

“Saying Grace”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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It is not an uncommon experience, as a clergyperson, to be called upon to “say grace.”

To be asked—sometimes with absolutely no notice—to offer up a prayer, to bless a meal or a moment when people have gathered together.

Here’s a little secret:
This isn’t something typically taught in seminary. There was no course in my divinity school days that covered the finer points of such prayers.

It was simply expected that this was something we already knew how to do—or that it was something we’d eventually figure out on our own, sink or swim.

Looking back, that’s probably as it should be.

Praying, in general, and saying grace, in particular, seems to be best learned by example.

Something we pick up by observation or osmosis from those who find strength and sustenance in the practice.

While there is no shortage of tomes published on the topic, a detailed how-to guide will always miss the mark, because such prayer, if it is to be experienced in a meaningful way, must ultimately engage our hearts.

And that means rigid rules and intricate formulae can get in the way of our simply being in conversation with what we consider most sacred—whether we name it the Universe or the Divine, the Goddess or Allah, the Ultimate, the Eternal, or the Spirit of Life.

That’s not to say that prayers can’t be prepared in advance.

Some of the most beautiful ones are.

But there is something to be said,
when it comes to saying grace,
for just pouring out our heart, even if our words
are halting or incoherent
or a grammatical mess, marred by dangling participles.

More than anything, it is about the attention required
to bring intention to the practice.

It means slowing down, noticing, and acknowledging.
Taking the time to take in the world around us.

That is why saying grace so often begins with gratitude.

As we behold the bounty of life, as we truly take it in,
there is often a growing awareness within us
that the gifts of this life are not to be taken for granted.

And that they are, instead, worthy not merely of our notice,
but our gratitude, as well.

That's not to say this is easy or automatic.

If you're anything like me,
you've come to expect the wonders of the world
to routinely be at hand—be it in the form
of Brussels sprouts always in stock at the store,
or electricity flowing uninterrupted through the wiring in your walls.

But, of course, the expectations don't necessarily end there.
We too easily project them on to our nearest and dearest, too,
often on the false assumption that what is will always be so.

But the bittersweet truth
is that right alongside the wonders of this life,
is the reality that, one way or another,
we, eventually, must and will say goodbye to it all.

Knowing this—truly knowing it in our bones—
presents us with a choice—a choice between despair and gratitude.

As enticing as despair may be, I can assure you

that gratitude is the more satisfying path.

For it is in facing life's fragility that we find its true fortitude: the thankful heart that knows how precious it is to be alive, even amid life's many slings and arrows.

In the American South, where I spent a significant chunk of my growing up, there was a colourful expression used to describe someone who was particularly blessed.

It was said that such a person "had more than they could say grace over."

Meaning more than they could possibly appreciate. More than they could ever give thanks for.

But, in my experience, this pointing out of abundance, this reference to an embarrassment of riches, is only one of the meanings of the phrase.

There is a secondary definition that speaks to having a lot of something—so much of something that it's hard to manage.

It's often used to describe someone who, quite literally, has a lot of food on their plate.

In this meaning, it's akin to saying that someone's "eyes were bigger than their stomach."

That they had more on their plate than they could possibly eat.

Certainly a risk many of us may be sitting with this weekend as we gather around tables bearing up the bounty of Thanksgiving.

But it's possible to extend this expression of having more than one can possibly say grace over even further to also acknowledge that our proverbial plates can also, at times, be far too full.

So full that it's hard, or maybe even impossible, to summon feelings, let alone words, of gratitude for all that we are contending with.

For all that is our life.

There is an industry out there
that promotes “the power of gratitude”
in a way that I think veers into “toxic positivity”—
when it insists that one simply needs to feel gratitude
to the exclusion of whatever else we may be feeling.

It is true that there is much research that shows the connection
between gratitude and spiritual well-being.

But that connection begins to break down
if and when we deny our reality.

The psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl
spoke of “tragic optimism” as a way we humans can find meaning,
even amid the struggles and suffering of this life,
by facing the realities of our situation,
rather than ignoring them or wishing them away.

Indeed, researchers in the field of what’s called “post-traumatic growth”
are finding that people often deepen their appreciation
for life and their relationships
by living in and through their share of life’s trials and tribulations.¹

That’s not to say we should seek out suffering.
It, of course, has a way of finding us!

And it’s not the source of struggle itself that brings about growth anyway.

It’s how we process the experience;
how we make meaning
of what we have lived through,
or are living through now,
that helps to shift our outlook on life.

It is the ongoing work of meaning making.

Of feeling not only gratitude,
which is a temporary, passing emotion,
but shifting to a more enduring outlook of gratefulness.

¹ Kaufman, Scott Barry, “The Opposite of Toxic Positivity,” *The Atlantic*, 18 August 2021. I’ve drawn on this excellent article for much of this section of the sermon.

An “overall orientation,” according to Robin Nelson, who says that “is not contingent on something happening to us, but rather a way that we [meet] life.”

In other words, it’s realizing that we may have more on our plate than we can possibly say grace over— joys and sorrows, happiness and heartache— and still finding a way to say grace over as much of it as we can, even the hard bits we may not be able to change or control, but which may in time, and in some way, help us to grow.

That is my prayer for you.
This day.
This Thanksgiving.

That you may find yourself saying grace,
over and over again.
Here and there, and everywhere.

Over it all.

For *all* that is our life.

May it be so.

Amen.