



For This Thanksgiving: Survivor's Guilt Or Gratitude?

By Michael J Tamura

I woke up this morning feeling grateful. What was I grateful for? Well, for life. All of it. But, do you know what was the first specific thing in this world that I felt gratitude for this morning, two days before Thanksgiving Day? For the more than 46 million turkeys who have given their lives up in this world in order that the nearly 280 million of us would be able to “properly” celebrate Thanksgiving Day and be grateful that we are alive - and well fed.

No need to feel guilty, if you're planning to feast on these interesting and tasty birds. Survivor's guilt is not good for either the survivor or the deceased. Feel survivor's gratitude and have survivor's grace instead. As for me, I'm looking forward to slicing up the one that Raphaëlle will be making a 3-hour round-trip to Oregon today just to purchase, spend all day tomorrow preparing to cook, and then, wake up Thursday at a time, when the turkey's gallinaceous cousins start crowing, to roast through the day. I'm grateful to the bird that gave its body up so that I can nourish mine. More than half of my adult life, I've been a vegetarian or vegan. Yet, in the past several years, it seemed that I needed some kind of animal protein to maintain good health as I wasn't assimilating enough of the plant proteins. After trying out seafood and poultry, now, I'm just down to eating some chicken and occasional turkey for my animal protein requirements. So, I'm

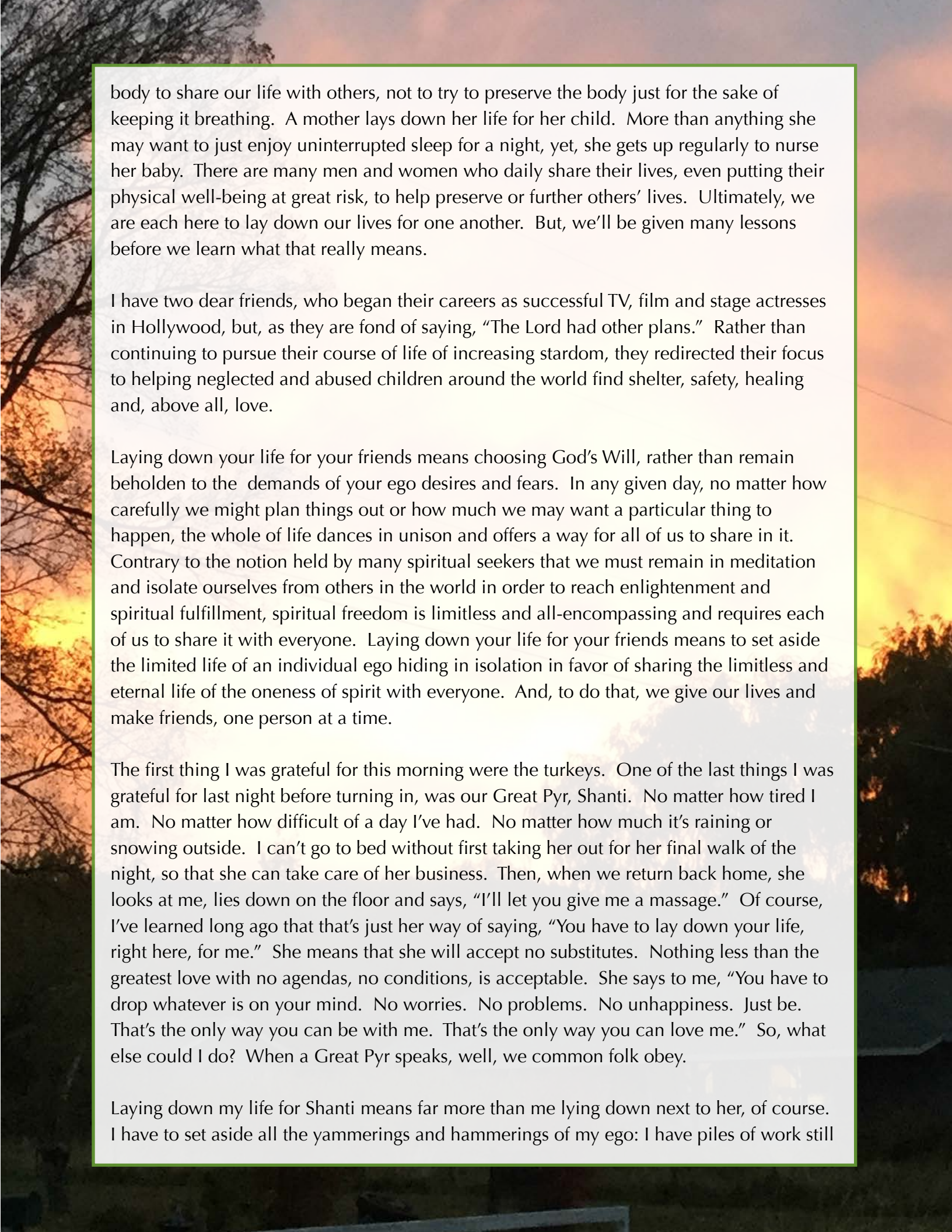
thankful for the birds that help me stay healthy in this world, that I may finish my job here. That way, I can continue to offer survivor's grace.



When I woke up to being grateful this morning for the turkeys, I remembered what Jesus commanded

his disciples do: “Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.” I know that the turkey that we'll end up enjoying for dinner this Thursday didn't know me, much less considered me its friend. Yet, it did end up laying down its life for my sake. Whether it knew it or not, that which did that is love, nonetheless. That love is the wellspring of all life. And, love never takes life. It only gives life.

What does it mean to lay down your life for your friends? It doesn't mean to take your life or anyone else's. It means to give life. And, giving your life means sharing it. We use our



body to share our life with others, not to try to preserve the body just for the sake of keeping it breathing. A mother lays down her life for her child. More than anything she may want to just enjoy uninterrupted sleep for a night, yet, she gets up regularly to nurse her baby. There are many men and women who daily share their lives, even putting their physical well-being at great risk, to help preserve or further others' lives. Ultimately, we are each here to lay down our lives for one another. But, we'll be given many lessons before we learn what that really means.

I have two dear friends, who began their careers as successful TV, film and stage actresses in Hollywood, but, as they are fond of saying, "The Lord had other plans." Rather than continuing to pursue their course of life of increasing stardom, they redirected their focus to helping neglected and abused children around the world find shelter, safety, healing and, above all, love.

Laying down your life for your friends means choosing God's Will, rather than remain beholden to the demands of your ego desires and fears. In any given day, no matter how carefully we might plan things out or how much we may want a particular thing to happen, the whole of life dances in unison and offers a way for all of us to share in it. Contrary to the notion held by many spiritual seekers that we must remain in meditation and isolate ourselves from others in the world in order to reach enlightenment and spiritual fulfillment, spiritual freedom is limitless and all-encompassing and requires each of us to share it with everyone. Laying down your life for your friends means to set aside the limited life of an individual ego hiding in isolation in favor of sharing the limitless and eternal life of the oneness of spirit with everyone. And, to do that, we give our lives and make friends, one person at a time.

The first thing I was grateful for this morning were the turkeys. One of the last things I was grateful for last night before turning in, was our Great Pyr, Shanti. No matter how tired I am. No matter how difficult of a day I've had. No matter how much it's raining or snowing outside. I can't go to bed without first taking her out for her final walk of the night, so that she can take care of her business. Then, when we return back home, she looks at me, lies down on the floor and says, "I'll let you give me a massage." Of course, I've learned long ago that that's just her way of saying, "You have to lay down your life, right here, for me." She means that she will accept no substitutes. Nothing less than the greatest love with no agendas, no conditions, is acceptable. She says to me, "You have to drop whatever is on your mind. No worries. No problems. No unhappiness. Just be. That's the only way you can be with me. That's the only way you can love me." So, what else could I do? When a Great Pyr speaks, well, we common folk obey.

Laying down my life for Shanti means far more than me lying down next to her, of course. I have to set aside all the yammerings and hammerings of my ego: I have piles of work still

to finish; I want to rest; I'm too tired; when are *you* ever going to give me a massage? I have to choose God's Will, rather than fight with or try to solve or silence all the yammerings and hammerings of my ego. But, when I do, within a moment or two, silence prevails. Peace makes its grand entrance without pomp or circumstance into my consciousness. Now, there is neither Shanti nor me, just we. When any of us is, all of us are. If we but set aside all the self-abusive demands of the ego, love reveals itself in its limitlessness. There is no love greater than limitless love that stops at nothing, eternal love that neither waits nor hurries.

Whether I found myself experiencing gratitude for having Shanti in my life or the prospects of having a juicy golden turkey on the dinner table for Thanksgiving, what brought my appreciation for what life offered me was that underlying, all-pervasive, limitless love. On the flip-side, I am an ingrate whenever I refuse that all-encompassing love that is being given ceaselessly as life. True gratitude comes as a natural consequence of accepting unconditional love. It never fails. When I accept love, I'm grateful. It's not something I try to be out of obligation or etiquette. I can't help experiencing gratitude whenever I accept unconditional love. That also means that whenever I'm *not* experiencing gratitude, I'm somehow not accepting that greatest of love.



You might think that accepting love is the same as having someone love you. But, it isn't. Far from it. Many people lament that if only there were someone to love them, they would certainly be able to accept it. Yet, we don't really accept unconditional love, until we share it. Love is not a commodity that can be kept to oneself. The very nature of being unconditional is that it can't be contained in any way. You can't keep it for a rainy day. You have to continuously pray it forward.

When you find yourself sharing that untethered, silent, peace-giving love in any way, you know you've accepted it for yourself as well. This is why you can't truly reach your final destination by yourself in isolation. The more the merrier and the faster your journey will be. Seeing the light in the light is the first step, but you don't graduate until you see the

light in the dark, until you can resurrect yourself from the dream of death, pain and suffering.

Late last night, I went to bed grateful for Shanti. I woke up this morning, grateful for turkeys. The common denominator between the two was my wife. If it weren't for Raphaele, I would not have had Shanti in my life. Today, that would be hard for me to imagine. My two favorite T-shirts say: "Be the person your dog thinks you are." I know I'm a better person because I wear those T-shirts regularly. If it weren't for Raphaele, I most likely wouldn't be eating turkey for Thanksgiving. Then, I wouldn't have awakened this morning with gratitude in my heart for turkeys giving their lives. I would have missed out on the opportunity to see the light in the seeming darkness of slaughtering turkeys in the name of giving thanks. When we're willing to see, love remains steadfast behind the apparent scenes of worldly life, beyond all conditions of existence, ceaselessly giving life wherever, whenever and however we need. There is truly no greater love than for one to lay down one's life for a friend. Raphaele lays down her life every day for me. No matter how exhausted she may be. No matter how much she'd like to take a day off. No matter how she may be feeling or what she may want to do, she regularly sets aside the yammerings and hammerings of her ego demands to be with me through thick and through thin. Every day, she offers me the opportunity to accept that greatest of all love, that love that lays dormant within each of us, until we are willing to share and pray it forward. And, when we are willing to accept this love and share it, we begin to transform whatever survivor's guilt and unworthiness we may hold deep within us into our gratitude and grace.

