
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: #blessed

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

I'm looking forward to seeing posts from your upcoming trip to Deer Valley. As I'm sure your grandmother has told you, we have fond memories of visiting relatives who lived near Park City. They were wonderful to us when we were your age.

It's amazing how much the world has changed in such a short time. When we made our trips out west our parents might have gotten a letter or two, and sometimes after we were already home!

That you and I can continue in the rich tradition of writing these letters to each other having seen the same pictures and read the same articles online feels like a real blessing.

I'm glad you found Kate Bowler's recent piece about her cancer diagnosis as powerful and thought provoking as I did. I was particularly moved by the moment Bowler described of a neighbor knocking on her door and telling her husband that everything happens for a reason. "I'd love to hear it," he responded. "Pardon?" the neighbor replied. "I'd love to hear the reason my wife is dying," he said.

It is easy to slip into the belief that we deserve the privileges we enjoy. The illusion of control becomes most apparent when things fall apart. All of our attempts to explain evil and suffering as God's will, the obvious corollary to explaining our relative privilege that way, simply separate us from God and each other at the very time when we need those connections the most.

So, I think you are on to something important when you say that seeing posts tagged #blessed makes you uncomfortable.

Blessed has become a Trojan Horse. It tricks us into thinking about God in the wrong way. It looks like we're saying we have been given a gift, but it's really code for claims that we deserve our blessings.

The strategy is successful because it relies on a partial truth. We do have some control over our lives. Positive thinking is a good thing, and real rewards often do require hard work. But, faith is not magic, and health and wealth are not things that we can manipulate God into giving us.

We are blessed, of course, but the appropriate response to God's graciousness is gratitude, not pride. I didn't deserve the hospitality of my cousins when we visited their farm any more than Professor Bowler deserved her cancer.

Expressing true gratitude on social media is tricky, but if anyone can figure out how to do it I'm sure it's you.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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