

Dancing with Monsters

CHRONIC ILLNESS as CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION

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When Gratitude is Difficult

We hear a lot about gratitude in the month of November. I am happy that the United States has a national holiday dedicated to giving thanks. It turns our hearts and minds and media toward thanksgiving, and that's a good thing.

But it plays a little thin for those of us who suffer from chronic illness.

I'm using the word suffer consciously. It's not the chronic illness part of things that makes giving thanks difficult, it's the suffering.

There is always something for which to give thanks. I can blather on about advances in medical treatment and health care, but somehow that increases the pain. Yes, it's wonderful that I have a motorized wheelchair and can get out of the house. That doesn't erase my grief over the pain in my legs and not being able to walk. The more people insist I give thanks, the more I feel my lack.

So here we are, those of us with chronic illness, once again feeling separate and alone. What to do?

- 1. Practice self-compassion.** There are times when it's easy to be grateful and times when it's not. Let yourself be where you are. Say and do kind things to yourself. Sometimes I say out loud, "this is hard. It's okay that it's hard." I stroke myself on the arm comfortingly, as though I am soothing a small child.

Use your senses and memory to build a comforting imaginary nest. Are there colors or textures that speak of comfort? Flavors? Sounds? Fragrances?

I am wearing my sister's red plaid wool robe, nestled in front of the fireplace with Bach cello suites playing in the background. I'm sipping from a mug of cinnamon tea and honey... It's that brown ceramic mug that used to be at the cabin.

That scene never happened...Those objects are scattered across time and space. I can't curl up in a chair or hold a mug of tea anymore, but I can close my eyes, listen to the cello suites and imagine I am there. I relax and smile.

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- 2. Gather support.** It's helpful to be honest out loud. If there is someone to whom you can talk who will offer you a listening, nonjudgmental ear, take advantage of it. If you don't have someone like that in your life, you may be able to train one. ("I just need to vent. I need you to listen and not try to problem solve or pass judgment.") If you don't have candidates for support, there are phone counseling services, support groups and pastoral resources worth adding to your life.
- 3. Express yourself.** Here are some creative experiments that can help you explore the role of gratitude in your life right now:

Writing starters:

- "I am grateful for..."
- "I am not grateful for..."
- "This whole gratitude thing..."

Make marks:

- What does gratitude look like?
- Make marks that show how you feel when you hear the word gratitude.
- Make marks that show how you feel when you are comforted.

Make sounds:

- What does gratitude sound like?
- Make sounds that show how you feel when you hear the word gratitude.
- Make sounds that show how you feel when you are comforted.

Objects in space:

- Find five objects for which you are grateful. Arrange them in a way that pleases you.
- Find five objects you wish were not part of your life. Arrange them in a way that pleases you, then make a mess with them, then arrange them again.
- Find five objects that speak to you of comfort. Make a nest.

Write or perform a dialogue...

- between a voice that is grateful and a voice that doesn't want to be grateful.
- between a hurting you and a comforting you.
- between a chunk of ice and a warming breeze.

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Move through it:

- make a motion that says “thank you” with your hand. Slowly involve more and more parts of your body in that motion until your whole body is saying “thank you.”
- Make a motion that says “not me” with your hand. Slowly involve more and more parts of your body in that motion until your whole body is saying “not me.”
- Hold your body in a way that shows you are hurting. Comfort yourself and then slowly move into a position that shows that you are feeling better.

There are other people who were feeling separate and alone. There are other people who are suffering. Take a breath in as you bring them to mind. Exhale and wish them well:

May you feel surrounded by light and love.

Include yourself in the blessing:

*May I feel surrounded by light and love.
May we feel surrounded by light and love.*

Know that I am thinking of you reading this as I write these words. You are not alone. May you feel surrounded by light and love.