

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Let us remember to live life with purpose and gratitude



Doug Kindschi Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

Last week we discussed the importance of not defining yourself as a victim because you cannot change the past. Instead, we can make the choice to live to the future and take action that can change the future.

In the news, we are reading about the extraordinary life of Sen. John McCain. No matter what one's political position, we can admire him for not seeing himself as a victim following his more than five years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam.

As a Navy pilot, McCain was shot down while on his 23rd bombing mission over Hanoi; he was badly injured and taken prisoner. He was tortured and spent two years in solitary confinement. He was given the opportunity to be released early but refused because the other prisoners who had been there longer were not given freedom. Following his eventual release and major medical procedures and operations, he continued his military service for many years until finally retiring with a disability pension.

He chose not, as he put it, to be a "professional POW" but began to build his second career, not in military service but in public service as an elected member of Congress. Following two terms in the House of Representatives, he was elected to the U.S. Senate, where he was serving his sixth term.

A year ago, he was diagnosed with glioblastoma, a very aggressive brain tumor. He had previously survived three melanoma cancers. He once again did not consider himself a victim, but entered radiation and chemotherapy to treat the disease. In an interview last fall, McCain



Sen. John McCain, who died Saturday, lived his life with an attitude of gratitude despite being injured and tortured as a prisoner of war in Vietnam.

gratitude or thankfulness. The great 13th century Catholic mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough."

One of the pillars of Islam calls for prayer five times a day as a way to give thanks to God for his goodness. During Ramadan, the Islamic pillar of fasting has a goal of encouraging the believer to remember in gratitude the blessings received. The Qur'an frequently warns against ingratitude but states, "God always rewards gratitude and He knows everything." (4:146)

An article in the magazine Hinduism Today, titled "Two Powers: Gratitude and Appreciation," discussed gratitude in terms of the different kinds of consciousness. It states, "Gratitude is a quality of the soul. It does not depend on how much we possess. Its opposite, ingratitude, is a quality of the external ego. When we abide in soul consciousness, we give thanks for whatever we have, no matter how little or how much. When in ego consciousness, we are never grateful or satisfied, no matter how much we have."

Recent scientific studies have also shown the relationship between gratitude and physical as well as mental health. It is correlated with self-esteem, sense of well-being and life satisfaction. It also contributes to decreased risk of depression, eating disorders and drug abuse.

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admitted to a feeling of fear of what may happen but countered with a statement of gratitude for having "had a great life." In that same interview, he mentioned gratitude at least five times. Repeatedly, McCain made the choice not to be a victim but to live for the future. He chose to see his life with an attitude of gratitude.

Gratitude is one of the most important attitudes that one can take, especially when tempted to fall into victimhood. All of the religious traditions teach it. Before the Christian era, the Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero said, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of the virtues, but the parent of all of the others."

In the Bible, gratitude and thanksgiving are common themes, with more than 140 references, and are especially apparent in the Psalms.

"O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever." (Psalm 30:12)

"I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart." (Psalm 9:1)

The phrase, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever," appears 16 times throughout both testaments.

The Apostle Paul writes, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Philippians 4:6) A central event in the Christian worship service is known as the Eucharist, a term that comes from the Greek word "Eucharistia" meaning

Abdu'l-Baha, son of and successor to the founder of the Baha'i faith, tells the story of Buddha speaking to his disciples as he was planning to send them out to teach. He wanted to be sure that they were prepared for the hardship ahead. He asked them:

"When you go to the East and to the West and the people shut their doors to you and refuse to speak to you, what will you do?" — The disciples answered: "We shall be very thankful that they do us no harm." — "Then if they do you harm and mock, what will you do?" — "We shall be very thankful that they do not give us worse treatment." — "If they throw you into prison?" — "We shall still be grateful that they do not kill us."

"What if they were to kill you?" the Master asked for the last time. "Still," answered the disciples, "we will be thankful, for they cause us to be martyrs. What more glorious fate is there than this, to die for the glory of God?" The Buddha then responded and said, "Well done!"

We are not all called to become martyrs, but in whatever life brings, we have the choice to be thankful or to become a victim. Science has recently affirmed what our religious traditions have taught: that gratitude and thankfulness can bring life fulfillment so important to finding meaning in all that we do and experience.

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interfaith@gvsu.edu