



## PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

### **Program #5104**

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#### WELCOME

**Daniel Pawlus:** Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re glad you’ve joined us for this half-hour reflection on faith. I’m Daniel Pawlus.

**Lydia Talbot:** And I’m Lydia Talbot. Our guest today is writer and professor of religion, Howard Macy, whose new book is called “Stepping in the Light: Life in Joy and Power.” He’ll be talking to us about the importance of giving thanks, and the freedom we experience when our hearts are grateful.

**Daniel Pawlus:** We also welcome back writer Tom McGrath, who will reflect on a lesson her learned from his dad about gratitude.

**Lydia Talbot:** And we begin with the story of psychiatrist and photographer, John Matt Dorn, whose early childhood experience and his work with people in nursing homes, shaped his life and carved in him a lasting sense of gratitude. Let’s watch.

#### SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

**John Matt Dorn:** the reality is that no matter what has happened to you, your life is more precious than you will ever be able to imagine. And it’s making the most of your life, no matter what has happened to you, that can help you retain a sense of joy.

I grew up in Easley, South Carolina. My father was out of the picture from the time I was one and a half. He abandoned me and certainly I experienced a tear in the fabric, if you will, in early childhood. The most important role model as a child was my grandfather who was a retired minister. My religious life changed radically when I went to college. I began to think that hell was not a concept that was consistent with my idea of a loving God. That was such a profound epiphany that it led me away from organized religion and the church for many, many years.

There was a time in my life when I drank a lot and it was really my involvement in recovery that brought me back to a God and religion. I think nursing homes were integral to my spiritual life. Faith in a nursing home setting was paramount for many of the residents. I remember walking into a nursing home one time and I went up to the desk and I said, “I can’t find so-and-so because they aren’t in the room.” And the nurse said, sort of flippily because this is an everyday occurrence in nursing homes, “Oh, they died.” I threw my pencil in the air and walked to the end of the hall and just stood there and looked out the window. People who think that doctors don’t

care are wrong.

I think, historically, psychiatry has been sometimes frankly hostile to religion, so I went to the most academic and prestigious divinity school I could find. This was the University of Chicago. My ability to help people has been transformed by my knowledge.  
[So is it fair to say that we tend to see Socrates through Plato's filter?]

Spirituality can often help in overcoming suffering, grief, the sense that something's wrong. A lot of poets and artists suffer early losses that have to be worked out through some artistic medium. I think that inspired a lot of my artistic efforts. Sacred things are all around us. Very often God will say, "Hey, would you look over there?" If you see something that you would think of as a weed, if it has color and light, it's a flower.

Everyday you do spiritual exercises which help to remind you how precious your life is and how very big the world is and how if you only experience that bigness, the things that trouble you now will fade. I think that our primary emotional roles in this life are to love and to forgive. And primarily to forgive ourselves. God is about love and forgiveness. That's it! That's the Bible: love and forgiveness.

## INTRODUCTION

**Daniel Pawlus:** John Matt Dorn's photography is shown in exhibits throughout the United States, and frequently in conjunction with the poetry of Judy Valente, who produced this story for us. Our thanks to both. If you'd like more information, you can visit our web site at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org).

Now, let me tell you about today's speaker. Dr. Howard Macy is Professor of Religion and Biblical Studies at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. His current research and writing is about humor and the spiritual journey. Howard's family became Quakers about 300 year ago on Nantucket Island, and among the Quakers he calls mentors are Elton Trueblood and Richard Foster, who are both former guests on this program. Howard's new book, "Stepping in the Light: Life in Joy and Power" is a collection of his essays published in "Quaker Life" over the past 25 years. We're delighted to have Howard Macy with us on *30 Good Minutes*. Welcome, Howard.

## MESSAGE

**Howard Macy:** Thank you very much. It's a delight to be here.

One of the fun things I get to do as a grandfather is watch my kids raise their kids. There's so much to teach and learn: how to talk and play with others, where to put the Cheerios really, how to be polite by saying thanks. So when a child receives a gift, Mom or Dad is likely to prompt, "And what do you say?" "Thank you," they'll usually reply.

We think saying "thanks" is a part of having good manners. Of course, it is, and it's important. But the importance of being grateful goes well beyond minding our manners or doing our social duty. Among many other places in the Bible, for example, Psalm 136 reminds us, "Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his love endures forever." And the Apostle Paul urges Christians to sing, "always giving thanks for everything." Such reminders to give thanks aren't to add to our

duty, but to increase our freedom and joy.

For one thing, giving thanks frees us to receive life as a gift. The strength we use, the resources we enjoy, every breath we breathe, all of these come to us from the hand of God. One of my favorite psalms is Psalm 104, a psalm that celebrates God's creative activity. It describes God's shaping the world, but even more it wonders at how generously God pays steady attention to and provides for all the creatures exactly what they need. And we are among them. God provides steadily, generously, graciously to give us life.

We're tempted (and often taught) to think that we're on our own. We need to be independent. We need to watch out for ourselves, to plan and hustle to provide what we need. Of course there's a measure of truth in that. But it's even more important to know that even for the most "self-made" persons among us, none of us is really on our own. All of us depend on God's generous care. Knowing this frees us to lay down the need to be self-sufficient. Being grateful for God's care frees us to release the burden of worry about whether we can guard our lives and gather all we need. We can learn to enjoy the ordinary things, the small things.

Several months back now, the story of Alberto Salazar caught the nation's attention and, even more, the attention of those who live in the Pacific Northwest. As a young man, Salazar was one of the world's most successful long distance runners, winning three consecutive New York City marathons and the 1982 Boston Marathon, and setting a handful of United States and world records in track. At age 48, he was fit and still running 25-30 miles a week and was coaching some of the country's most talented runners. So all of the people around him were shocked when he suddenly collapsed of a heart attack on the Nike World campus. All who witnessed the event and the medical personnel who worked to save his life say it's a miracle that he lived through it. But he did and he continues to lead an active life.

Once he was on the road to recovery, Salazar ventured that he was glad it happened because it reminded him of what's most important. He said, "Every little thing I do right now, every time I see my kids, or wake up in the morning, see my daughter sleeping—little things I thought were just normal, they're always going to be there—I really appreciate them a lot more now." He continued, "I kind of forget to really keep things in proper priority and that's my family, God, faith and those friendships."

Though it may not be as dramatic, perhaps most of us can remember being rescued from a close call or even a life-threatening experience. I find that such memories sometimes still give me a sobering chill. And often they do remind us of priorities and of God's goodness. Wouldn't it be better, though, not to have to rely on close calls to remember God's care and generosity toward us? Wouldn't it encourage us to notice and be grateful each day? Simple practices of thanksgiving can be freshly rich, not merely routine, and they can remind us of the gift of our lives. Giving thanks invites us to gladly receive God's provision in each day, in each moment, and in the ordinary blessings of our lives.

Giving thanks not only frees us to receive life as gift; it also frees us to relax into contentment. Without gratitude, we can easily be captured by the restlessness of need, even the frenzy of scurrying about to get the next one thing that will make us happy. It's a subtle habit, isn't it? We

tell ourselves, “If I just had X (you can fill in the blank), then I’d be satisfied.” But when we get it, we tend to fill in the blank with something else. And others push us in that direction. Our culture has a major industry that devotes itself entirely to breeding discontent, to stirring up our sense of need and reminding us that we are entitled to everything we desire. The constant appeals hammer at us: you want it; you need it; you deserve it. Sometimes it’s put that boldly, sometimes more subtly. So it’s easy for us to slip into a constant dissatisfaction or perhaps into a tempered uneasiness in which we say, “That’s not really good enough, but it’s okay for now.”

Of course, such dissatisfaction touches more than just the things we own. It may have to do with our jobs, our dreams, our social circles or station in life, and much more. So we discover that, unlike the Apostle Paul, we have not learned to be content, whatever our circumstances may be.

Though sometimes we joke about people who see the glass half-full or half-empty, I’m quite sure that God does not intend that any of us should live steadily in restless discontent. Giving thanks helps us move toward contentment, toward living joyfully in the lives we really have. Instead of focusing on what’s lacking, we can be glad for what we’ve received, both large and small. Certainly there are times when we have genuine needs, and we are invited to bring those to God in trust and prayer. But even in time of need, God’s gifts to us invite thanksgiving.

It may be in the wonder of the world itself, perhaps in a full moon rising, or in the glory of roses, or the delicate strength of a spider’s web. We can say thanks for food, whether ordinary grub or cuisine, or thanks for well-crafted instruments and musicians who can make them sing. Or it might be for quiet moments or friendly smiles or other small things. Though it’s not small, I often thank God for the gift of people in my life, the people who have befriended me, guided me and who love me regardless. How can we not be grateful for the folks God sends to rescue us, to open new opportunities, to love our kids, and even to laugh at our jokes? Giving thanks helps us relax into contentment, not chafing under false need, but celebrating God’s care.

Though I think it’s not, maybe it seems too small a thing to rest easily in God’s care, practicing Jesus’ teaching about not worrying about tomorrow. In my experience, however, making a habit of thanksgiving does something grander still. It frees us to see even more fully the goodness of God. Instead of God just getting us by, we begin to see generosity. Even if the circumstances of our lives are modest, instead of mere adequacy we begin to see God’s abundance.

An old gospel song urges people who are struggling in life to count their blessings. To those who, in the words of the song, feel “discouraged,” “tempest-tossed” or who even feel that “all is lost,” the refrain invites, “Count your blessings, name them one by one...And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.” The word “surprise” has been grabbing my attention recently, I think because it suggests that without intentionally giving thanks we don’t notice God’s goodness. We too easily become preoccupied, slip into the ruts of routine, into anxiety, into complaint, into taking things for granted.

How much better it is to see and celebrate God’s goodness in the whole fabric of our lives. Giving thanks can free us from the worries of self-sufficiency and from the restless striving of perpetual need and it can bring us into the joy of God’s abundant love. Then we can, as Paul advises, let our “hearts overflow with thankfulness.”

## CONVERSATION

**Lydia Talbot:** If you'd like a free printed or audio copy of the message you just heard from Howard Macy, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org) to watch the video or download the text anytime.

Now let's talk to Howard Macy. Howard, thank you, thank you for that wonderful message on gratitude. You refer to the Psalms, that say to give thanks increases our freedom and joy. And I must ask you, as a "DNA Quaker" as you are known, how does that kind of gratitude fit into the Quaker traditions of peacemaking and justice?

**Howard Macy:** One of the things that I find really interesting in the early Friends movement, particularly with George Fox who is regarded as founder, is how he was overwhelmed with the love of God. In his own sense of need, he encountered God in remarkable ways, and in ways in even in very discouraging times. This was the Commonwealth period in England. Oliver Cromwell and others were throwing people who weren't righteous enough into jail, you know, a lot of Friends and Baptists and other people. Even in those dark moments he encouraged people to sing and dance because of God's presence in the midst of all of that. They had a keen sense that the ocean of darkness and death was being overcome by an ocean of light and love. So I think built into that was that sense of God's sufficiency and power at work, and was very important to them.

**Lydia Talbot:** Did you learn that as a child?

**Howard Macy:** Oh, I wish I had learned more! But I mean I was certainly among people who understood a lot of that.

**Daniel Pawlus:** Now, Howard, you pursued an interesting avenue in your study of spirituality and that is the integration of humor into that. I'd love for you to share that with us because many times we think of faith and religion as a very serious matter.

**Howard Macy:** Quite serious.

**Daniel Pawlus:** Very serious! Share with us a little bit what that research was and that work was about.

**Howard Macy:** Well, actually, I was surprised. What I set out to do was maybe write an article—to be a scholar and everything—about interpreting humor in the Bible. Because there is very little written about how to do that, I began to read after humor and I've been teaching spiritual formation courses for a long, long time, so I found a lot of good stuff about reading humor in the Bible. I also began to see an intersection of how humor touches on how we understand ourselves and what's possible for us. So a couple of examples and we could call this theology but it might scare people! I wrote a chapter called, "The Klutz Factor," because all of us do things that make us feel stupid. We wear mismatched socks, we lock the keys in the car and that sort of thing. Theologically, we can say we're limited, as we are creatures. We're not in charge. We have limits as great as God has crafted us to be and our failures are kind of built in,

in some sense. We have great powers but we have limitations. And to learn to accept that and deal with it has been real eye opening.

The other one that is kind of fun for me is to think about being the center of the universe. Now, people who write about humor often talk about being the center of the universe or discovering yourself in that place, king or queen, and then needing to unpack that. We use humor to take people down from the top of the hill because they are in our spot. A lot of “take down” humor is really this competition to be in the center. But when we can discover about ourselves that, in fact, we’re making moves that put us in relationships in wrong places or maybe act in ways that we may be simply oblivious. I think a lot of “center of the universe behavior” is that people are oblivious. I discover this when people run into you with shopping carts and other kinds of things! People are so engrossed in their own world that they’re really hardly aware that there is another world. So humor is a way of unpacking that in ourselves especially, rather than necessarily being cruel to others. And there are a lot of other ways that kind of test who we are and where we are.

**Lydia Talbot:** I wonder how you would say that humor would feed into gratitude in the context of the Alberto Salazar story, the world famous long-distance runner who collapsed of a heart attack. And you said in the context of that, that reminded you of your own close calls that leave you with a sobering chill. You’ve got to tell us, what do you mean? What are they?

**Howard Macy:** Well, do you know the Darwin Award stories? They’re books now collecting Darwin Award stories. These are people who are given awards because they’ve taken themselves out of the human race through their own stupidity and so removed unfortunate parts from the gene pool, is the theory. I’ve read those stories and they’ve done really stupid things and I say, “You know, that could have been me!” Or, “You know, that maybe was me and, but for the grace of God, I’d be dead!”

**Lydia Talbot:** Have there been really close calls in your life?

**Howard Macy:** One that comes back every once in a while is when I was driving on a road in Maine and pulling out thinking I can pass this car and the next thing staring down the road and seeing there’s somebody right there in my face. It’s only God’s grace that rescued me, very frankly. That kind of thing.

**Lydia Talbot:** What do you say to people who are at the depths of despair, who are in pain and anguish and suffering who would rather say to God take back your gift, than express gratitude? What can you say to people feeling that way?

**Howard Macy:** One of the chapters in that book is called, “When It’s Hard to Laugh.” I think there are two things to say. Sometimes we say, “You know, in five years we’ll laugh about this,” or sometime down the road we’ll laugh about this. And you might say, “Well, could we maybe laugh about it now?” And that can unpack some of that. But there are other places where, in fact, it’s too soon and you really can’t. So to introduce humor at one level is cruel. I had a woman who shared with me a story of a family that used laughter quite a lot, but that in a cancer period in their family they didn’t laugh at all for a year and they began to later. But there was a period

where that couldn't happen.

**Daniel Pawlus:** I wish we had more time to spend with you, Howard, but thank you for joining us today. We appreciate your being here.

**Howard Macy:** Thank you very much. It's been delightful.

#### INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTION

**Daniel Pawlus:** And now our friend, writer Tom McGrath, has this "final thought" on gratitude.

#### REFLECTION

**Tom McGrath:** I was visiting my father a few weeks before he died. That day had been a hard one for him. As I arrived, the hospice nurse was administering a new medicine that offered Dad blessed relief. As I sat next to his bed, Dad finally relaxed into a deep and welcome rest. Ten minutes later he awoke again, refreshed. He looked over, smiling, and said, "All in all, Tom, we're in pretty good shape." I was astounded. Clearly Dad would not be considered in good shape by any passing observer. Yet Dad was not delusional. He knew he was dying and in pain. But these were words I'd heard him say throughout his life. They reflected the attitude of gratitude he brought to every situation. This attitude had become yet one more gift to his family. Even in his torment Dad knew that nothing—not pain, nor suffering, nor even death can separate us from the sustaining love of God.

#### CLOSING REMARKS

**Lydia Talbot:** Thank you, Tom. And our thanks again to Howard Macy, John Matt Dorn, and you for joining us today on 30 Good Minutes. I'm Lydia Talbot.

**Daniel Pawlus:** And I'm Daniel Pawlus. Before we go, I encourage you again to visit our website at [30GoodMinutes.org](http://30GoodMinutes.org) for more information about today's program and a wonderful collection of messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at 30 Good Minutes, may your faith be strong in the week ahead and may your heart be open to God.