

“Gratitude Adjustment”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
Thanksgiving Sunday
9 October 2022

Sometime today—or maybe tomorrow—most, if not all of us, will gather around tables with people we care about to break bread.

For many of us, this may be the first time we’ve done so since the pandemic began.

It being Thanksgiving and all, before digging in, someone might even suggest that *someone* should say a blessing over the meal.

Now, while I suspect this moment triggers panic in the hearts of the more prayer-averse among us, my guess is that we’re all just a little bit relieved when someone—anyone else, really!—agrees to take up this most solemn duty of Thanksgiving.

As you might imagine, being asked to “say grace” on short notice and in all sorts of settings is something of a job hazard in my line of work.

Along with the standard wedding rehearsal dinners and 50th wedding anniversary celebrations, I’ve also been called on to offer a blessing before a football game; to say grace with a gathering of Muslims and Jews who were, at the time, refusing to speak to one another; and, perhaps like many of you, I have been nudged into praying at family holiday meals—though I should tell you that those invitations have tapered off in recent years—no doubt a not-so-subtle commentary on my theology.

This reminds me of an old episode of “The Simpsons,” when Bart, the ever-oh-so-candid son, was asked to say grace.

With head bowed, he prayed with his usual air of sarcasm:

“Dear God, we paid for all this food ourselves, so, uh, thanks for nothing.”

It's an honest enough prayer, given our modern separation
from the sources of so much of what we eat,
and the vast resources and labour
hidden behind most every item that fills our shopping carts.

Yet, it would be a mistake, like Bart's,
to take the ability to buy anything one might want in this world
to somehow be a sign of self-reliance.

If anything, our very need to pay for something—for anything—
points instead to the interdependence
that is increasingly at the heart of life
on this complicated and deeply connected planet of ours.

A point brought home to us in distressing detail
in recent years, marked by pandemic, war,
and the damaging effects of climate change.

The impact these forces have had on our economy, of late,
and the reminder that we are served by supply chains
that stretch around the planet into places we don't even know,
should remind us all that what touches the life of one of us
eventually affects us all.

But I'm not here today to speak to you
of our global economy, but, instead, of gratitude.

Seven hundred years ago, Meister Eckhart said:
“that if the only prayer we ever learn to say is ‘thank you,’
it will be enough.”

I think he was on to something there.
Something we arguably need as much or more in our time than he in his.

For to have “thank you” on our lips
is the surest sign I know that we recognise
that our lives are lived in relationship—
marvelously, and sometimes frustratingly, entangled with others,
but always in relationship.

Yet, it is one of life's truths we so easily forget,
a truth so readily sacrificed on the altar of independence,
whenever see ourselves somehow set apart
from the gifts and obligations of community,

of meaningful connection.

Though the topic warrants a full sermon of its own, in passing,
I'd like to say that this point gets to the heart of my own notion of sin:
that living as we do,
in a delicate and interconnected web with all of life,
that to break faith with those relationships for one's own gain
is to have a sinful disregard
for the sacred trust that binds us together with all of life.

There's a story inspired by a passage
in Alice Walker's book, *Sent By Earth*,
that describes a very unusual tribe in South Africa called the Babemba.

They were unusual because of the way they handled problems
in their community.¹

The story is of a grouchy man who moved to the village.

He didn't really fit in very well because he was always in a bad mood.
He didn't take very good care of himself
and he didn't even seem to like himself.

He mostly kept to himself, except when he sold the baskets
of fruit he gathered from the forest.

Despite his grouchy demeanour,
some people noticed what a beautiful voice he had
when he called out to the villagers when he was in the market;
others noticed what great care he took in preparing the fruit;
and still others noticed how he was always generous to the children.

But, one day, one of the villager's cow was missing.

Everyone was puzzled.

They couldn't imagine how the cow could have gotten away
without someone's help.

They feared that someone had maybe stolen the cow.
But rarely had anyone ever stolen anything in this village.

¹ Adapted from a telling by Dana Lightsey.

So they were even more confused.

The villagers began looking for the cow everywhere,
and eventually found it far away tied up
next to the grouchy man's hut.

Now, it was the tradition of this village
for everyone to surround a person when they had broken the law.

So when the man returned from picking fruit,
all of the villagers surrounded him in a very large circle.

This made the man very nervous.
He didn't know what they were going to do to him.

While he knew he shouldn't have stolen the cow,
he was desperate for some milk.

And he had reached a point of not caring
about what happened to him anymore,
and thought no one else cared either.

Just as he was bracing for the worst from the villagers, though,
they all began to say very nice things to him!

They bombarded him with compliments.
They were yelling out things like,
“we love the way you prepare your fruit,”
and “we're grateful to you for giving fruit to our children,”
and “thank you for your beautiful voice when you call out to us.”

They yelled out all of the things they liked about him,
all of the things he was good at,
all of the wonderful things he had done.

Now, this was not what he was expecting at all!

And in that moment,
his anger and hatred for himself began to melt away,
and his heart began to open to the kindness of these people.

They continued to bombard him.

The villagers saw his face change.

The man was crying.

The children ran to hug him,
and all of the villagers welcomed him back into the tribe.

The man eventually sang and danced
with all of the villagers long into the night.

Never had he ever felt so good about himself;
never had he felt like he truly had a place to belong.

He then knew he had people who cared about him
because rather than punishing him,
they reminded him of his very best self,
and from that day forward,
the grouchy man was grouchy no more.

He spent the rest of his life trying to be the best person he could be,
all because the people around him
believed that he could be better than he had been.

This story demonstrates not only an amazing act of forgiveness,
but the transforming power of gratitude.

Describing this tradition, Alice Walker, the author, explains:

It is said that in the Babemba tribe of South Africa,
when a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly,
he is placed in the centre of the village, alone and unfettered.

All work ceases, and [every person] in the village
gathers in a large circle around the accused individual.

Then each person in the tribe speaks to the accused, one at a time,
about all the good things the person in the centre of the circle
has done in his lifetime.

Every incident,
every experience that can be recalled
with any detail and accuracy is recounted.

All [their] positive attributes, good deeds, strengths and kindnesses
are recited carefully and at length.

The tribal ceremony often lasts [for] several days.
At the end, [when] the tribal circle is broken,
a joyous celebration takes place,
and the person is symbolically and literally
welcomed back into the tribe.

What moved me about this story
is that gratitude served as the way back in—
the way back into relationship,
into community, and into the fullness of life.

My heart was moved by the example of a community
that damaged by this one man's selfish act,
could find healing by choosing to see him as more than his mistakes,
a person who had simply forgotten his inherent worth and dignity,
and lost sight of his best self.

If such words of gratitude—
such words of deep appreciation—
could restore and recall a grouchy man back to his best self,
what about us?

We have often shared in this congregation the words of George Odell,
words that affirm that we do, indeed, “need one another.”

Every line speaks to the gifts of love
we give to each other in community,
but some of the most moving are these:

We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation,
and need to be recalled to our best selves again.

What if we, like the Babemba people,
were to adopt gratitude as our way to make these words real?

Just what effect might true thanksgiving have on our lives—
not just on a special day, but every day?

A wealth of research into gratitude has brought forth
a number of compelling findings.

Studies² have shown that gratitude is good for us:

² McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002.

“Grateful people report higher levels of positive emotions, life satisfaction, vitality, [and] optimism and lower levels of depression and stress.

“People with a strong disposition toward gratitude have the capacity to be empathic and to take the perspective of others.

“They are rated as more generous and more helpful by people in their social networks.

“Grateful people are more likely to acknowledge a belief in the interconnectedness of all life and a commitment to and responsibility to others.”

And, I want to make sure you hear this point:
“Those who regularly attend religious services and engage in religious activities are more likely to be grateful.”

And, I believe, this is especially true for us as Unitarians.

My colleague Galen Guengerich, the minister at All Souls Unitarian in Manhattan, sees gratitude as our defining practise.³

He says that,

For Jews, the defining discipline is obedience:
To be a faithful Jew is to obey the commands of God.

For Christians, the defining discipline is love:
To be a faithful Christian is to love God
and to love your neighbour as yourself.

For Muslims, the defining discipline is submission:
To be a faithful Muslim is to submit to the will of Allah.

And what of us?
What should be our defining religious discipline?

While obedience, love, and even submission

³ Galen Guengerich, “The Heart of Our Faith: Gratitude should be the centre of Unitarian Universalist theology.” *The UU World Magazine*, Spring 2007.

each play a vital role in the life of faith,
[his] conviction is that our defining discipline should be gratitude.

In the same way that Judaism is defined by obedience,
Christianity by love, and Islam by submission,
[he] believe[s] that Unitarian Universalism
should be defined by gratitude.

As he explains it, there are two dimensions that recommend gratitude
as a compelling “defining religious practice” for UUs.

“One,” he says, “has to do with a *discipline of gratitude*,
and the other has to do with an *ethic of gratitude*.”

His “discipline of gratitude reminds us how utterly dependent we are
on the people and world around us for everything that matters.”

“From this,” he says, “flows an ethic of gratitude
that obligates us to create a future that justifies
an increasing sense of gratitude for the human family as a whole.”

“The ethic of gratitude
demands that we nurture the world that nurtures us in return.”

“The two forms gratitude takes in our lives
([as] a discipline and an ethic)
are natural outcomes of [what he calls]
the two elements of religious experience (awe and obligation).

It is, he says, “the experience of awe [and wonder
that] leads to the discipline of gratitude,
and the experience of obligation [and responsibility
that] leads to an ethic of gratitude.”

In returning to the Babemba people of South Africa,
we can see both this discipline and this ethic in action.

The discipline of gratitude,
the practice of recognising the depths of our interdependence,
is evident in the careful attention the tribe had paid
to the grouchy man’s best attributes
long before the cow ever went missing,

The tribe had already been cultivating a culture of deep appreciation

by bothering to routinely notice
those splendid moments that point to another's best self.

The ethic of gratitude can, of course, be seen
in the way the tribe addressed a selfish act by one of its own.

There were so many other ways to respond to his crime,
and the man clearly feared the worst
when he was surrounded by his tribe.

But rather than hurl insults or stones,
they bombarded him with blessings of gratitude and appreciation.

With their words, they gave back to him
the dignity he had squandered through stealing.

No wonder he wept.
No wonder they danced.
It was a moment of grace.

A moment that restored the fabric of a community
by honouring the sacred bonds that bound their lives together.

Friends, should you be called on to say grace this Thanksgiving,
may you take up the challenge with conviction.

May you open your hearts and minds
to the wonder of just being alive.

May you be filled with gratitude
for those who've called you to your highest self.

And when you manage to catch your breath,
may you simply begin with the words: "Thank you."