



## Gratitude

*The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.*

Some time ago, I wrote a thank you note to someone after visiting him out of town. I was feeling grateful for the vibrant connection we'd shared even though we hadn't been in touch for years. To my surprise, a week later, a note from him arrived in my mailbox — a thank you note for my thank you note, which he wryly acknowledged might belong in the reiterative department of redundant redundancy. It was a note of such good heart and wit, I was tempted to write another thank you back, and I wondered, just how long might that echoing gratitude go on?

In a different encounter, I once visited a group of old school humanists, and after I had been introduced as a Unitarian Universalist student attending a Christian seminary, but before I addressed the group, three concerned members approached me during the coffee break. *You're not going to say a prayer or anything like that, are you?*, they inquired sternly. I paused. I hadn't actually been planning to, but their tone of censure made me curious. *Perhaps just a word of thanks?*, I ventured, waiting for their response. Not missing a beat, one of them leaned in close and said, eyebrows raised, *Depends. Whom would you be thanking?*

Somewhere between these two experiences, I've come to consider gratitude as an openness of the heart that reaches well beyond any particular benefactor, toward some larger generosity often unnamed but experienced as grace. It is no coincidence that a prayer of thanks is known as saying "grace." The words are two branches on the same etymological tree. So the Buddhist practice of bowing

to convey gratitude reminds us that thankfulness is not a quid pro quo exchange. It is an expression of humility, even impoverishment, implying, I bow because to say thank you is the very best I can offer in acknowledging the gifts I have received.

In his beautiful book, "The Gift," author Lewis Hyde studied gift economies in a number of indigenous cultures around the world. In a true gift economy, Hyde noted, the gift is meant to keep moving, weaving givers and receivers into an ever widening tapestry of relationship. To stop the gift's movement — whether by denying it, trying to pay for it or by possessing it without passing it or some other gift on in its place — is to strip it of its power as a gift. Saying thank you marks the beginning of the relationship fostered by a gift. It expresses our intention to keep the gift moving, a bow to the generosity that shared it.

Perhaps gratitude too is meant to keep moving, calling us into relationship with the larger experiences of life. Just a little gratitude for the smallest blessing — a bite of good food, a gesture of kindness — can spread far beyond what first prompted it. Like yeast, gratitude expands; and it lifts and leavens our hearts as it does, opening us to both the beauty and the brokenness of our lives. Given the right conditions, gratitude sometimes migrates to places in my heart where I never expected to feel it. Right there, in the midst of my sorrow and despair, or my fear and my anger, I have felt gratitude moving gently among those muscular emotions jostling for my attention. It slips in beside them, quietly offering to carry their load for a while, bringing just enough relief that I can

once again learn to trust the web of life that holds me.

Like a gift, gratitude also cannot be forced but must be freely granted. In Romania last summer, when members of Unity Church visiting Homorodszntpeter presented our partner congregation with a gift during Sunday worship, our Transylvanian siblings in faith showed their gratitude by knocking on the wooden pews in front of them. We later learned that during the repressive Communist regime, whenever the party leaders arrived for public appearances, the villagers were required to attend and applaud in a forced display of enthusiasm and gratitude. Today, to reclaim the free choice of gratitude, they knock on the pews instead of applauding, and perhaps the sound of that knocking keeps a deeper gratitude moving, honoring the gifts of freedom we dare not take for granted anywhere in the world today.

*What gestures and words of gratitude do you use in choosing and expressing gratitude? How do you invite it to move in your heart and through your life, weaving you into relationship? How might its leavening make room for the grace that keeps the gifts of our shared world moving?*

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**Gratitude Theme Resources**

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