

Gratitude: The Grammar of our Lives
November 9, 2008

“What? You’ve got to be kidding. I’m supposed to preach about gratitude now? In the midst of the greatest challenges of my life you think I can do this? Can I call in sick? Make someone else, like our outstanding intern, preach this sermon? No?” “Damn.” You are now privy to part of a dialogue between me, myself and I. When I discovered that I really couldn’t escape this holy obligation, I began some of the most demanding work I have ever done spiritually. So thank you. You and demands of the spirit and the worship integrity of Unity Church have provided me with a great gift. Thank you.

Gratitude is a state of mind and a discipline. It is also foundational to our lives. Frederick and Mary Ann Brussant, the co-authors of *Spiritual Literacy* think of gratitude as the grammar of our lives. It provides, they say, the underlying structure of life that helps us construct meaning and purpose and to make sense of our lives. Their understanding inspired the title of this sermon and the spiritual challenges I have faced these past few weeks.

Every day there is a thank you to be said. It might be just a faint thank you in the early hours of dawn. Thank you for another day. Thank you for this day. Every day that contains a thank you helps cultivate a sense of gratitude.

Gratitude possesses many facets in our lives. Our beloved colleague Galen Guengerich posited in an article in the UU World last year that our liberal faith should be defined by gratitude, much like our individual lives. In the article he focuses on two aspects of gratitude: the ethic of gratitude and the discipline and practice of it. The discipline of gratitude begins with noticing and an acknowledgement.

One of you among us wakes up and waits for the dawn to emerge and when it does acknowledges the gift of each new day. The discipline of gratitude reminds us of the many ways that we are interconnected and interdependent on one another. We are dependent on so much for our continued survival.

When we notice the snow falling or the beauty of a sunrise, when we take time to acknowledge the world around us, we acknowledge the underlying kinship that informs our lives. This, in turn, creates the context for us to offer thanksgiving for that which we did not earn and do not own, but is ours none the less. By noticing, we acknowledge and in so doing become a container of receptivity and spiritual hospitality. Thank you.

These are the words of Annie Dillard:

Every day is a god, each day is a god
and holiness hold forth in time.
I worship each god,
I praise each day splintered down,
and wrapped in time like a husk,
a husk of many colors spreading,
at dawn fast over the mountains split.

The discipline of gratitude can be cultivated. It can be an intentional dimension of our spiritual formation and development. I know many of you end your day by saying

thank you, recounting those things for which you are grateful. I know some of you keep gratitude journals. I know others of you are intentional about saying thank you each day to someone or something.

IN the wake of the Knoxville Tennessee shooting this August, Bill Moyers devoted his television show to the shootings and its aftermath. During the show he told a story familiar to some of you. It comes from the Cherokee community: “A man is talking with his grandson about some of his struggles. The grandfather says, ‘You know, I have two wolves within me. One is mean spirited, greedy, jealous, hateful, envious, and vengeful. The other wolf is kind, loving, generous, compassionate. They battle within me. The grandson asks, “Which wolf wins?” He replies, “The wolf that I feed.”

Cultivating a life framed by gratitude helps us feed the wolf of our better nature.

Cultivating gratitude begins with the act of acknowledgement –yes, there are blessings in our lives. There is a feast set before us. When we recognize and acknowledge the feast, take a moment to let the beauty of the feast fill our spirits, we are expanding the discipline of gratitude. Whatever form that takes in your life, I can not say. But I can encourage you to integrate it into your life. The practice and discipline then flow naturally to an ethic of gratitude which asks us to nurture the world that nurtures us in return. According to Galen, “It is our duty to foster the kind of environment that we want to take in and, therefore, become.”

These two dimensions of gratitude are natural outcomes of three essential sources of religious experience; awe, humility and duty. Awe because we notice, and, *oh what a world*; humility because gratitude naturally leads us to the recognition of our interdependence on and with one another; duty because those to which much is given much is expected and needed. Or in the words of writer Daphne Rose Kingman, “In relations to others, gratitude is good manners; in relation to ourselves, it is a habit of the heart and a spiritual discipline.”

Gratefulness, “great fullness” as writer Brother David Steindl-Rast reminds us, in the book, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, “is the full response of the human heart to the gratuitousness of all that is.” We are receivers and givers. Gratitude supports us to recognize that we are dependent on one another for our very survival. This is true even in the midst of the trials and tribulations of troubling times.

\The Psalmist speaks:

Yea, though I walk through the valley
Of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:
For thou art with me.
Thy rod and thy staff
They comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me
IN the presence of mine enemies:
My cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life:
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil and I will testify to the feast set before me. This is the gift of cultivating gratitude. This is the gift of naming what I am grateful for every day, even the days that contain disappointment, disgruntlement and despair. Each day I must describe and acknowledge the feast. What is this feast? So many things I could describe. This week was full of particular and spectacular blessings—we watched as our country moved toward a new kind of hopefulness. What a feast that unforgettable night was for those sitting in our basement crying tears of joy and relief! For me personally it is Jen and Charlie and all that they are and have offered to us. It is the staff here at Unity with whom I have the great privilege to work. It is the bag of popcorn left at our doorstep by Brian and Angela. It is my dear friend and colleague Meg, saying she would be with me during Jonah's latest surgery and we could do anything. She provided a list. I was especially captivated by her suggestion of throwing dishes against the garage wall. Had she not suggested this I am not sure I would have taken her up on her offer. Because of course, I was fully capable of sitting through it alone. She, of course, gave me so much more-- though I do regret that we didn't actually throw dishes against the garage.

Having to cultivate a discipline of gratitude has saved my life these past few weeks since Jonah's recurrence. It has kept me focused in the present. It has provided the structure to take me beyond my fears about his future. It has helped me focus on those things that are so much more important and significant than our economic downturn. It has forced me to hold the joy and the sorrow, the sources of my curses and my praises. It has challenged the life of my spirit to be large enough to contain it all—as Szyborska spoke of the soul through her poetry earlier in the Readings: “It's picky: it doesn't like seeing us in crowds, our hustling for a dubious advantage and creaking machinations make it sick. Joy and sorrow aren't two different feelings for it. It attends us only when the two are joined. We can count on it when we are sure of nothing and curious about everything.” It has helped me clarify what I can count on and what I can't and to realize how important and largely intangible those things I can count on are. It has counseled me to let myself be helped and cared for, to give the gift of letting others care for me, as precious I now realize as caring for those around me. Remember that when one of the members of the pastoral care team calls with offers to spend time with you.

Gratitude provides the magnetism of our moral compasses. It is part of the inner workings that keep us on the path of righteous, mercy and compassion. It is, of course, the very thing that keeps us grounded in our essential humanity.

On a rock in Boston that is part of Holocaust Memorial this story is carved into the granite: We were starving to death in the concentration camp. My friend found a discarded raspberry on the ground. She carried this lone raspberry around with her all day and at the end of the day she offered it to me. Can you imagine such generosity? In this stark and depraved environment, a life grounded in gratitude gave a gift beyond measure.

At such moments, we feel a sensation in the heart of such vast openness, of poignancy, that bittersweet understanding that holds joy and sorrow. At holy moments like these we are filled with the sense of a great love that is available to us and through us. It is a breakthrough moment—from ordinary living to a glimpse of the source and the meaning of life. This is the gift of the discipline and ethic of gratitude.

Benediction: Written in 1513 by Fra Giovanni
There is nothing I can give you
which you do not have;
But there is much, very much, that
while I cannot give it, you can take.

No heaven can come to us unless our hearts
find rest in today. Take heaven!
No peace lies in the future which is not hidden
in this present instant. Take peace!

The gloom of the world is but a shadow.
Behind it, yet within reach, is joy.
There is a radiance and glory in the darkness, could we but see,
and to see, we have only to look. I beseech you to look.

Readings: A Few Words on the Soul by Wislawa Szymborska

We have a soul at times.
No one's got it non-stop,
for keeps.

Day after day,
year after year
may pass without it.

Sometimes
it will settle for awhile
only in childhood's fears and raptures.
Sometimes only in astonishment
that we are old.

It rarely lends a hand
in uphill tasks,
like moving furniture,
or lifting luggage,
or going miles in shoes that pinch.

It usually steps out
whenever meat needs chopping
or forms have to be filled out.

For every thousand conversations
it participated in one,

if even that,
since it prefers silence.

Just when our body goes from ache to pain,
it slips off-duty.

It's picky:
it doesn't like seeing us in crowds,
our hustling for a dubious advantage
and creaky machinations make it sick.

Joy and sorrow
aren't two different feelings for it.
It attend us
only when the two are joined.

We can count on it
when we're sure of nothing
and curious about everything.

Among the material objects
it favors clocks with pendulums
and mirrors, which keep on working
even when no one is looking.

It won't say where it comes from
or when it's taking off again,
though it's clearly expecting such questions.

We need it
but apparently
it needs us
for some reason too.