



# Saying Grace

It's a simple gesture to say thank you. But how we express those words and the reasons we utter them are far more complex.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
MATT HULSMAN AND TRAVIS DOVE



*written by Michael Graff*

## I bow my head toward a plate of fried chicken.

It overflows. Leg, breast, thigh, and wing — the entire left side of this poor chicken lies in pieces, all for mighty me. It's a ridiculous amount of fried chicken. It's a ridiculous amount of any kind of chicken.

I'm in a restaurant in Maggie Valley. It's loud. Across the room, a keyboard player cranks out "Rocky Top," and people are clogging. Feet stomp in unison. I struggle to hear the other three people seated at my table. In this noisy, crowded restaurant, I try to take this moment to say something to myself.

I've been assigned to write a story on saying grace. And somewhere along the way, after talking to academics and religious leaders throughout the state, I realized the only way to explain grace, to understand grace, is to say it. So here in this boisterous restaurant, I take a moment to look down upon the entire left half of a chicken, fried so golden that my doctor would kill me, and I start to quietly give thanks:

*Thank you for this meal ...*

"Do you want any hot sauce, honey?" the waitress interrupts.

"Yes, I do. Thank you."

I bow again.

*Thank you to the farmer who raised this chicken ...*

"Can I refill that water?"

"Please do."

I bow again.

*Thank you to the man at the processing plant for working long hours ...*

"Y'all need anything else?"

"No. Please, no."

Everybody else is already eating. Not wanting to hold up the group, I decide to skip grace. That's the one thing I've always known about saying grace: It's easy to skip.

It's easy to skip because we have distractions. It's easy to skip because we have places to be and people to talk to. It's easy to skip because we have appetites. And because it's easy to skip, it's all the more important to know what we're forgetting.

When I first started this story, I sought the deeper meaning of thankfulness for this Thanksgiving issue, something beyond the faith and beyond the traditions, hoping to discover what it means to be truly grateful in our own hearts. To say grace.

I should say here that I was not raised in a church, never practiced a particular faith, was not taught to believe or disbelieve the stories that have held the center of mankind, and I was well into adulthood before I understood why I was the only one in the neighborhood who mowed my grass on Sundays. So in many ways, I was both an unnatural and logical choice to explore why we bow our heads and give thanks.

I've attended hundreds of events throughout North Carolina — Lions Club functions, Ruritan dinners, company Christmas gatherings — where the group says grace. I don't think I'm alone in saying that during those group blessings I've lifted my head and peeked, just to see if someone was doing the same.

As is the case with eating fried chicken, I knew I shouldn't. But I didn't know why.

I do now. I learned that there are no shortage of reasons to be thankful and no shortage of ways to acknowledge them. I learned that being thankful means acknowledging the things beyond our reach that keep us alive: the man who grew the beans, the farmer who raised the beef, a midsummer rain that saved the corn crop, the workers at the chicken processing plant who put in long hours in tough conditions on the dream of providing a better life for their children, the sea for a piece of flounder.

We could not exist without these meals we bless. And I'm not sure there's anything more worth being thankful for than existence.

**T**he less a person has, I've learned, the more likely he is to be thankful for what he does have.

One thousand years ago, the Cherokee Indians lived all over the eastern half of the continent. Their world narrowed, decade by decade, after the arrival

of European settlers, until most of them were secluded in the mountains of North Carolina. Then the Indian Removal Act of 1830 led to the Trail of Tears. Four thousand Indians died. The few who were able to stay here formed the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians, but they didn't have it much better. Throughout the 1900s, the U.S. government passed laws that demanded the Cherokee to assimilate into our culture. Only during the past two or three decades have the Cherokee been able to openly embrace their heritage.

And yet, the Cherokee people are some of the most grateful in this state.

Their word for thank you is *sgi*. Before meals they thank Mother Earth for the food. They thank the Creator for life. They thank the people who made the food, blessing those people's hearts, blessing those people's minds. They give thanks for having a community. They also have nonverbal ways of saying thanks, through dances or drum beats or a traditional smoking of a pipe.

When Cherokee Indians pick an apple from a tree, they say *sgi* as soon as the stem pops off the branch.

Almost every minute of every day, the Cherokee acknowledge the things that allow them to be here rather than the events in history that nearly made them extinct. Yet doing so never loses significance.

“You’ve got to be patient,” says Jerry Wolfe, an elder in the tribe. “Sometimes people say [thank you] so much that it becomes numb. It becomes dead, like just because we know it, we say it. And we don’t have any real patience for the meaning of it. We have to be thankful for all times that we are here. We are not here on earth too long.”

Gratitude is the great neutralizer. It paralyzes superficial thoughts in favor of the simple and pure. The moment when we say grace at the table isn’t a time to lament what’s not there, rather it’s a time to celebrate what is.

In those moments, we fill our hearts and minds with the people and things that are most important to our lives, elevating those characters into a more prominent place in our minds, curing them of their flaws for at least that moment. If there’s any reason to say grace, it’s to see the good.

**D**uke Chapel’s tower draws a jagged outline in the sky above Duke University’s West Campus. It is one of the most recognizable religious houses in North Carolina.

Just next to it is Duke Divinity School, one of the finest resources on religion in the country. Despite being one of only 13 seminaries founded and supported by the United Methodist Church, the divinity school covers all religions. If any place in this state has answers on the meaning of saying grace, it’s this short stretch of land in Durham.

William Turner is a teacher at the divinity school, and he’s also a minister at Mount Level Baptist Church, a predominately black church in Durham.

In his classes, he teaches students how to preach in front of a crowd, and then he goes home most nights and says grace silently. Now in his 60s, Turner is a father, but his children are grown and moved away. Dinners have become quiet and personal. And so has grace.

It’s interesting how that happens over the course of time, Turner says. The son of a railroad worker, he grew up in a house with eight brothers and sisters. Every night before dinner, the family joined and said the same thing — together.

“Father, we thank you for this food and the hands that prepared it. We ask you to consecrate this food for the nourishment of our bodies, for Christ’s sake, amen.”

He says the same blessing still.

Many members of black churches — of many churches — say the exact same blessing in their homes. The peace is in the ritual, Turner says. Especially as life

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**William Turner, a professor at Duke Divinity School and minister at Mount Level Baptist Church, has said grace the same way since he was a boy.**





**Steven Sager promotes traditional Jewish customs and says many blessings throughout the day, including one every time he fastens his seat belt.**

corn harvest — with their agricultural mentors, the Indians — after their first winter here proved perilous. The second came two years later at the end of a lengthy drought, and these occasions of thanks remained largely Northern and sporadic until President Lincoln prescribed a recurring date on the calendar during the arduous times of the Civil War.

Everyone I meet says some version of the same explanation for what saying grace is: Like for the Pilgrims, it's a way of acknowledging that we are dependent creatures, supported by other life — plant, animal, or friend.

Or higher power.

**W**henver he sits in his car, Steven Sager says a blessing for the seat belt.

“Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, who has made us unique by giving us commandments and has commanded us to guard our lives.”

Sager, the rabbi emeritus of Beth El Synagogue in Durham and an adjunct professor at Duke Divinity School, wrote the blessing years ago after his friend died in a preventable accident.

He now considers the act of protecting himself a larger-than-life moment, and for every one of those moments he encounters during the course of a day, Sager — also

changes. Sometimes Turner finds himself at public events and big dinners where people say grace. And they say the precise blessing he's recited his whole life. Often one person starts the sentence, another person continues, and another person finishes.

“It became a formula,” Turner says, “a prescription for how to regard food and how to regard the blessings of life, a reminder that it wasn't to be taken for granted.”

Thanksgiving itself seems such a ritual today that it's easy to forget it wasn't always there. But we took 242 years from the fabled first Thanksgiving to make it an official national holiday. The first Thanksgiving was a way for the Pilgrims to celebrate a successful

the executive director of Sicha, an organization that promotes and teaches Jewish traditions from classical texts — says a blessing.

The Jewish word for blessing is *beracha*. Sager says dozens of them every day. He even told me he'd say one after I talked with him, to thank God for a good conversation. It's probably the only time anyone's ever thanked God for talking to me, so I told him thank you.

Sager often considers the word “bless.” It is thought of as a warm word today, although few people know what it means. “Bless” comes from the Proto-Germanic word *blodison*, which means “to mark with blood.” So bless actually has sacrificial overtones.



**Norman Wirzba is a research professor of theology, ecology, and rural life. He hopes that our strengthening bonds to the foods we eat — helped by farm-to-table movements and backyard gardens — will also strengthen the gravity of saying thanks.**

In his prayers, Sager prefers to mentally substitute the word “overflowing” for “blessed” because he thinks it means something more concrete. A pre-meal blessing is specific in the Jewish culture, acknowledging not only the whole meal, but also each piece of it.

“Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, king of the universe, who brings bread forth from the earth,” is how Sager blesses bread on a table. In his mind, he means, “Overflowing are you ...”

Sager spends about 45 minutes a day in personal reflection participating in three statutory prayers of the Jewish faith in the morning, afternoon, and night.

But he also follows Jewish tradition of punctuating his days by stopping to acknowledge any moment that’s bigger than him — any moment that is overflowing. He says a *beracha* for a strike of lightning. A clap of thunder. A rainbow. A good conversation. The death of a friend.

Sager believes it’s a biological trait among humans to be grateful.

“If I hear a clap of thunder and I scream, that rises out of my sense of fear, which is deeply embedded in my biology,” Sager says. “The soul insists I say something —

‘Holy expletive,’ or, ‘Yikes’ — as an impulse. Or I could scream, bring the air up through the vocal cords with no words being formed. But the religious definition moves us to shape that impulse to exhale differently.”

The *beracha* for hearing thunder, Sager says, is, “Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, whose power and strength fill the world.”

**N**orman Wirzba is halfway to an empty nest. Two of his children are in college, and two are at home. Every night the family says grace. But real joy lifts from the words in the summers and on holiday breaks. On Thanksgiving the family knows what the first shared piece of gratitude will be: They’re thankful that everyone is together.

For several minutes every night, each member of the family says out loud a personal message of grace. Each day the message changes. Each day the things for which they are thankful are constantly new because life is constantly new, Wirzba says. To this family, the blessing is not a memorized sentence or two, like the Lord’s Prayer, but an evolving event.

“If you’re growing food in your garden, you’ve worked to get it to harvest, and you’ve prepared it lovingly. Saying thank you gives it a whole new meaning in that context.”

— *Norman Wirzba*

Wirzba feels this makes him and his family deeply consider the words they choose. “To use them in a way,” he says, “that we really mean them.”

Wirzba is a member of the congregation within Duke Chapel, and he’s also a research professor of theology, ecology, and rural life. He is an expert on the relationship between agriculture and religion, two of the most important pieces of North Carolina’s soul.

When environmentalism gained momentum in the 1960s, religion became a target, Wirzba explains. In an

article that appeared in *Science* magazine, writer Lynn White Jr. blamed much of the abuse of the earth on religion, asserting that Western Christianity, in particular and in contrast to some other worldwide belief systems, was an anthropocentric religion, meaning people are the center. The article, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” stirred anger. But it also roused a re-examination of the Bible by theologians throughout the country. And it caused new interpretations of phrases in Genesis, phrases that assert that humans have dominion

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over the earth.

“That does not mean human beings can do with the earth what we want,” Wirzba says.

Still, convenience and lower price tags helped supermarkets emerge as our dominant source of food, and fast-food restaurants became standards of every major business strip in every town. The narratives behind our meals were forgotten.

It happened fast. Humans have been practicing agricultural traditions for 10,000 years, yet we needed only a few decades to forget where our food comes from.

The effect was that the authenticity of the blessings we say before meals suffered, Wirzba says. It’s hard to say thank you for a Whopper and really mean it.

“To be truly thankful, you also have to be somewhat knowledgeable about what you’re thankful about,” Wirzba says. “In today’s economy, there’s a lot of ignorance. It’s a lot harder to be genuinely thankful.”

Wirzba supports the local foods movements in places like Durham, where several new restaurants now champion farm-to-fork meals. He also sees a revived enthusiasm in the younger generation to grow vegetables in a backyard garden.

“If you’re growing food in your garden, you’ve worked to get it to harvest, and you’ve prepared it lovingly. Saying thank you gives it a whole new meaning in that context,” Wirzba says. But simply taking a moment to think of all that went into our food is a start.

That level of awareness transcends food.

“If you want to be thankful for the health of your grandma, then you should spend time with grandma,” Wirzba says. “How many people say they’re thankful for grandma, and they never visit grandma?”

And that’s probably the most important answer I learned in my examination of saying grace: No matter the object of our gratitude, no matter the faith, no matter if it’s fried chicken or grandma, no matter the time and place and nature of the saying, no matter how often we say it, the key to being thankful is that we truly mean it. That makes saying grace worthwhile, and shouldn’t that be the case no matter what it is we are about to receive? 🍴

*Michael Graff is the writer-at-large for Our State magazine. His most recent story was “What’s it Worth?” (October 2012).*



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