

“Otherwise”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

How was it getting up this morning?
Did you wake with wonder at the miracle of being alive?

How was your breakfast?
Did you savour every bite?

On your trip here this morning, did your dazzle in the glint of the sun
and feel enlivened by the crisp air all around?

Or has today, thus far, been pretty much like any other?
The stuff of routine, with all the predictable rhythms of life.

Last spring when I was in the UK, I spotted a sign
hanging in the window of a place in London called “The School of Life.”

It simply read: “The mundane is to be cherished.”

How hard that lesson is to learn.
How easy it is to take for granted
the ordinary miracles that comprise our every day.

The mundane miracles that Jane Kenyon outlined
in the poem Ellen shared during mediation.

Jane Kenyon’s poem, “Otherwise,” can be found here:
<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/050.html>

These words were written by Kenyon in 1993, just after her husband,
the equally brilliant poet Donald Hall, had been diagnosed with cancer.

What makes her words all the more poignant is the knowledge that Kenyon herself died less than two years after writing them, at the age of 47.

Her husband survived his cancer, but she, sadly, did not survive hers.

In the fifteen months between her diagnosis and her death, she continued to write, with the same precision on the most mundane miracles of life.

The poem “Otherwise” was published after her death in a collection that took as its title the title of the poem itself.

Donald Hall published a collection of his own three years later called, *Without*, that traces his journey through the devastating grief of her loss.

These two books, *Otherwise* and *Without*, were my constant companions during the summer I served as a chaplain in the children’s unit of a cancer hospital in Boston.

On hot mornings, on my way in on the bus, I would read the poems again and again, touched by the rugged earthiness they contained, moved by the powerful way both poets so clearly cherished the mundane.

Their imagery of flawless peaches and refulgent fields, of mid-day naps and candlesticks on the table were a counterpoint to the visits I would make throughout the course of each day— visits to the kids who’d lost their hair but not their hope, as well as to the ones who knew they soon would die, yet who so often exuded a calm I’ve rarely seen in adults faced with the same hard facts.

I often thought of them as little Buddhas,
bearing a peace that was indescribable.

I believe these kids discovered for themselves the truth the poet had named: they knew, even amid their suffering,

that sooner than later things would be otherwise.

While there were certainly tears and plenty of heartache,
there was also a pervading joy in that clinic
that's still hard for me to explain.

It had something to do with those kids learning life's hardest lesson—
that life's deepest value is found in its fragility.

We live our lives in radical contingency.
In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, everything can change.
Our foundations shaken. Our dreams dashed.
Our hopes upended, never to be righted again.

This point is powerfully made in the musical "Jersey Boys,"
when the main character, playing the singer Frankie Valli,
takes a phone call and learns his daughter has died of a heroin overdose.

As he hangs up the phone, he reflects
on how he'd always heard the phrase "this too shall pass,"
as some hopeful assurance to help people get through life's challenges.

And then he says that what he'd never realized before is that it applies
to the good stuff, too—to the joy and the happiness that fills our lives.

This, too, he found, shall pass. Sometimes in an instant.

As heartbreaking as this truth can be,
I believe it is where gratitude is born.

Gratitude takes root in the knowledge
that things—for better and for worse—
could and will certainly some day be otherwise.

It's not a matter of simply feeling ourselves
to be especially more fortunate than someone else,
though that can sometimes be a source of gratitude.

To be sure, the words, "there but for the grace of God,"
have crossed many lips in a moment of confession
at our relief in not having it quite as bad off

as this person or that person, or those poor people over there.

But there is a deeper well to be found
from which gratitude can be drawn.

The place where we, in grasping life's heart-breaking fragility,
come to discover the true and staggering depths of life's worth.

The place where we learn that because life is precarious,
it is all the more precious.

The bittersweet place where we know in our bones
that because everything will ultimately be otherwise—
the gift of each day, of each breath,
of each morsel of food and every expression of love—
that our hearts must beat with gratitude for the miracle of it all.

And while this *should be*, it's not always the case, is it?

We forget. Wonder dulls. We take our blessings for granted.
We hardly notice our own breath or the gift of our very heartbeat.

And too often, too many of us find ourselves, ironically,
sitting at the Thanksgiving table
feeling bereft of anything for which we might give thanks.

How can that possibly be?
And how might we reverse that sad state of affairs?

The Zen Buddhist teacher, Greg Kreck, points to three practices
that help overcome a diminished capacity for gratitude.

The practices are to Notice, to Reflect, and to Express.

He says, "The more I think I've earned something or deserve something,
the less likely I am to feel grateful for it.

"As long as I think I'm entitled to something I won't consider it a gift."

"But when I am humbled by my own mistakes or limitations,
I am more likely to receive what I am given

with gratitude and a true sense of appreciation for the giver, as well as the gift.

He goes on to explain that,
“To experience a sense of heartfelt gratitude, you must develop a practice.
“Without practice,” he says, “there is no development of skill—only an idea.

“[And] you cannot become a grateful person just by thinking that you want to be grateful.

“Rather, you need to develop a new habit of attention—to notice the concrete ways in which the world supports you each day. And...then [to] develop a new habit of speech—expressing [that] gratitude to others.”

Sometimes, in order to get this, to really grasp this fundamental lesson of life, we need the shocking insight that things could be and will be otherwise.

Such was the case for the writer Sue Bender and her husband, in their early 60s, who decided they needed to get their financial affairs in order.¹

They met with their lawyer one bright autumn morning, and he asked them, “What would you like to do in case there’s an exploding turkey?”

“Exploding turkey?” Bender asked.

The lawyer continued: “What if the whole family was together at Thanksgiving and the turkey exploded? If the four of you were killed at that moment, who would you want to have your worldly goods?”

At first, the question was a bit unsettling and surreal. Perhaps it was the awkward image of the bird blowing up in their dining room. It wasn’t something she had ever considered.

¹ As told in a story by Rev. Thom Disrud.

But it later turned out to be quite a productive question, causing her to reflect on what was most dear to her.

Hopefully, none of us requires a combustible turkey to prompt our noticing and reflecting on the things for which we are grateful.

Finding the courage to express our gratitude, though, might be a different story. . .

How often do we miss the moment when a simple “thank you” would mean everything?

How often do we miss out on the opportunity to transform the world around us with life-giving words of gratitude?

Last January, an amazing thing happened in a courthouse in Brampton.² A moment that was made by giving thanks.

Maxwell Beech, a 37-year old man, took to the podium in courtroom 103 to tell Judge Hugh Atwood what a difference he had made.

With permission from the Crown and the judge, Beech stood during a lull in proceedings.

As the room fell silent, “Beech thanked the judge for giving him a [second] chance seven years ago when he was facing serious criminal charges” for drug and gun-related activity.

He wasn’t sure the judge would remember him, so he shared the story of his life in the years that had passed—“how he [now] runs his own business installing blinds and home security systems.”

He explained how he’d become a good father and what it had meant to him to be able to watch his son,

² “Convicted man returns to thank the judge,” Jennifer Pagliaro, *Toronto Star*, 19 January 2012.

now eight years old, grow up under his guidance.

When he walked into that same courtroom seven years earlier, he had been told by his attorney to say his good-byes, as he was certain he would be spending years in prison.

Judge Atwood, though, “tempered justice with mercy,” and sentenced Beech to serve only 90 days, on weekends, at the Metro West Detention Centre.

The story could have ended there, with Beech serving his time while still being able to carry out his responsibilities as a single dad.

But, Beech made an effort to say “thank you,” and it had a profound effect.

As he told his story, everyone in the courtroom was in tears, including the judge, who “turned red, weeping silently in his chair, holding his face in his hands.”

“Even the three offenders in the prisoner’s box appeared to have tears in their eyes.”

“When Beech finished speaking..., the stunned onlookers in the courtroom simply applauded.

It was a moment of shared recognition of how very differently things could have turned out, of how profoundly otherwise that man’s story could have been.

That day, Beech wasn’t the only changed man in the room.

“The judge said it was the best thing anyone had ever said to him.”

I believe gratitude is the mortar that holds us together. It helps us to recognise what is of such precious worth that we can’t live without it.

It holds before us our dependence on each other and this good green earth for all that we have and are.

And it reminds us, because we so often forget,
that everything can and will eventually be otherwise.

May we, then, embrace the opportunity of this Thanksgiving
to make an ongoing practice of harvesting gratitude in our lives.

May we learn to notice life's ordinary miracles
and cherish its mundane moments.

And may we not need special days on the calendar
to know what we truly treasure
and be reminded to give thanks.

May we simply live with the courage to be grateful,
knowing that one day all will be otherwise.

Amen.