

Zen Lawyer

CHAPTER 6



"I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me, but it's hard to stay mad when there's so much beauty in the world," a character says in *American Beauty* after he is shot and killed.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst," he goes on. "And then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life."

He ends the movie with, "You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure. But don't worry, you will someday."

In the Zen story "Heaven and Hell," a battle-weary samurai senses his mortality. He had led many men into battle and had killed many adversaries. Wondering about the afterlife, he sought out a Zen master to explain heaven and hell.

The master, on his knees preparing for meditation, barely looked up at the samurai. "I know who you are," the master said with scorn. "You're nothing but a murderous brute. Why would I waste my time on someone who understands only violence?"

Angered, blood pumping, the samurai pulled out his sword from its scabbard. He raised his voice and said, "I could kill you for your impertinence."

He was about to decapitate the master who looked up at him.

"That," the master said, "is hell."

Startled by the truth about the maddening fury that had him in its grip, the samurai calmed down, sheathed his sword and bowed, deeply grateful.

"And that," the master said, "is heaven."

Like many lawyers, my calendar is chock-full and ever-changing. I build rituals into my schedule for some consistency. At home, for example, we go around the dinner table and each of us voices what we are grateful for.

Sometimes we give thanks for simple pleasures, sometimes for deeper gratifications. My four-year-old daughter has said she is grateful for everything from ice cream to life.

"Wow," I said when she casually listed, "life."

Out of the mouths of babes...

We began this custom so that our daughter would learn to appreciate her many blessings. I hope it works for her. I know it works for me.

I have always been optimistic and have become even more so. Research studies show that pausing to express gratitude results in higher levels of optimism, enthusiasm, alertness and energy. Studies may not be very Zen, but I read them anyway.

Those who live with gratitude experience less stress and depression, are more likely to help others, have better relationships, live longer, sleep better, and make greater progress toward goals.

Gratitude is a miracle drug.

I start each day reminding myself what I'm grateful for and count additional blessings at dinner.

In *American Beauty*, the Zen gratitude narration is voiced over footage of a plastic bag floating and swirling in the wind among leaves. The dancing bag became an iconic motif of the movie, representing the benevolence of the universe and the transcendental beauty revealed to those who pause for appreciation.

*As a Zen lawyer,
avoid
anger,
live with
gratitude.*

This is heaven
on earth.



Mark Lindquist is our Pierce County Prosecutor. Copyright 2015 Mark Lindquist