

Thanks Be To All the Things: A Gratitude Workshop

Logan Phillips, January 2019

In designing writing workshops, I'm always thinking not only about how the event can help participants explore their creativity but also how the experience can improve their well-being. There is an increasing amount of science that shows [connections between expressions of gratitude and mental health](#). Gratitude is also a key element of the [Kindness Curriculum](#) developed by [University of Wisconsin - Madison's Center for Healthy Minds](#), which offers many ideas on how to create a healthy classroom environment.

The following workshop is a work-in-progress that I began developing in sessions with undergraduates at the University of Arizona and high schoolers at Sunnyside High School in the fall of 2018. The workshop series at Sunnyside, entitled Liberation Lyrics, is a program of [Spoken Futures](#) and was presented with the support of the UA Poetry Center and the Southwestern Foundation.

While the combined age range of those groups ran from 14-22, I'm sure this workshop could be modified for elementary students all the way up to older adults. I imagine this version of the workshop would work for groups of 3-15 participants, and can be compressed or stretched between 30-60 minutes total.

The goals for the workshop are:

1. Practicing the art of noticing.
2. Cultivating a sense of gratitude.
3. Collaborating as writers: building healthy group dynamics through collective prompt generation and getting to know each other as people.
4. Generating inspiration for further poem writing, specifically odes (see "Extension" below).

Here's the sequence of how I've been running the workshop most recently:

1. Introduction 5-10 minutes

We know it's healthy to be thankful for what's around us, but often we don't pause long enough to really consider the many things that are worthy of our gratitude. And as with writing, sometimes it's hard to focus in specifics. So the first thing we're going to do is brainstorm as many "categories of gratitude" as we can. For example, these are all categories of things we could be thankful for (*I usually only give a couple of these examples, writing them on the board / projector, but here are several*):

- a. A physical space that we're thankful for

- b. A specific song that we're thankful for
- c. A person we've just met this semester...
- d. A piece of clothing
- e. A physical activity
- f. A question we've been asked
- g. A specific moment
- h. A physical touch
- i. An annoyance that we are thankful for
- j. *Etc.*

2. Listing: Categories of Gratitude *2-5 minutes*

So now let's all think of our own. When I say "go," spend the next few minutes making a list of categories of gratitude. Remember these aren't actual people / places / things / ideas that you are grateful for, but rather really specific types of gratitudes that a person could have, like the examples on the board. Nothing's too silly, too serious or too specific, so let's see what we can come up with. Go!

3. Re-read & Select: Categories of Gratitude *1-3 minutes*

Ok, finish the item you're writing, then please stop writing for now. Please take a moment to re-read the list you've just written, and circle two categories from your list. Which ones? Whichever two seem most juicy, unexpected, interesting, or just jump out at you.

4. Listing: Specific Gratitudes *10-20 minutes*

Great, now all of us have a couple categories. The next part of this workshop will be lead by all of us collectively. We'll each take a turn (or two) to offer up a category of gratitude to the group. When the rest of us hear it, we'll write down the first thing that pops in our heads, being as specific as possible.

For example, Juan might say "A certain meal that you're thankful for," and I might write down "That red chile & fried cauliflower burrito from Tania's I ate with Enrique, Meleena and Jackie on Saturday afternoon in the sunshine." Then Juan will pick the next person to offer a category and we'll write another one.

Take a look at what you've already circled. Who can start us off with a category?
(*Writing ensues*)

5. Re-read & share out *10-20 minutes*

Ok, wow, that is a lot of stuff, a lot of gratitude. Please take a moment now and re-read the list of specific gratitudes you've written down, and circle two. *2 minutes.*

Now, we'll go around in a circle and each of us will have the opportunity to share one of the gratitudes we've written down. After you read it, if you'd like to say a bit more about it, please do.

6. Closing: Look at All That

Before we finish, take a look at that page in front of you. Look at all that you have to be grateful for! Even on our worst days, there are opportunities to be grateful, whether those gratitudes are as small as a hello or as juicy as a red chile burrito.

Extension: Odes!

This gratitude workshop can lead into a second session focused on ode writing. An ode is a “song of praise” for a specific object, person, place or even an idea. Each participant’s list of gratitudes contains great, original candidates for becoming the subject of an ode, i.e. “Ode To The Red Chile & Coliflor Burrito,” or, probably more interesting, “Ode to My Mother’s Hug,” “Ode to These Kicks that Walked Me the Hell Out of There.”

When I teach odes, I usually use it as opportunity to discuss sensory detail and deep (even tangential) consideration of an object— but that’s another blog post. In the meantime, if you’re looking for ode inspiration, consider the classics found in Pablo Neruda’s “[All the Odes](#),” the borderlands-specific odes of Pat Mora in “[Adobe Odes](#),” and even the epistolaries of Evie Shockley’s “The Fare-Well Letters” in “[The New Black](#).”

As for me, I am grateful for the support of the UA Poetry Center in doing this work.