

Gift of gratitude

When I was 5 or 6, my grandmother gave me a brand-new pack of crayons. Even after prompting, I didn't say, "Thank you," so my mother took the gift and put it on a high shelf.

I couldn't have the crayons until I thanked Grandma, and I desperately wanted them. As the days went by, it only got harder to find the courage to say that belated thanks. Of course, eventually I did thank my grandmother, she gave me her usual loving smile, and I ran off to try my new crayons.

I've long since forgotten the pictures I colored and drew, but I have realized the depth of my mother's lesson. The truth is that you can't fully enjoy a gift if you haven't appropriately thanked someone for it.

Gifts connect us to one another in special ways. Every time I bring out our china for special occasions, I think of the people who gave us each piece. With our children, I often remind them of the aunt who picked out the treasured stuffed Cat in the Hat, the uncle who delivered the stuffed hedgehog, or the friend who chose the game that's always such fun to play.

I try to do that when teaching our children about the gifts from God, too, by expressing gratitude in our daily prayers, but also by talking and praying aloud in front of them throughout the day.

"Look at this beautiful day God made!" "How could anyone but God make bunnies that are that cute?" Or after a close call on the road: "Thank you, God for not letting that car run into us."

In my Sunday School class this year, we have a pillow that looks like an orange slice - our "Orange You Glad" Pillow. At the beginning of our class, each second-grader gets a turn sitting on the pillow and sharing something he or she is glad happened during the week. I love hearing their thankful prayers for the birthday parties and the dogs they met and the visits with their grandparents. And I'm sure God enjoys the prayers even more than I do.

It's easier, of course, to thank God for the sunny days. It's harder in times of grief and loss and pain. Gratitude doesn't always come easily, but there's almost always something to be thankful for, though it can take time to see it. I look at our infertility, which led us to adopt our two children. I think of colleges that rejected me and jobs I didn't get, and I realize those experiences helped shape my life and career in positive ways.

I look back on the **death of my nephew Georgie**, who was stillborn four years ago just weeks before we thought he would be born. Even in the midst of the pain, I was grateful that God had shared this little boy with our family. And today as we talk to and about Georgie, I think of how he has deepened our faith. Even though I wish he were here on earth, I am profoundly grateful that he is part of our lives.

"The secret of happiness is to live moment by moment and to thank God for what he is sending us every day in his goodness," said St. Gianna Beretta Molla.

So we try to live each day with gratitude to God and to those around us. And I try to remember the value of the handwritten note for gifts, large and small.

The best thank you note I received this year came from my preschool-aged nephew who can't write yet. "Your Christmas gift was my favorite," his father had written, "and I have enjoyed it every day since receiving it." I laughed knowing that someone had torn through the wrapping paper so quickly that my brother has no idea what we sent.

Sounds like a grateful recipient to me.

Also see:

Being thankful even when it's difficult