

## SERMON – Gratitude is Not Enough - Nancy Anderson

Preceded by the meditation of the same title by Elizabeth Tarbox

November 19, 2006

This Thursday is the day that has been set aside as a day of thanksgiving, a day to mark the harvest and the end of the growing season. It is an ancient celebration of abundance, revelry and joy - a pause between the hard work of harvest and the cold dark winter waiting.

While many of us are not farmers, we do enjoy the fruits of the harvest - a walk through a local market on any Autumn Saturday reveals a wealth of fruits and vegetables, herbs and flowers and other signs of the season. There is a mood of celebration as I wander through the crowded aisles. I dream up all kinds of good meals and treats.

We have much to be thankful for: good food to be sure, a beautiful part of the world in which to live, good friends and family. And like Elizabeth Tarbox, we have a caring community into which we can bring our pain. And if we have spent time on our interior life, we have a means of finding solace in times of trouble; if we have paid attention, we have a sense of our connection with all of life.

There is so much to be grateful for; and this is the time of year when the abundance in our lives is noted and celebrated and shared. For we know that gratitude alone is not enough. We know that true appreciation requires giving back in some way, and yet it is not a game of keeping score.

I once knew a person who kept score. Whenever I did this person a favor, or somehow made his life easier, he would say, "I owe you one." And when he found opportunity to pay me back, he would always let me know that, "Now we are even."

I was never really sure when he thought I owed HIM one, but I was pretty sure that if I inadvertently stepped on his toes he would not rest until he had gotten even.

I always felt sorry for him for being unable simply to do something for someone without expecting equal return. It was clear that his gifts came not from care for others, but from some need to ensure he would be able to demand what he wanted at some point in the future. The gift was always contaminated. I always suspected that somewhere deep inside he did not feel worthy of someone else's good deed.

I learned an important lesson from my experience with a man; that a true gift must come from a sense of wholeness and connection. Retired UU minister and author Bill Houff addresses this when he writes about the spiritual basis for social action, which is really a way of giving back to the world for the life we have been given. He writes,

"If we attempt to do good before having come to terms with our own egotism, brokenness, alienation, incompleteness, neediness then these will tend to contaminate our motives and our actions..."

Sharing and caring for others is an important part of being a Unitarian Universalist. We do it because we believe that through human action we can help create a better world.

And yet this sharing and caring does not always come easily, and we can often be overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of need. The gifts we offer, like those of my former colleague, can so easily become contaminated by our own need for recognition or our alienation from that which sustains us.

I know this happens to me. I recall a time when I spontaneously and joyfully gave a gift of some value, and later found myself wanting to let others know how generous I was. I quickly realized that the gift had been given out of my sincere desire to bring joy to another. The joy of the receiver was my joy. I did not need further recognition. Slowly, I am learning to give back to the life that sustains me without keeping score.

Sometimes we withhold our gifts out of fear or anger or contempt. Like that person I once knew, if someone didn't help him, he wouldn't help them either.

Sometimes we feel that life has not treated us fairly...When we lose a job or a home or a friend, when a loved one dies too soon...at those times it is so easy to say, I have nothing to give. I have nothing for which to be grateful.

But as long as we have a heart for breaking and a pillow to catch our tears, we can be grateful for knowing what pain is so that we can care for others. We have been given the gift of life. We are a part of all that is. We can never be grateful enough. .... Few among us are spiritually able to become a Mother Theresa or Dag Hammarskjold, but most of us are willing to give what we can. We are willing to become part of some effort to create a better world.

In order to keep our gifts pure we must develop a sense of generosity, which comes from participation in serving a cause that is greater than ourselves. This is a significant part of my understanding of why it is we gather in religious community... to make real and to live out our interconnections with life.

Richard Gilbert, one of our foremost social activist UU ministers, maintains that the liberal church, of which we are a part, "rests on the four pillars of Worship, the Caring Community, Education and Social Action."

"**Worship**," he says, "serves to strengthen and maintain commitment to social change by pointing to justice, freedom, equality and beloved community as ends to be sought."

In a **Caring Community**, a reverence for life undergirds our one to one ministry as well as a broader sense of caring which embraces people beyond our immediate personal experience.

**Religious Education** is a process of developing a core of meanings and values to which we can commit our lives.

**Social Action** is the means by which people address themselves to social-ethical problems in the light of ultimate concern. Personal and corporate action comes from a community's process of ethical reflection.

Gilbert's doctrine of the liberal church asserts, "Social action is not the central function of the liberal church. It is a vital function but must emerge out of a religious community which serves well the functions of worship, caring and education."

We are not here for ourselves alone. We are here to worship, appreciate and be grateful. We are here to care for one another. We are here to find value and meaning. We are here to act on our values and our feelings of gratitude for the life, which comes from beyond us.

When we are spiritually nourished, educated in faith, cared for in love, our acts of gratitude will come willingly. We too will "try bravery though we be cowards, and honor wisdom though we be fools."