

Gratitude – Informing & Enhancing Our Lives

Gratitude is both a feeling and a practice that both informs us, and enhances our lives. As Galen Guengenrich said in the readings (also cited below), gratitude combines the transcendent experiences of both awe (wonder, mind expanding appreciation – epiphanies of our connectedness to, and dependence on the web of life), with an ethic of obligation to perform our duties to protect and enrich the biosphere. To put it another way, gratitude inspires both appreciation and action. We are both stimulated and obligated to serve in our world.

My personal experience with a palpable sense of gratitude was a mystery to me for almost a year. I am very sure this twin sense of stimulation and obligation helped me help my wife SallyG in her struggles near the end of her life. My experience of gratitude while caregiving was a mysterious, inexplicable, grace. I could not understand what was helping me. It was such a personal experience, that I did not know if I could share it.

I was reluctant to turn to the Internet, because my process was so personal. I wanted to understand what was going on.

My hesitation to share my experience of gratitude stemmed from both an inability to articulate my own source of an enhanced sense of well-being, and a professional distrust of processes that may work for a while, but are unstable or reversible, and therefore not worthy of being spread to a wider audience. After pondering my own palpable sense of gratitude for about a year, I finally came to the realization that my enhanced sense of well-being sprung from sleeping better.

I was not convinced that my personal experience had some relevance to a wider audience, until Cameo Galloway shared her very personal story “Radiant Love” as emanating from her internal work needed to radiate her love. Her success stemming from personal responsibility resonated with me.

Gratitude, love, and trust are all feelings that can also be experienced as disciplines that help us transcend our personal experience, and join in service to life. That connection was important to me, as it informed my sense of self, and helped me attribute my sense of awe and obligation to something that I hope resonates with some of you.

I had a PTSD episode involving SallyG in 1991, that disturbed what had been a rock solid sleeping ability. For more than 22 years I chased sleep through many

different prescriptions, talk therapists, exercising to exhaustion, and some coping mechanisms that utterly failed. The worst combination was my taking a drug to go back to sleep after 3 to 3-1/2 hours, and another one to wake up. Both prescriptions were from same physician, but he did not appreciate the difference between an 8 hour clearing time, and 3-1/2 to 4 hours of time between taking the drugs.

That background is only necessary to understand my enhanced sense of well-being started when I started sleeping better. I still do not understand how the coconut derived medium chain triglyceride compound (Fuel For Thought) that I now take works to help me sleep. However, I have now begrudgingly accepted that restful sleep provides my enhanced sense of well-being, which provides both energy for doing the work, and the inspiration / awe / thankfulness that compels me to try to share this very personal experience of gratitude.

When I finally started reaching out to family and friends, I found their experience of gratitude had to do with the past, not the present or future. Several commented on how gratitude was the opposite of selfishness, self-satisfaction, narcissism, or a sense of entitlement.

It wasn't until I read (or full-disclosure – reread) the article by Galen Guengenrich from the 2007 issue of UU World, which I get and usually read, but that year marked the end of my 30 year process control / plant automation career. It was a turbulent time, which may have caused me to miss Guengenrich's article, or perhaps I have now forgotten that I read it. His thoughts tying gratitude not only to the past, but the future has been echoed by many Unitarian Universalist theologians, for centuries.

Henry David Thoreau said, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others." The Reverend Sam Trumbore (First UU Society of Albany, Nov 24, 2008), presented on "Gratitude as UU Spiritual Discipline." He anticipates backlash because the UU rugged individualism of being able to claim a belief system without a discipline has become a badge of pride for many UUs.

Trumbore suggests that the practice of gratitude can be both an individual or a communal discipline that enhances our lives and our communities. He contrasts our wariness of trusting authority outside of ourselves, with an awareness that Buddha gave to this sense of dissatisfaction and distrust, which he called Dukkha.

Not only do we depend on the web of life, but we live in bodies that age and are subject to disease and death.

The USA has a particular burden which has been discussed at length by many authors, due to our “pursuit of happiness” phrase in the Declaration of Independence that Thomas Jefferson modified from John Locke’s “life, liberty, and property.” This substitution seems to have reverberated in our society to a mandate for materialism, celebrating the maxim “he who has the most toys wins.”

Seeking a refuge from ego driven consumption is an urge that several people in this room have expressed as one of their drives to seek refuge in our fellowship. We support each other in ways that help subdue the blare of marketing for all things material, that we are bombarded with 24x7.

Community support is essential for resilience, and for a sense of identity. Perhaps Unitarian Universalists membership will surge when people see the UU Chalice as being a source of both individual inspiration, and group support for the common interest of the discipline of service in support of our biosphere.

There is a surge of interest in gratitude from a number of not only UU theologians, but also other denominations. Religious communities are powerful allies in our common goal of supporting the biosphere / web of life.

Excerpts from:

A theology of gratitude

The heart of our faith

Galen Guengerich

February 12, 2007

The discipline of gratitude reminds us how utterly dependent we are on the people and world around us for everything that matters. From this flows an ethic of gratitude that obligates us to create a future that justifies an increasing sense of gratitude from the human family as a whole. The ethic of gratitude demands that we nurture

the world that nurtures us in return. It is our duty to foster the kind of environment that we want to take in, and therefore become.

The two forms gratitude takes in our lives (a discipline and an ethic) are natural outcomes of the two elements of religious experience (awe and obligation). The experience of awe leads to the discipline of gratitude, and the experience of obligation leads to an ethic of gratitude.

(G)ratitude is a uniquely religious virtue . . . A sense of awe and a sense of obligation, religion's basic impulses, are both experiences of transcendence, of being part of something much larger than ourselves.

The feeling of awe emerges from experiences of the grandeur of life and the mystery of the divine. We happen upon a sense of inexpressible exhilaration at being alive and a sense of utter dependence upon sources of being beyond ourselves. This sense of awe and dependence should engender in us a discipline of gratitude, which constantly acknowledges that our present experience depends upon the sources that make it possible. The feeling of obligation lays claim to us when we sense our duty to the larger life we share. As we glimpse our dependence upon other people and things, we also glimpse our duty to them. This sense of obligation leads to an ethic of gratitude, which takes our experience of transcendence in the present and works for a future in which all relationships—among humans, as well as between humans and the physical world—are fair, constructive, and beautiful.

Put another way, the discipline of gratitude connects the present with the past, while the ethic of gratitude connects the present with the future—just as (Alfred North) Whitehead and his successors in the process theology movement described God both as the refuge of the past and as the hope of the future.