

THE STRAIGHT SHOT

Gratitude by Jess Hardin

Sorry to say, I wasn't a particularly grateful fellow growing up. I figured I deserved whatever I got, but I couldn't even remember to thank myself let alone anyone else! Not that I was a particularly un-grateful kid, mind you. I just hadn't taken the time to really let it sink in how much I valued the gift of life, the love of parents, or the many adventures I had. But these days one could say I'm filled clear to the brim with it: gratitude for every wonderful thing that ever happens, every day we're here to greet the sun. For challenge and test as much as for reward or fun. For the eyes to see, and the legs to walk upon. For the love I'm given, the freedom I insist upon, and the mountains where I live. For opportunities like these pages, to share what matters to me, inspire when I can, and raise heck regardless.

Then again, one needn't be so blessed to be thankful for who they are and what they have. A man might find himself so gimped up with arthritis that his wife has to strap him to a wheelbarrow just to get him to the outhouse but that's still no reason to

be unappreciative! Life is too short to focus solely on our troubles, and too precious not to give thanks. Besides, even things like rheumatism can bring with them their own gifts, such as humility and patience. If ever we can't walk as far or as fast we are likely to notice more of the flowers on the path and spot animal tracks that might have otherwise been missed, and the dawn will seem to take forever to lose its gorgeous glow. Even death can serve us as a teacher. It reminds us how our time could be up at any moment no matter how young or healthy we are. It is the certainty of our demise that teaches us to make the most of each God given day, to relish every breath of air, to express gratitude for our blessings... to care, and to dare.

When a respected member of my community passed away recently, my first regret was that I hadn't told him lately what a fine fellow he was. Pretty eulogies are important, but even more vital is remembering to tell folks how much they mean to you while they're still around to hear it. We should be saying thank you every day to the husbands and wives that grace our lives,

thanks to the friends that put up with us no matter how difficult we can be. Thanks to our kids before they leave us, and to our grandparents before they pass away. We should be saying thanks, even, to that waitress telling jokes at the local cafe. To the man who manages our wastewater. And to the woman who passes our mail out, eating her lunch over a pile of paperwork while most of us are taking our meals at home.

We here are not about to take our rural lifestyles for granted, nor focus exclusively on problems or inconveniences. Prices can be higher in "the sticks", but then we're a fortuitous distance from traffic jams and crowds, and we have one of the last grocery stores in the United States that still gives credit to its long term customers. We may be burdened by federal regulations, yet we're lucky to be living in one of the most beautiful, wild and old fashioned places left: thousands of acres of national forest free from the curse of condos and the blanketing of concrete and asphalt, woods open to every citizen to enjoy. Neighbors that often go out of their way for each other. Wildflowers bursting with the joy of Summer, birds cavorting in the brush like kids on Spring break. Ringtail cats and coatamundi, back porch raccoon mischief makers, jumping trout and big eyed deer. Madly mating ducks and frog pond crooners. Crimson streaked cliffs marked by the heated brush of volcanic eruption, pockmarked with crystal geodes, etched with the dreamlike designs of Paleolithic peoples, illuminated by the near constant attentions of the sun, and washed in heaven sent rains. Streams and rivers that glint like diamonds at dusk, bringing a life giving bounty to an otherwise arid landscape. Giant Ponderosa Pines, reaching skyward next to blooming squats of cactus. Those of us born in the mountains can be grateful for the father that picked such a fine home. Or if we moved to the country from somewhere else, we can be grateful to whoever it was that told about such a place.

You'd better believe it, we're grateful - for the mother that cherished us no matter what. For the blessings of children, or the treasure of a sister. For surviving grandmas and grandpas, and our memories of the deceased. For every bit of grace or magic in our lives. For every lesson and omen, aid or sign. For dotting husbands and crusty friends like mine. For anyone that ever enlisted to help us out, even if they later quit. And for that love which never leaves us, like a fire forever lit.



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