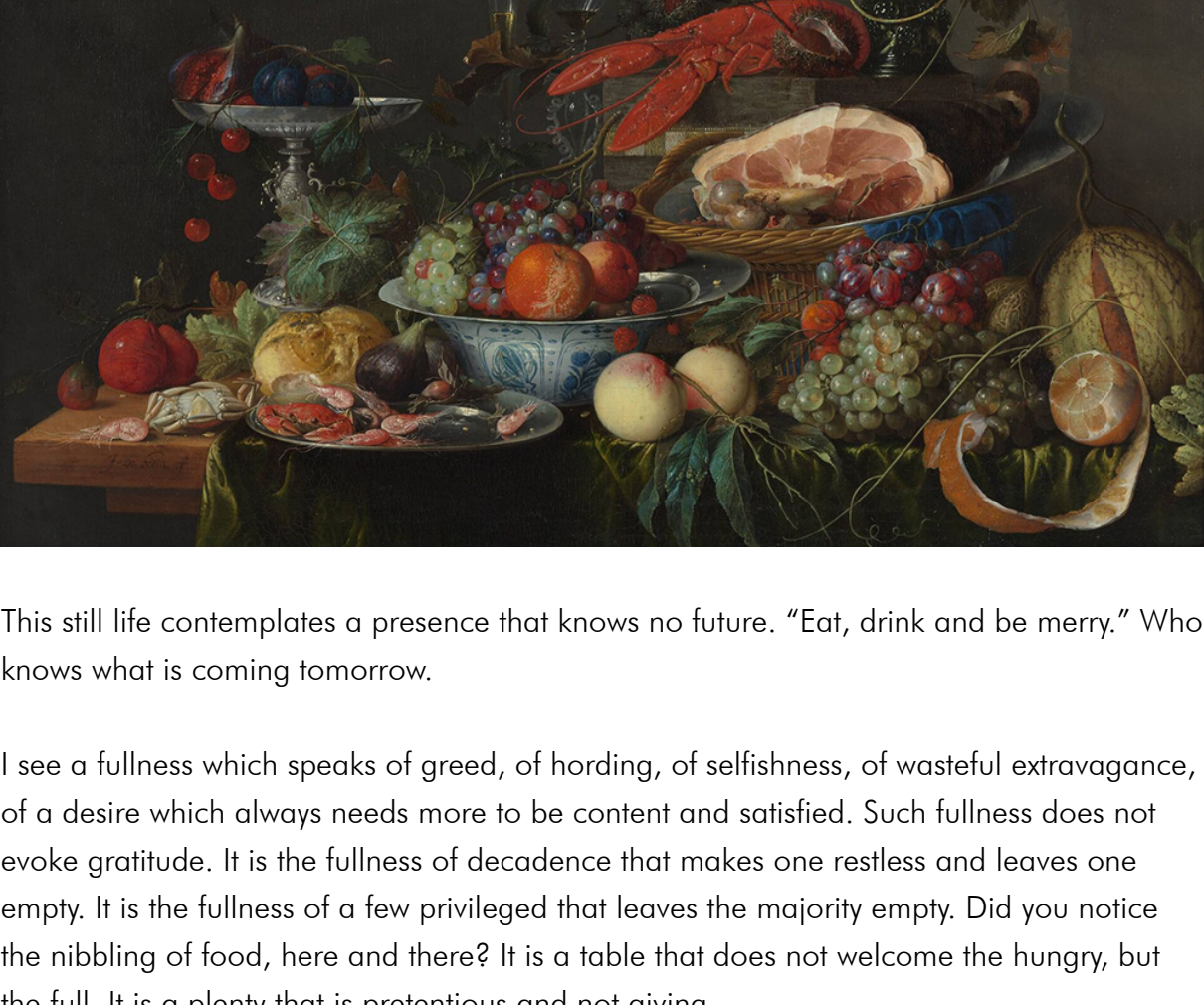
There is a fullness that can fill us with gratitude.
and there is a fullness that can leave us empty. An experience of fullness does not automatically lead to gratitude. But gratitude on the other hand always leads to an experience of fullness and abundance.

And so the question this morning for me is:

How does one transform an experience of fullness, of abundance, of privilege into gratitude?

I am trying to find answers in conversation with three striking still lifes. Each of them contemplates a different kind of fullness and either resists or encourages a sense of gratitude.

There is the still life by the Spanish painter Juan Sanchez de Cotan (Barock) that speaks to me of decadence.



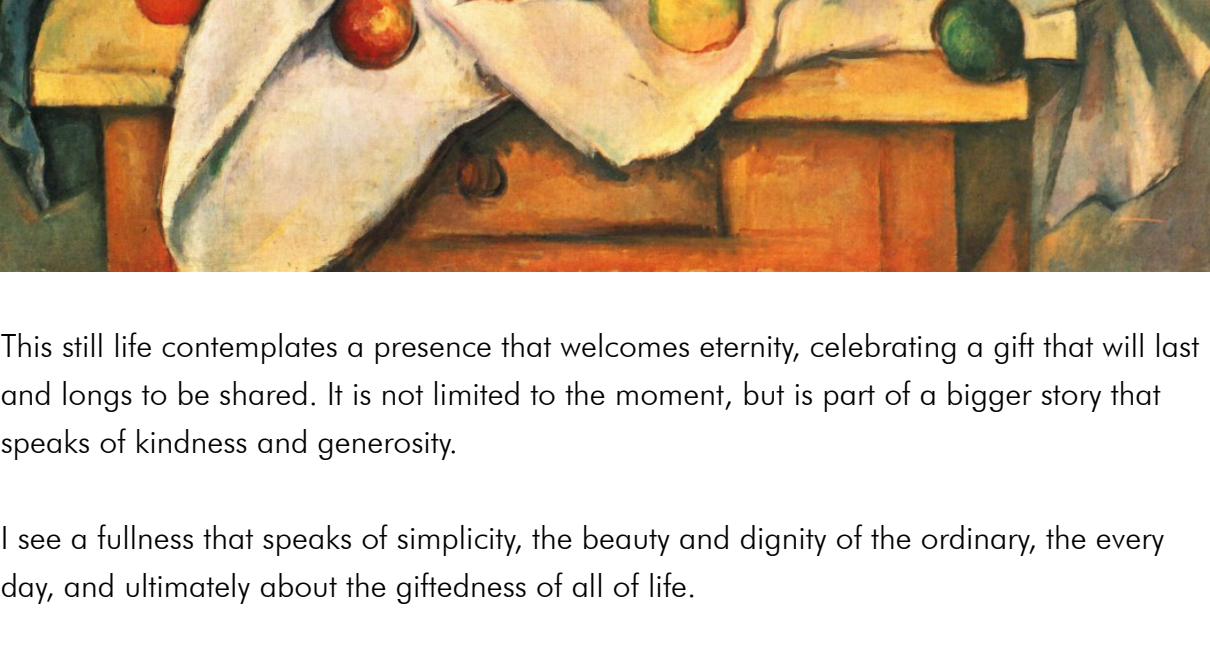
This still life contemplates a presence that knows no future. “Eat, drink and be merry.” Who knows what is coming tomorrow.

I see a fullness which speaks of greed, of hoarding, of selfishness, of wasteful extravagance, of a desire which always needs more to be content and satisfied. Such fullness does not evoke gratitude. It is the fullness of decadence that makes one restless and leaves one empty. It is the fullness of a few privileged that leaves the majority empty. Did you notice the nibbling of food, here and there? It is a table that does not welcome the hungry, but the full. It is a plenty that is pretentious and not giving.

At a more fundamental level, the painter describes human vanity. The word derives from the Latin word vanitas which means ‘emptiness’. It reveals a certain idleness, a ‘chasing after the wind’, to speak with Ecclesiastes. It depicts the kind of decay and corruption, which leaves us with a bitter distaste. Such still lifes do not instill calm, but tend to be dramatic and conflicted, morbid and tasteless.

Fulbert Steffensky manages to address this kind of conflict of interest when he thinks of gratitude and justice as siblings: “One cannot give thanks for one’s own bread and then eat it all by oneself. For all of life is sharing and communicating. Those who keep the gifts of life to themselves, do not only rob their siblings, but also isolate themselves.” (My own translation)

There is the still life by the French painter Paul Cézanne that speaks to me of simplicity.



This still life contemplates a presence that welcomes eternity, celebrating a gift that will last and longs to be shared. It is not limited to the moment, but is part of a bigger story that speaks of kindness and generosity.

I see a fullness that speaks of simplicity, the beauty and dignity of the ordinary, the every day, and ultimately about the giftedness of all of life.

Everyday objects of no great significance are lifted up, set aside, painted in a way that they radiate calm and peace, serenity and harmony, sufficiency and innocence. Reality is often simplified in terms of form and arrangement, a concentration on the essentials, and in that sense also a form of abstraction.

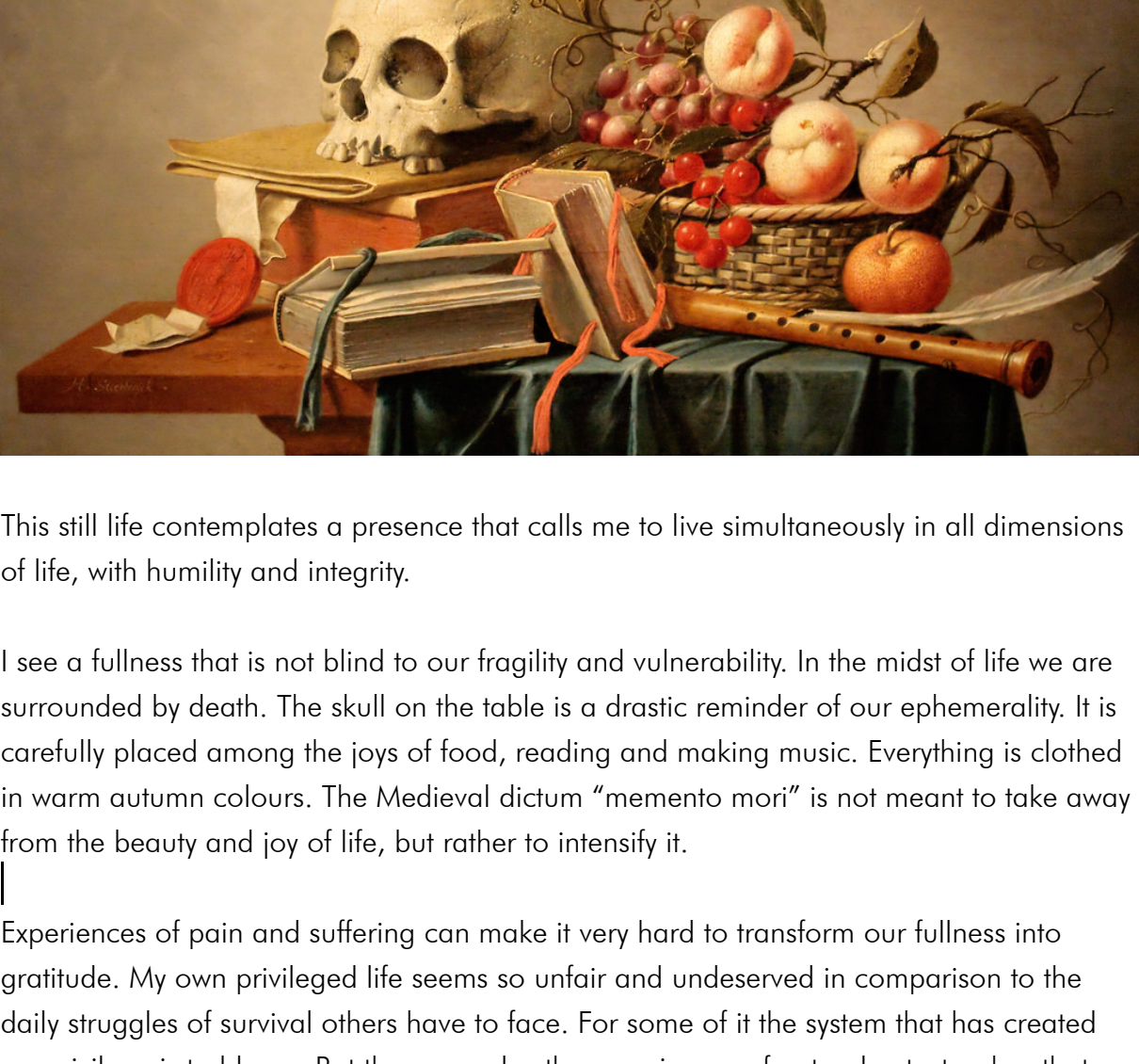
It is a fullness that stills me, slows me down and wants me to become more aware, more curious, more receptive to how in the end all of life, including my own life is a gift. The fruits are spread across the table. Only a few of them have been arranged in a bowl. It looks as if someone has just collected them with piece of cloth and has now poured them over the table. It is unpretentious and spontaneous. It is the kind of table that welcomes all, freely sharing the gifts of nature.

A real gift is something that you cannot give yourself. It is not something you can work for or purchase. It has to be given to you and is not dependent on any achievements or merits from your side. This definition of gratitude sets us, as far as I can see, on a fascinating journey of discovery of self and world. The key to a grateful life lies in experiencing life in general as a gift granted to us. The more we decipher the giftedness of all of life, the more we will be able to make gratefulness not only a momentary experience, but a way of life. And then, and that is the beauty of gratitude, every moment carries in some ways a “gift within the gift”, an unexpected opportunity. (Steindl-Rast, a Benedictinian monk)

Robert Emmons, Professor for psychology at he university of California established through his scientific experiments that grateful people are all in all more content, more optimistic, more empathetic, willing to help and more spiritual. The experiment ran as follows: Over a period of 10 weeks a test group was asked to take down five things for which they are grateful every evening. Another test group was asked to take down five things that upset them on the day. And a final control group was asked to take down five important things that happened to them throughout the day. The result was clear: The participants of the gratitude group were more optimistic and more content with life. Furthermore they lived a healthier life, for the suffered less of headaches, coughing or vertigo. In another test run with adults who suffered of chronic illnesses similar results were gained among those who introduced gratitude days: Not only did they experience more positive feelings like interest, enthusiasm, joy and pride, but they also felt socially more connected and had a much better sleep. It becomes clear that gratitude contributes to wellbeing and health. The experiments encourage us to take stock in the evening and to focus on the positive things that happened throughout the day. We should ask ourselves: What am I grateful for? But in a second step we should also ask ourselves: In what ways have I contributed, to experience this as positive? What we will realize is that very often gratitude for something also involves our participation and awareness. For example, to notice that today was a beautiful autumn morning is one thing. It is another to take a moment to enjoy the warmth of autumn sun and to marvel at the colors it creates.

It is the kind of stilled life that knows how little it takes to experience real fullness. Gratitude opens eyes, hearts, and doors.

There is the still life by the Dutch painter Harmen Steenwijck (17th century) that speaks to me of vulnerability.



This still life contemplates a presence that calls me to live simultaneously in all dimensions of life, with humility and integrity.

I see a fullness that is not blind to our fragility and vulnerability. In the midst of life we are surrounded by death. The skull on the table is a drastic reminder of our ephemerality. It is carefully placed among the joys of food, reading and making music. Everything is clothed in warm autumn colours. The Medieval dictum “memento mori” is not meant to take away from the beauty and joy of life, but rather to intensify it.

Experiences of pain and suffering can make it very hard to transform our fullness into gratitude. My own privileged life seems so unfair and undeserved in comparison to the daily struggles of survival others have to face. For some of it the system that has created my privilege is to blame. But there are also the experiences of natural catastrophes that strike indiscriminately. There is a cruel arbitrariness in nature that makes some winners and others losers.

To be welcomed to this table is to be aware of how close joy and pain are. To say grace at such a table is to be aware of those who do not have, is to allow for lament to surface side by side with gratitude. For both lament and gratitude have something in common: They share a deep affirmation of life. Such empathy and grief help to transform good fortune into genuine gratitude, which is not selfish, but deeply caring and giving.

In closing, how then does one transform an experience of fullness, of abundance, of privilege into gratitude? It is about discovering „the gift within the gift“, a spaciousness that allows for both thanksgiving and lament, a table that celebrates our common humanity and welcomes all to eat and read and make music together.

Amen.