

The Place of Gratitude in UU and My Journey  
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As chair of the worship committee I encouraged the other members to pick their favorite themes from our Touchstone worship planner resource before I chose. I have done this because I want the coordinators to feel excitement about their themes. This year, just as last, it worked out that the topics left over after the other committee members made their selections, were exactly what I would have chosen myself. Gratitude, our theme for this month, has been an important part of my spiritual journey and I am truly grateful and excited to speak with you about that today. I am also grateful for having a strong worship committee to work with.

To start with I want to share a personal story. I realize what I am about to say will not sound too awful to most of you. The point I hope to make is that it felt awful. I grew up in a family with an older brother, an older sister and a younger sister. My sister Sydelle is six years older than I, and my sister Marilyn is five years younger. My brother Morris is two years older. Sydelle had special status as the oldest. Morris had special status as the oldest boy. In ancient Israel the oldest boy, called literally “the chosen one,” inherited his father’s property and extra blessings. You may remember in the Book of Genesis, Isaac and Rebecca had twin sons; Jacob was the second born of the twins. Jacob it is said was grasping the heel of Esau in order to prevent him from being born first. With the help of his mother Leah Jacob tricked his nearly blind father into giving him the blessings of his father Isaac so that he became the forefather of the nation of Israel. Because Morris was the first-born son he was the embodiment of the “chosen one” in my family. He was our mother’s favorite, and I always felt like I was in the one down position compared to him, growing up. To add to my feelings of being cheated, Morris was taller, more handsome, stronger etc. and he definitely got more attention and recognition than I did, especially from my mother. Just as one example of the inequity in treatment, Morris’ bar mitzvah was larger and more lavish than mine, and he was able to invite more friends to his. My younger sister was my dad’s favorite and she got more of my dad’s limited supply of attention than either Morris or I. When the youngest three of us would fight, I invariably would be the one blamed and beaten by my father, sometimes with his belt.

I think you are getting the picture here. I felt cheated and worse, I felt unworthy. I believed that there was something inherently wrong with me. Almost everyone in the family preferred the white meat; I almost always ended up with the dark meat. My birthdays were never acknowledged nearly to the degree that my sibs’ were. I didn’t get why this was happening except I believed and felt I had some inherent fatal flaw that I just wasn’t as worthy. Then in response to this treatment I rebelled and I acted out at times. I challenged teachers too much and was sent to the principle’s office several times in my grade school years. I don’t want to suggest that in an objective sense I had a rough childhood. Most would say that compared the vast majority in the world, my childhood would qualify as privileged. But that is not how I felt at the time.

I thought the solution to the dilemma of “injustice” that was my early experience was to find ways to get to the head of the line, to insure my share. I dreamed of a world where all would be treated equally. (I still dream of that one.) As I think all of you will agree, seeking to grab “my share “ was not going to work to fix what was wrong in my soul. The process that took me out of this pain included therapy, my profession as a psychologist,

my marriage, my friendship with Ronn, and my discovery of my UU faith. Through all of these I learned about gratitude and that is what made the change in me. I have also discovered that within the Judaism of my childhood were practices that helped embody gratitude. I did not understand this as a child but I do now. Let me turn now to the theme of gratitude as I have come to understand it.

There is a saying from the Talmud that goes as follows: "Who is the wealthy one? It is he (sic) that is happy with his lot." I have come to embrace this pearl of spiritual wisdom more and more, and it has truly helped to heal me from the brokenness that I described to you.

It appears that gratitude confers not only spiritual benefits but psychological and physical health benefits also. The world's foremost expert on the psychology of gratitude, psychologist Robert Emmons, defines gratitude as "a sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life." He notes that gratitude consists of two separate but interconnected steps: First, we acknowledge the goodness that is present in our lives. Second, we recognize that the source of these blessings lies, at least partially, outside of our own doing. Research has shown that individuals who regularly practice gratitude do better across a number of areas in terms of mental and emotional health. Gratitude has been linked to lower rates of depression, and creating a buffer against future depressive episodes. It has also been shown to decrease stress levels and enhancing positive mental states such as joy, optimism, and tranquility. Living with gratitude can lower stress levels and improve sleep.

I know I have shared with you many times a reference to an essay on gratitude that Ronn Smith wrote for the Sheridan Press many years ago, during the Thanksgiving season, that spoke meaningfully to me. I liked it so much that I enshrined it by laminating it. I can summarize what it said to me in one sentence: Gratitude in itself is a sufficient practice of religion. One of the ways I practice gratitude is to do the exercise that I shared with you during the meditation this morning.

I am going to expand further on this, for me, soul-saving premise in the remainder of this talk. In an article in the UU World written in 2006 Rev. Galen Guengerich wrote that gratitude ought to be the defining feature of our UU faith. As many have, Guengerich found that people might gravitate to UU because our faith does not require a specific belief or dogma for membership. That certainly was an important consideration in why I chose this community. But Guengerich states people are not likely to stay in our faith without a positive message to help make their lives more meaningful and fulfilling. You won't go a concert hall if there is no music to be performed there. Our faith has to be defined by something positive if we are to be of value. In the same way that Judaism is defined by obedience, Christianity by love, and Islam by submission, Guengerich believes that Unitarian Universalism ought best be defined by gratitude. I could not agree more. But, I would add that in my understanding of Judaism, gratitude plays a central role as well.

When I was a boy in an Orthodox Jewish home, I did not understand the purpose of all the blessings that were required. I was told simply that it was a sin not to say the blessing and as one accumulated more and more sins one was much less likely to end up in heaven and much more likely to burn in hell. After the destruction of the Jerusalem

temple and exile reciting blessings replaced sacrifice as a means of worship. While the temple was functioning, up to about 2,000 years ago, three times each year Jews were required to travel to Jerusalem bringing the best of their yield of crops or livestock to sacrifice as an offering to God as embodiment of gratitude. Contemporary practicing Jews recite a specific blessing before eating bread, or fruit, or vegetables, or drinking wine or other beverages. There is also a blessing recited after finishing a meal. There is a blessing upon awakening and before going to sleep. There are daily, fairly lengthy blessings, to be recited each morning before breakfast, then again in the afternoon, and finally after sundown. These latter prayers of gratitude replaced the 3 sacrifices that were performed each day in the Jerusalem temple. I hope I make the case that gratitude is indeed at the center of Jewish practice, on a constant basis. While I agree with Guengerich that obedience to the laws of Moses defines Judaism, we see that gratitude does as well, and obedience and gratitude are interwoven in Judaism. When I was a child I understood only the obedience aspect, but now I appreciate the gratitude dimension, and that speaks to me much more.

As I mentioned, Guengerich states that as a religion, UU has a big problem because it lacks a shared belief system we can point to and that adds value to living. The very thing that makes UU attractive to begin with, is not sufficient to hold us here. I agree, and that was made clear to me when we had a visitor many years ago who had a knack for blunt expression. He said of our Sheridan fellowship that we were a nice group of people, but he asked, "Where's the beef?" When my old graduate school friends visited our fellowship in September they voiced a similar criticism. They said, your worship service has many lovely parts to it, but we never did get the sense that you were addressing the transcendent. Without that your service lacked a central core message for us. The problem is not unique to this fellowship but to UU in general, as Guengerich points out.

Guengerich wants to fix this problem. He suggests our UU theology or belief system might best be framed by two principles: awe and obligation. He sees these two things as related. When we feel awe at the wonder and mystery of creation we are simultaneously struck by a sense of obligation. Our first UU source of inspiration is "that transcendent mystery and wonder...which lead us to renewal of the spirit." Our seventh principle is, "respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part." Both the source and the principle speak to the awe and imply the obligation. Guengerich contends the role of religion is to inspire awe and promote obligation:

Religion unites the purpose of our lives as human beings with the purpose that animates the universe. Religion unites the meaning of our lives as human beings with the meaning that pervades the universe. Religion unites the spirit of humanity with the spirit that keeps the stars shining, the planets spinning, and the flowers blooming in springtime. I believe that gratitude is the appropriate religious response to the nature of the universe.

Awe leads to gratitude and gratitude to obligation. Each of the major religions makes requirements or obligations for its followers. Jews are required to follow the laws of Moses. Christians are required to love. Buddhists are required to meditate and follow the eightfold path. Muslims must submit to the will of Allah, and so on. Guengerich contends that if UU's do not have a requirement then we can't really consider ourselves to be a religion. The crucial requirement Guengerich points to of course is gratitude. The feeling of awe flows from our experience of the grandeur of life and the mystery of the divine.

This feeling becomes religious when a sense of obligation lays claim to us, and we feel a duty to the larger life that we share. In theological terms, religion begins as transcendence.

When we are in touch with the transcendent and appreciate our place in the grand scheme of creation, we naturally feel compelled to give something back. We are grateful for the gifts of life we have been given. We are grateful for all the people and other resources that have sustained and nurtured us. In the words of the hymn, "Source of all to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise."

As I stated, each religion makes demands of its followers. So how might we as UU's be expected to practice our faith? Guengerich proposes that we establish gratitude as the core expression of our faith. He talks about the "discipline of gratitude." The discipline of gratitude stems from the cosmic realization that we owe our existence to, and are completely dependent upon, others and the natural world. The air we breathe, the food we require, the shelter, everything we need comes from outside of us. Michelle talked about, "notice and reflect." There is indeed an "interdependent web of existence of which we are a part." When we are in touch with this reality we are naturally drawn to contribute to the welfare of others and to a sustainable planet.

Our own dependence upon others and the world's resources for our survival and well-being is a reflection of what happens in all of nature:

Everything that exists is made up of constituent parts that are borrowed from, shared with, and related to others outside it. As humans, we are dependent upon the parents who conceived us, the plants and animals who daily give their lives for our nourishment, the trees that reverse our cycle of taking in oxygen and giving off carbon dioxide, and the sun that warms the atmosphere and lights our path. In every respect, we are utterly dependent.

We tend to forget this reality. We pride ourselves in our accomplishments and fail to credit the assistance we receive from others and other external resources. Guengerich considers this to be a "sin." The "salvation" for this transgression is gratitude. It is by way of gratitude that we are able to recall who we really are in the scheme of nature and what our religious obligation truly is.

Guengerich recommends two activities to embody the discipline of gratitude to help us remember our true identity as children of the universe, our place in the natural and human world, and our debt. One activity is simply to journal each day, making a list of all the people, things and events for which you are grateful. He states if we do this every day it will help us see the world in a new way. We will notice more kindnesses and we will feel more connected. And we will enhance the feeling of gratitude. The second suggestion he makes is to recite this verse from Psalm #118 once a day, every day: "This is the day we are given. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." Will you repeat that with me now?

The discipline of gratitude grows out of our sense of awe and our reflection upon it. We acknowledge the source that makes life possible. We are therefore duty bound to improve the life we share together. The connection we feel to the cosmos, to nature and to others, inevitably leads us to want to repay and to serve the future of life on earth. Through our charitable actions we become part of the future, co-creators. We become part of the hope for the future. Rev. Rebecca Parker said can use our talents to bless the world or to curse the world. That is our choice. Let us choose to express gratitude by giving back, or paying forward, for all we have been given.