

From Gratitude to Kindness; a Spiritual Practice
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The ideas in this talk come mostly from UU minister Galen Guengerich's book God Revised. Particularly they come from a chapter entitled, "What we owe; an ethics of gratitude." Guengerich states that it is by recognizing our profound debt to others for so very much that we have been given, we feel a desire to repay. We want others to experience the opportunities, resources and positive experiences we have received. Gratitude motivates us towards kindness. Kindness does not come from being commanded to do good deeds for others. The Abrahamic religions teach us to "love our neighbors," and to "do unto others." However it is human agency, our own free choices that meaningfully direct us towards kindness. We choose this path because we realize that we owe everything in our lives to what came before. Kindness feels natural and right, when we live with gratitude.

Guengerich takes this idea that gratitude as the inspiration for acts of kindness, "what we owe" to a deeper spiritual level. He does so through the process theology of Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead stated that the meaningful units or building blocks in the world are not things alone, but rather the relationships between things. Nothing at all exists independently of other things. Everything from the atomic to the galactic, and from the natural to the human-created, exists in relationship to other things. What makes a person a person is not the elements and organs that compose the body, but rather what the person does with the life given. Humans are the sum of all that has come before us; what our parents, friends teachers, neighbors, etc. have provided. In other words who each of us is, is determined by our past and present relationships as much as anything else. There is also the relationship each of us has with the physical world. We receive oxygen and food from vegetation, warmth from the sun, material for shelter from the world's resources and so on. Whitehead believed that the sum of all relationships, all that came before us from the beginning of time, with all of the present opportunities available, and all of the possibilities of the future equal what he called the "ideal harmony." The ideal harmony was Whitehead's term for God. The really exciting point in all of this for me is that when we act with kindness, when we provide opportunities for others we are joined with ideal harmony. Our acts of kindness are at once a way we repay our debt of gratitude, and we join with the source of life. It is our true nature to do so. Consider the reading for the meditation by Buddhist psychologist Jack Kornfield. Acts of kindness are part of the goodness in the world that we contribute to.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched with Martin Luther King across the Edmond Pettus Bridge in Selma, said something similar to Whitehead when he spoke of the divine partnering with human beings to create a better world together. Heschel said God needs us to complete "his" work. Heschel's book is called God in Search of Man. One doesn't have to be a theist to find this view of

kindness inspiring. We can all feel we are part of a greater good when we engage in acts of kindness. The more options we create for others, the brighter the future for all. An ethic of gratitude envisions a world with greater value, and more choices for all. The more kindness we spread with each other, the greater the reciprocity and sharing, and the greater the freedom for all. Others create opportunities for us and we create opportunities for others.

Currently, our country seems to be divided by two competing ideologies: One ideology says each citizen is responsible for her or his own well being alone. This ideology states we each climb the ladder of success by means of our own grit and perseverance. If we didn't succeed it is because we didn't try hard enough. If we did succeed we take all the credit ourselves. No need to worry about the misfortunes of others. If others deserved more they would have more. There is meanness and disregard for the wellbeing of others that seems to be in ascendance here. Perhaps the culture of meanness that was discussed in last week's presentation applies here? The opposing viewpoint says, "I am my brother's (or sister's) keeper." If I succeeded it was because I had advantages, encouragement and opportunities which others provided me. Those who have not succeeded as well may not have had the same opportunities I have had or they may have had disadvantages I didn't have to face. The ethics of gratitude and kindness aligns with the latter ideology. It is in keeping with Whitehead and Guengerich's ideas. While I believe you need to put your own oxygen mask on before helping others, you still need to help others after you get your mask on. "All our lives we are in need of others and others are in need of us," in the words of George Odell.

We are aware of the many problems in the world: injustice, racism, poverty, hunger, disease, squalor, sexism, inequality of opportunity, global climate change, needless violence and others. Guengerich says our appreciation of beauty, whether natural, or that created by people, reminds us of what is possible and what we ought to do to help resolve these problems and create a better world. We notice the difference between the ideal and wrongs, and this motivates us to correct the wrongs and to restore a balance. We understand that if only more people committed themselves to resolving these inequities we could actually do it! We want to bring more kindness into the world not only from a sense of gratitude and fairness, but also because we carry with us a sense of the ideal and what is possible to strive for. We are naturally driven to create beauty and restore harmony and order where and when we can. The need to establish order and create beauty and balance may be in our genes.

Guengerich refers to the moral philosopher John Rawls who wrote about the concept of "fairness as justice." Rawls affirmed rational people universally understand fairness. As an example of this Guengerich presented the situation that if child has a piece of cake and another child has none it makes sense for the two to share. One child cuts the piece of cake and the other gets to pick which half. The child who cut knows that the more evenly he or she does so, the

better the outcome for the cutter. Rawls believed if we removed all preconceived ideas, all of our cultural conditioning, we would probably agree as rational people, in liberty for all, and for sharing of the earth's resources equitably. If our government applied this principle to immigration policy we'd welcome into our country the people most in need, those who are not able to survive in their own country. During WWII the US prevented refugees from Eastern Europe who were trying to flee from Nazi persecution, to emigrate because we passed legislation declaring them to be genetically inferior. As a result of this unjust legislation many Europeans died that we could have saved. In contrast, an ethic of gratitude encourages us to maximize the freedom and opportunity of others, in other words to make choices kinder to others. Guengerich said, "Most human suffering would disappear if human beings used their freedom to make worthy (and kind) choices rather than wicked ones. We must all die sometime but so many people die so very young either from war, preventable illness or hunger." These tragedies happen only because not enough of us are willing to share. Not enough of us appreciate what we have received.

At UUA General Assembly this past June, the Ware Lecture speaker was Bryan Stevenson, Founder and Director of the Equal Justice Initiative. He talked about how his feeling of compassion for victims of injustice in the legal system motivated him to become a lawyer. His clients are poor. Sometimes they are children; sometimes they are people with severe mental illness. These people would remain victims of extreme unfairness were it not for efforts of people like Stevenson. He said he cannot resist trying to do his best when he feels the suffering of others. One example he spoke of was that of a six year old who shot and killed his mother's boyfriend. The incident occurred when mother's boyfriend came home drunk and beat mother with a handgun while the boy watched in terror. The boyfriend then went to sleep, at which point the boy took the gun. When the boyfriend stirred awake, the boy, in a state of panic thinking the boyfriend would try to harm mother again, shot him. This boy had never been in any prior trouble, but county attorney decided he should be tried as an adult. This young juvenile was thus placed in an adult jail. Stevenson went to the jail on the third day of the boy's incarceration in order to prepare to represent him. The boy would not speak for a long time in spite of Stevenson's many pleas to do so. In desperation Stevenson held the boy and the boy started to cry. Then he told Stevenson that he had been sexually and physically abused many times over the prior three days.

Another presenter at GA, Rev. Cheryl Walker, talked about those in our current political climate who appear to want to create change for the sole reason of making a name for themselves regardless of the potential negative impact. She contrasted this to other politicians working to make a positive impact on the lives of others without regard to personal recognition. Rev. Walker asked, are we in life to build our egos, or are we here to promote justice through loving-kindness? The latter is the spiritual path we are called to take. Kornfield says people on

their deathbeds don't ask themselves if they made enough money over their lifetime, but rather did they love enough?

Marsha Nussbaum, also mentioned in the Guengerich book, appears to have a distinctly unflattering view of humanity. In her book, The Fragility of Goodness, she stated that most human beings are "lazy or self-preoccupied," or they are racist, hate-filled, or blind to the humanity of others. The majority of the suffering from inequality of opportunity in this world is not necessary. A lot of suffering is unfortunately the result of humanity's negligence or wrongdoing. As others have said and as I mentioned earlier, Nussbaum repeated, if we only realized this we could bring most human suffering to an end. Guengerich recommends we take the ills of the world "personally," in other words to take ownership of them. We need feel that it is our job to help end problems that humans cause or those we can fix if we are willing to take them on. When we see order, value or beauty to be at risk, we must be willing to act from a place of generosity, fairness and kindness.

In 2010 the VA began a program to end veteran homelessness completely. Since that time the rate of homelessness among veterans has dropped by 56%. To me this statistic illustrates that when we decide to put our efforts and resources to work to solve a social problem we can make a difference.

Even without overt racism, which still exists, people of color continue to be disadvantaged in employment, housing, education, and banking, and in the criminal justice system as well. Discrimination has been part of the history of this country, as you all know. Here is an example of government-sponsored racism: The homestead act of 1867, after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, outrageously precluded participation by people of color. The 1934 National Housing Act also barred participation by Blacks, thus preventing justice and equity. Here is an example of culturally caused racism we are all aware of. In spite of legislation making it illegal, segregated housing and schools continue to exist, thus creating a barrier to equal opportunity for people of color. I quote Guengerich again, "An ethics of gratitude insists that we acknowledge our good fortune and take personally our duty to ensure that good fortune is possible for all as well." Many of us speak of racial equality but our actions fall short. An ethic of gratitude and kindness would improve this problem. In a just world, skin color should make no difference, as Martin Luther King proclaimed. He envisioned a world in which people were not judged by the color of their skin but the "content of their character." As our first UU principle states, all humans have inherent worth and dignity. If we had the will, discrimination on the basis of color would not exist.

Even our UUA history unfortunately includes failures to keep promises to the people of color that have been part of our faith. Black ministers left us in the 1960's when money that was promised by the UUA to help both ministers and congregants failed to be provided. In the 1990's our UUA promised to end

discrimination in its hiring, but people of color have been excluded from senior level positions. It is only in recent months that serious efforts to correct this injustice have begun to occur.

Working to eliminate discrimination, racism and White privilege represents only one of many inequities and injustices in our world today. It can feel overwhelming to take it all on. Mother Theresa stated that what we can do is make our own efforts to practice loving-kindness. "In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love." Though we have a long way to go in bringing others along, we need not be discouraged but just continue to be alert to the opportunities to be kind that are presented to us. The only ethical and spiritual choice that we have is to respond from gratitude and act with kindness and generosity. Others and we ourselves will be the better for it, and the world will move a tiny bit closer to the "beloved community." In our own small individual ways we join with the creative source, the "ideal harmony" in co-creating a more just and equitable world. This is our ethical and spiritual calling.

I will end with a quote from Jack Kornfield's book: A Path With Heart:

All other spiritual teachings are in vain if we cannot love. Even the most exalted states and the most exceptional spiritual accomplishments are unimportant if we cannot be happy in the most basic and ordinary ways, if with our hearts we cannot touch one another and the life we have been given. What matters is how we love. This is why it is so difficult and so important to ask this question of ourselves, "Am I living my path fully, do I live without regret?" so that we can say on whatever day is the end of our life, Yes I have lived my path with heart."

May it be so.