

On Gratitude

Thanksgiving Service
UU Fellowship of Paris

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Nowadays, it is rare for Unitarian Universalists to "gather together to ask the Lord's blessing" — so radically has our hymnbook changed the words of this classic Thanksgiving song: thus, "We Sing Now Together" this afternoon! Nonetheless, we never fail to gather around a Thanksgiving turkey & a pumpkin pie, and we usually feel grateful for such a repast — let alone for all the other blessings of Providence, Fortune, Family, or Friendship received during the past year. Thanksgiving is perhaps the most non-denominational spiritual festival in the world, and we should also feel grateful for that. Whatever their religious, spiritual or secular inclinations, people everywhere appreciate a good harvest, autumnal colours, gathered families, and an overflowing table. In brief, it is the season to feel glad!

What **is** gratitude? How often do we pause to examine this key word? It is perhaps among the few profoundly emotive words about which both religious and secular people agree. The Rev. Galen Guengerich, senior minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, delivered a sermon on Gratitude on 15 October 2006, in which he argued that it should be the key word of the UU faith. "In the same way that Judaism is defined by obedience," he declared, "Christianity by love, and Islam by submission, I believe that Unitarian Universalism should be defined by gratitude." His sermon was summarized the following spring as an article in the *UU World* (pp. 41-44).

Although the Rev. Guengerich's sermon was preached within a week of Canadian Thanksgiving, without a single mention of such a festival, it seems an excellent basis for our celebration this afternoon of the original, American version. For he is not interested in simply the giving of thanks, but in the context in which we do so — awe in the face of the universe and recognition of our utter dependence on every aspect of it. He believes that this awe & this recognition impose an obligation: the duty of being grateful and the discipline of returning back some of our abundance, the ethical response of helping the world go round & our neighbour go forward. We are grateful, yes; we are glad & we give thanks. But what are we doing in return for that for which we are grateful?

The Rev. Guengerich offers two motivations for his suggestion, one practical & the other theological. The practical motivation, in turn, has two aspects: First, UUs are in serious need of something focussed, simple, profound, & worthy upon which we agree & in which we believe. He argues that the concept of Gratitude admirably fits that necessity, fills that gap. It would even help our children answer awkward questions on the playground concerning what their religion was about.

Second, UUs, in his judgement, are unwise in so often taking Freedom as our salient word. He is dissatisfied with "freedom" because he sees it mainly as a negative term, meaning the absence of coercion. (For what it's worth, I do not personally agree with him on this point, at least not in all its narrowness; indeed, his making this important point here may have hid from him his own more balanced reflections.) "Freedom" is too open-ended & unfocussed, Guengerich argues, so it fails to bring us together, when the very word "religion" does not mean to liberate or set free, but rather to bind together. Religion unites the purpose of our lives as human beings with the purpose that animates the universe." More people are attracted to us for our freedom than remain among us for our often too-tangible vacuum — that is, for our apparent lack of substance: "People don't go to Carnegie Hall," he states, "because of what they won't hear." Thus, we should welcome people into UUism to practise Gratitude!

Guengerich's second, theological motivation has already been hinted at: religion is about binding people together. We come together out of awe, which he explains "emerges from our experience of the grandeur of life and the mystery of the divine". (Let me say parenthetically that his sermon makes it clear both that he personally believes in something called "divinity" and that he defines the "divine" broadly.) He argues that this awe becomes "religious when a sense of obligation lays claim to us, and we feel a duty to the larger life that we share." He carries one step further what he admits may seem heresies to Unitarian Universalists: he wants us, like adherents of other religions, to practise a **discipline**. "The discipline of gratitude," he continues, "reminds us how utterly dependent we are on the people and world around us for everything that matters."

He continues, with great eloquence: "As humans, we are dependent upon the parents who conceived us, the plants and animals who daily give their lives for our nourishment, the trees that reverse our cycle of taking in oxygen and giving off carbon dioxide, and the sun that warms the atmosphere and

lights our path. In every respect, we are utterly dependent." And so he returns to his concern about our placing such a primacy on "freedom" — on independence & Ralph Waldo Emerson's self-reliance, even to the extent of believing we are autonomous & self-sufficient, attitudes summed up in our treasured word "liberalism". He concedes that these concepts have value, but believes they are not enough; indeed, they are deceptive & dangerous if not balanced by the discipline of gratitude & an acceptance of obligation.

So, finally, we come to his "ethic of gratitude", which "demands that we nurture the world that nurtures us in return." It "takes our experience of transcendence in the present and works for a future in which all relationships — among humans, as well as between humans and the physical world — are fair, constructive, and beautiful. § Put another way, the discipline of gratitude connects the present with the past, while the ethic of gratitude connects the present with the future...." In a beautiful conclusion, he states, "The discipline of gratitude is about knowing how much we have been given and acknowledging the scope of our dependence. It's about saying 'thank you' to the people we love, to the world we enjoy, to the universe we inhabit, and to the God who holds us all in a divine embrace."

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I was sufficiently impressed by the Rev. Guengerich's argument that it induced me to write a sermon of my own (delivered three years ago in Winnipeg), in which I summarized & commented upon his sermon and also explored the idea of gratitude a little further. I'll suppress the temptation to draw on my sermon as amply as I have on his, but I would like to introduce two or three, interrelated points made there that I believe are important.

First, definitions: what might we unpack from the word? Our word "Gratitude" does not trace back to a single Latin word, but rather to several, whose various meanings have been blended together by time: Gratitude starts on account of a favour, service or kindness; this boon, gift or benefit is pleasing and welcome; this comes gratuitously or freely from a benefactor; it is associated with charm & pleasantness, with esteem and regard; and it is reciprocated by appreciation and thanks. All these conventional uses of the term are positive.

Yet, as with most fundamental words, we meet ambiguities, of which I think we should take note: "gratitude", in fact,

may also be **expected** by the giver or benefactor, who can create thereby a feeling of indebtedness or obligation, a sense of being beholden, a fear of being manipulated. An obligation is now imposed, sometimes without having asked for it. Indeed, givers need to be more sensitive to what their gifts may imply, elicit or impose.

The sense of gratitude can be, and usually is, a joy that affirms and enriches a relationship — a powerful feeling that can be overwhelming. Yet its ambiguities can be found in friendships & families, in commercial exchanges & relationships, and in political attitudes & activities at all levels. Furthermore, as with most profound and fundamental words, the connotations and applications of "Gratitude" can be invested with a religious significance.

Gratitude does appear to be one of the most fundamental and universal of all religious thoughts and emotions. The Rev. Guengerich even goes so far — too far, I suggest — as to see it as an **uniquely** religious concept. We can agree with him that the most basic of all thoughts & emotions of appreciation is gratitude for being alive. We are alive in a beautiful, bountiful and bewildering Universe, which religious folk usually agree was created by one or more deities. To feel grateful towards one's Creator is regarded as natural & spontaneous, but — enter that ambiguity again! — it is also regarded as an obligation & a calculation. The calculation is in part a simple, intellectual & perhaps ritualistic recognition of the gift, but one blended with the conviction that gratitude is required either to receive further benevolence, or to avoid malevolence, from the Divine Creator. God is to be both loved and obeyed irrespective of one's personal lot or fortune in life.

In fact, the "grace" of God is etymologically related to all the other defining features of "gratitude" that we examined earlier. God's grace is given (or withheld!) freely — arguably without regard to whether or not the creature is worthy of it. Conventional prayers begin with praise and thanks; traditional rituals have often been sacrificial offerings, whether of appreciation, of appeasement, or even of bribery. And God is regarded as a self-aware personality who notices, evaluates and guides these and other human actions, especially those concerned with worship or morality.

The problem for UUs, however, is that so many of us deny or doubt the existence of such a divine creator or at least we conduct our lives as if any deity that might exist were ir-

relevant to our daily objectives and preoccupations. Furthermore, we tend to challenge traditional presentations of God for their internal conundrums. For instance, when God is supposed to be both loved and obeyed, has anyone thought to ask if love and obedience — except (perhaps!) with children — are compatible sentiments?! How can an infinitely powerful & loving God be either so insecure or so tyrannical as to demand adoration, gifts, ... and gratitude?!

And so, among the several reasons I have for admiring the Rev. Guengerich's sermon is that it puts obligation back into gratitude. He reminds UUs that there is no free theological lunch. Not only do we UUs too much praise freedom of belief without requiring that we also, each of us, arrive at a substantive conviction; not only do we celebrate human goodness, without adequately delving into the problem of evil; but we also accept with pleasure the world's bounty without recognizing our dependence & without investing our gratitude with a **religious** (that is, a "disciplined") obligation to return the favour and to sustain the so generous Universe. We UUs may have escaped from both loving & obeying a Divinity, but does abandoning God leave us as free of religious duties as we usually think?

This blend of considerations makes Thanksgiving an even more special festival for Unitarian Universalists. First, we can celebrate it freely, out of gratitude. Second, we can celebrate it whether we are secular humanists or religious theists; Thanksgiving entails no theological baggage. Third, perhaps we should also celebrate it with a sense of obligation. Should we not take a moment to recognize our presence within an interdependent web that needs nourishing & protection?

Before turning towards conclusion let us note yet one more value or reward in Gratitude that not only UUs can appreciate: A wealth of research has shown that "gratitude" is a frame of mind that is more plenteously found in some individuals than it is in others. Those who often, easily and abundantly feel gratitude tend to be happier than those to whom the sense of gratitude is more foreign. Those enjoying a sense of gratitude also tend to be more helpful towards others (in general, not just towards some recent benefactor) as well as more forgiving. Not only do they forgive individuals and organizations that have neglected or mistreated them, but they also forgive "the Universe" for the injuries and disappointments handed out by fate and accident. All these experiences of gratitude, finally, are hedges against feelings of depres-

sion — which might suggest that gratitude is less expensive than medications or psychiatrists.

Thus, it may be salient to consider, within this last context, some of the things for which I am personally grateful. In fact, it would be rewarding for us, each of us, to examine what it is for which today — perhaps most days — we feel grateful. Since I have the podium, however, it seems unavoidable that I offer some of my own examples! In defense of this impertinence, I hope you'll notice that my story reflects many of those complexities surrounding gratitude & the challenge of accepting our destiny within the universe that we have been discussing this afternoon.

Life did not begin well for me. Along with the usual trauma of birth itself, I arrived with a complex set of congenital deformities in both hands, a depressed sternum (which created life-long extra work for heart & lungs), & a hernia; at age 2½, I fell off the toilet and broke my arm; and by about Grade IV, we finally realized that I was nearsighted, ...with astigmatism. Between ages 7 & 18, I went through five operations that only partly corrected the problems with my hands. No one thought to put me to the trombone or drums, let alone voice, so I learnt no musical instrument and am still limited to two-finger typing. Sleep apnea was not diagnosed till I retired, but in the meantime, I fell asleep morning, afternoon or evening whenever I tried to read and twice at the wheel of my car on the highway. Should someone like me be abroad in the world?

Yet I find myself relatively self-confident & outgoing (at least in my senior years), inexplicably cheerful & generous, and surrounded by friends. Can I account for this? I do not know: I was born into an extended family with many social & economic advantages, with dotting & stimulating grandparents, aunts & uncles, and both parents medical specialists — which meant in those pre-medical-insurance days that my surgeons operated without charge; my three younger siblings were usually happy, amusing & active, and remain so to this day; and my parents' friends were full of wonderful stories, achievements, provocations, & good humour. In addition, I count very much among my blessings that I felt well looked after by a series of surgeons and an abundance of often beautiful — or so they seemed at the time — nurses, whose competence, caring & exhortations set me standards for life. One of the earliest of them, an English nurse fresh from the war front in Europe, taught me how to fold the corners of sheets when remaking the bed, and a series of occupational therapists taught me basket

weaving & similar skills.

The excruciating after-surgery pain I have long forgotten; these positive memories have long sustained me. In both school & university I felt lucky in my teachers & professors, and felt having only a few friends then was sufficient. Although I suffered thirty-three years of a trying marriage, my wife was at least creative, dynamic & generous, and set many standards for me to emulate. (In passing, let me note that among my former wife's short-comings was a continuous expectation of gratitude from others!) But two marvellous children & then children-in-law, not to mention two heaven-sent granddaughters, have more than compensated for the marital afflictions. I cannot account for why the sum of my personal experiences has tipped me towards gratitude, happiness, gladness and thanksgiving, but I believe it has, ... and so I count my blessings. If I believed in God, I would join Johnny Appleseed in singing —

Oh, the Lord's been good to me,
and so I thank the Lord,
for giving me the things I need,
the sun and the rain and the appleseed!
The Lord's been good to me.

In closing, let me quote Regina Sara Ryan, from her book *Praying Dangerously*, a moving & challenging passage in which she might almost be speaking to the UU resistance to the sacred or spiritual:

Another reason we turn logical with our gratitude is that it is terrifying. The wonder of a moment in which there is nothing but an upwelling of simple happiness is utterly awesome. Gratitude is so close to the bone of life, pure and true, that it instantly stops the rational mind, and all its planning and plotting. That kind of letting go is fiercely threatening. I mean, where might such gratitude end?