

GRATITUDE THAT SUSTAINS US

November 23, 2008

Rev. Nancy J Anderson

Praise, Praise indeed. I am very willing to give praise for the wondrous earth, the beauties and unfathomable technicalities it sustains. I praise the inherent possibility in the universe, my human ability to think and reason. I praise with all my heart the gift of this community, my loved ones, as well as people who make life more pleasant, interesting and humane. Praise, Praise indeed.

In this season of Thanksgiving, praise is a natural component of gratitude. The thing about gratitude, though, and praise, too, is that it seems to need a recipient of our sentiment. Vague and generalized gratitude seems a little odd, and perhaps not very inspiring. For us, as Unitarian Universalists, this is a somewhat troubling situation. We feel gratitude, but we are unsure of where to direct that feeling. To whom or to what do we give our thanks?

I came upon a little meditation written by Christopher Buice, who, by He reminds us that the recipient of our thanks varies according to one's theological perspective. One might give thanks to God, or one of many gods, or one might give thanks to the animals who give their lives for our sustenance. The dilemma for him at Thanksgiving is whether to thank God or the turkey?

Then he adds, "A pantheist might try to eliminate the problem by saying, "God is everything!" but I personally do not feel comfortable saying God is a Turkey, at least not in front of Grandma."

"We all find different answers to life's ultimate questions. On the other hand, we are all capable of sharing a deep and enduring reverence for the abundance of this natural world that sustains us. As human beings we find ourselves unable to repress our gratitude for life's many gifts."

So here we are, filled with these feelings of gratitude, unable to repress them, yet unsure of where to send them.

We are overwhelmed, when we pay attention, by the miraculous workings of the human body, the vastness of the universe. We are awakened, when we consider gratitude, to our deep and precious connections to friends and family. At times like this, in the words of Richard Gilbert,

"The common things of life become uncommon

The ordinary becomes extra ordinary,

The habitual becomes sacred."

A sense of gratitude, deeply considered, brings us a sense of awe for all the complex pieces, both positive and negative, enjoyable and painful, that come together to form the reality of our lives. Our lately departed friend, Anna Jobe, gave me a perspective on gratitude that I had not formerly considered. Perhaps it was such feelings of awe, sacredness, awareness of how truly extra ordinary are our

everyday lives that led her to the conclusion she shared with me in the last weeks of her life.

One day I asked her, "What sustains you? What has been most important in your life?" and after a long silence, she answered, "Gratitude." For once, she did not elaborate. That one word summed it up.

Her answer gave me a whole new perspective on gratitude and to whom or what it should be directed. The overflowing feelings themselves can be sustaining. But as I have reflected on her confession of sustaining gratitude, I have come to believe there is yet more than feeling involved, and I think she knew that, too. Our emotions are important in giving us the impetus for action.

Gratitude can be a powerful motivator for caring, for reciprocal sharing, for delving deeper into our understanding of life and relationships, for challenging ourselves to do better in response to all we have been given. As someone in a meeting I attended recently suggested, "perhaps gratitude is a verb."

I think that is closer to what Thanksgiving is about. And it fits well with our values of love and service. It really doesn't mean much to sit around and feel grateful. We need to tell someone about that. We need to do something about that, in order for gratitude to be truly sustaining as it was for Anna.

Gratitude is a form of reciprocity. In the Analects of Confucius, Zigong asked; "Is there any single word that could guide one's entire life?" The master said, "Should it not be reciprocity? What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others." P. 45 Haidt

Reciprocity seems to be built into the human psyche. Some theorists suggest that there is a part of the brain devoted to keeping track of fairness, debts owed, and social accounts-receivable. Of course, as professor of psychology Jonathan Haidt points out, in his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, the other side of gratitude is vengeance, the impulse to return, in Biblical terms, an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth.

Perhaps it is recognition of this human impulse that made the various expressions of the Golden Rule so universal across cultures and religions. If you don't share with others, they won't share with you. If you hurt someone else, they'll hurt you back.

As religious people guided by principles of love and service, we like to think we are above such base reactive behaviors, but we, too are governed by the construct of the brain and the emotions. On the other hand, there is a sense in which we can transcend reactive tendencies of vengeance and exchange them for gratitude. It all depends upon to whom or what we attribute the gifts and losses of life, and whether we can see beyond the immediate and look to the universal.

Our Universalist forebears might be a good example for us. The Universalist theology was one that trusted that the kindness and everlasting love of God guaranteed salvation for all. There was no system of reward and punishment from on high, no doctrine of pre-determination of who would and wouldn't make it to heaven, no understanding of hellfire and eternal damnation. It was a liberating faith

that inspired gratitude and in turn inspired acts of kind and loving reciprocity. The Universalist understanding of the one whole family of humankind led them to apply these principles to society and an outstanding drive to social justice.

Today we have a wider understanding of God, a wider acceptance of the various understandings of what is ultimate and life sustaining. While we may or may not trust in a god, we all do trust in something, whether it be human resilience, or the spirit of community, or something else.

Our Universalist heritage can lead us to a wider sense of gratitude projected beyond the everyday, beyond the individual tit-for-tat. Gratitude for life itself, allows us to forgive and let go of the need for vengeance. It allows us to express our gratitude in acts of service to others and a desire to co-create the world of our best dreams.

Our theology of interdependence, and inherent worth and dignity allow us to help one another be the best that we can be, to eliminate the need for punishment and replace it with loving reminders to return to covenant.

There is a reason to count our blessings, it keeps us in a frame of mind that generates gratitude and the return of blessing for blessing.

This, then, is the Gratitude that sustains us. To look beyond the immediate is to discover that

“The common things of life become uncommon
The ordinary becomes extra ordinary,
The habitual becomes sacred.”

Let us give Thanks.

Let us praise that which has given us life and liberty and love.

Let us count our blessings and return the favor.

Amen