

by Brian G. Daigle

Each night we bathe our little daughter. For the nine months of her young life we have used the same yellow cup to rinse her, at times keeping a steady pour of warm water to minimize nighttime fussiness. With each passing day, she is more aware of her surroundings, more aware that a diaper change around 6:30 PM means a bath, and the yellow cup means warm water. It means clean leisure. She drapes her leg over the side of her mesh bath seat and enjoys her bath time rituals, becoming increasingly more aware of the yellow cup and its purpose. She watches with anticipation. Cup after cup empties over her newly-formed skin. She smiles.

What does she think of the yellow cup? What is its presence in her young gratitude? If she could speak, would she thank the yellow cup for bringing her warm water? Would she hug it and ask how it could be so kind? Does she understand it is animated by my hand? And my hand is animated by my Father's breath? Does she know her mom and I paid for this water? Has she considered that our monthly mortgage includes this tub and the bath tiles which adorn it? A close friend or family member bought her this bath seat. And my mother-in-law bought her this tear-free shampoo because it smells better than the previous stuff we used.

Our world is full of yellow cups, filled with instruments of providence - each blade of grass, each sunrise and sunset, each ant hill. Every day is a table brimming with providence. Reality is a sacramental feast. All this kind of stuff comes from somewhere. And while we are here, in this reality, we will give thanks to something.

As we sit around a Thanksgiving table this year, who will give thanks and for what? Better yet, who will we thank? My own family - siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles - is a motley crew of religious beliefs. And I can't help but consider how Thanksgiving fits within their framework. More basic, I can't help but consider how everyday gratitude fits within their framework. I look around our table and consider where each directs his appreciation. Misappropriating our gratitude is not a matter of opinion, and it is certainly not value-neutral. Find where a man directs his gratitude and you will find why he saves for retirement, raises his kids, and brushes his teeth.

The *pure patriot* digs back in history, to men and their documents now crystalized in American sentiment. He points to a system, a collection of policies, which have given us freedom enough to have overrated American Football, bloated banking, crony capitalists, and some kind of religious tether, which is fraying with each passing month. For the patriot, the flag, along with some kind of constitutional literary theory, is our hope of resurrection, of redemption.

The *family man* goes back a few generations for his gratitude. He considers the work others have done to get him here and the work those around him have done to keep him here. He attributes it all to a kind of blessed luck that has kept the family together and strong. It has all just happened with him at the helm. Values are real for him, often intertwined with what has been called moralistic therapeutic deism. He may be a God-fearing man, but not because God is worthy to be feared, but because this man's life is too worthy to lose. The problem with his gratitude is it always stops at the grave. Death, the great gift-killer, wins in the family man's narrative.

The *atheist's* world is nothing but yellow cups: impersonal, accidental, and unworthy bits of mass. Because these bits appear animated, and because the atheist's heart is still a human one, he senses that gratitude must fit somewhere. For him, it is only reasonable that something becomes the biggest yellow cup, the one most worthy of our praise (e.g. science, rationalism, Mother Earth). But ultimately, the problem with the atheist's position is that there is no room for gratitude. If the fool has said in his heart, "There is no God," then the atheist has said with his logic, "There is no gratitude." Even worse for him, gratitude is humility. It is submission. And in a world of ever-moving, sporadic evolution, submission is weakness, at best. Unintelligent, inanimate objects do not deserve praise. A merely mechanical earth makes something as great and necessary as gratitude needless, laughable, and even pitiful, as Nietzsche tried to teach us. Still, the man who mistakes the yellow cup for a god, who goes to his pantry each morning to pray and sing so that his gratitude may be pointed somewhere, is less pitiful than the man who thanks his waiter on Friday and on Sunday says there is no divine, only earth. Though they are both idolaters, caught in a tangle of lies, the first has at least realized that gratitude requires the divine. The second can only say he is being mannerly, which is not gratitude at all.

To the *naturalist*, gratitude can never be sincere because gifts are impossible. Giving requires will. It requires something more than moving parts. It requires intelligence. Gifts cannot happen in a world of cosmic accidents. Gifts are predicated on the reality of a gift-giver. Gifts come from a person. For the naturalist there are no people, in the spirited and willful sense, and therefore there are no gifts. Gratitude is yet another chemical relapse. It will be done away with in time, maybe. Welcome to a universe of pure material transaction.

In contrast to these, the *Christian* directs his gratitude with fervent heart and a sound mind. It is not directed at doctrines or systems. It is not ultimately directed at traditions and titles. The faithful Christian sees yellow cups and ponders not long. He knows his Maker's handiwork. He sees grass, sunrise and sunset, and anthills. He sees architecture, technology, binders of law theory, and knows these are more than artifacts. They are characters. The Christian sees a stage upon which an Author is telling a story, a story which overflows with instruments of providence. All pointing to a single gift Giver. We thank a person, three at least. We open our fridge, turn on the bath water, step on the gas, crack the cover of a classic text, hug our family, sing songs of old – each is a moment where we may offer mere gratitude for gifts we do not deserve, gifts we didn't even know we needed. My daughter may look upon the yellow cup and follow the hand to my face. In time she will say "Thank you," and see us looking beyond ourselves, to a face which is not our own, to a hand which upholds every cup, yellow or Eucharistic: to Christ.