



When the World Went Silent, Gratitude Spoke

UJWEL/Vol-3/Issue-7/NOV-2025/UID-3512026/Lydia-Soza-Castillo



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Abstract

In this personal essay, I reflect on the profound disconnection I experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic after losing my sense of smell — a loss that symbolized much more than a physical symptom. Through this silence of the senses, I rediscovered gratitude, presence, and emotional healing. What began as a simple family craft with my child, *The Gratitude Box*, became a practice of mindfulness that reconnected us to life's smallest, most meaningful moments.

When the World Went Silent, Gratitude Spoke

I can still remember the smell of turkey roasting in the oven — the butter melting into mashed potatoes, the savory gravy just the way my family likes it. It was the eve of Canadian Thanksgiving, 2024. I had spent the whole day preparing dinner to bring to my sister's house and desserts for my husband's family gathering. I could already picture the laughter, the warmth, the sound of my little boy running through the living room, giggling as his cousins chased him around.

But that night, as I finished cleaning up, something felt off — a tickle in my throat, a wave of exhaustion that wasn't just cooking fatigue. Out of caution, I

took a COVID test. Two pink lines. Just like that, the light drained from the room.

We missed every family dinner that October. No hugs, no laughter, no stories shared around the table. Just four walls and the sound of my own breathing. I felt cheated — furious, not at anyone, but at the world. At this invisible thing that had stolen years, memories, and people I loved. It reopened wounds I thought had healed. I saw the faces of three family members I'd lost to COVID — faces I could no longer touch or hold. The grief returned with sharp edges, carrying that same helplessness I'd felt during the first years of the pandemic — the fear that the world could collapse overnight, and no amount of love could stop it.

The virus hit me hard. My body ached, my energy vanished, and for days everything blurred together — time, pain, silence. Still, as mothers do, I kept going. I folded laundry. I made soup. I smiled for my son, even when I wanted to cry. When the fever passed, I thought the worst was over.

I was wrong.

A few days later, I noticed something strange. I couldn't smell my coffee. I couldn't smell dinner cooking. And then came the moment that broke me: I leaned down to kiss my little boy's head... and I couldn't smell him.



That was the moment everything inside me cracked.

It's hard to explain how deeply that loss cut. His scent — that warm, innocent, sun-soaked smell — was comfort, safety, and love all in one. It was home. And suddenly, it was gone. The world had gone silent again, not in sound but in sense. I felt disconnected from life itself.

I cried for days. I prayed. I researched. I panicked. It wasn't about smell anymore — it was about losing the ability to *feel alive*. In desperation, I began training my nose with cinnamon and cloves, hoping something would awaken. Each morning, I would inhale, remember, hope.

And then one day, I pressed my face to my son's hair and smelled him again — faint but real. It hit me like sunlight through a storm. I cried so hard I scared him. "Happy tears, Mom," he said softly. He was right. Those tears were relief, gratitude, and realization.

In that moment, something inside me shifted. I understood how much I had taken for granted — the small things, the daily things, the irreplaceable things. I promised myself I wouldn't forget again.

A few weeks later, while tidying up, I found an old Cheerios box in a cupboard. For some reason, I didn't throw it away. I turned it inside out, covered it with vinyl, and handed it to my son with a handful of markers and stickers. "Let's make something," I told him. We laughed and decorated until our fingertips were sticky and the box was covered in colour.

That day, without realizing it, we created something much bigger than a family craft. That was the day *The Gratitude Box* was born.

By the first week of January 2025, our first gratitude card slipped inside — a tiny note of thanks, a small piece of joy preserved. And it felt powerful. I didn't share it with anyone at first. It was private, sacred, ours. But when I eventually wrote a storybook about it and showed it to my sister, she cried. She told me she was going to start a Gratitude Box with her grandchildren. That's when I realized this was bigger than me.

The Gratitude Box became a way to heal not just our family, but others. It became a way to teach mindfulness, to retrain our hearts and minds to see light again. Gratitude isn't something that appears

when life is perfect — it's something we practice when life isn't.

It's been a year since that quiet Thanksgiving. I still have moments when negativity creeps in, when old habits try to take root again. But now, I catch myself. I breathe. I ask, *What is the lesson? Where is the light?*

About The Author:

Lydia is the heart behind Little Orange Hat Publishing — a writer, maker, and mama inspired by the everyday magic of life with her little family. Her stories are filled with warmth, gentle lessons, and the kind of hugs you can feel on the page. Through each book, Lydia hopes to help children feel seen, loved, and understood — one beautiful story at a time.