

Gratitude Overflowing
Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Mary José Holday is both a Franciscan sister and a Seneca elder. She writes of Seneca Iroquois traditions of thanksgiving which includes a four day celebration of giving thanks – storytelling, teachings, silence, singing, chanting, sharing meals... “and remembering all of the things for which to be thankful.” Four days. There are sixteen special chants of thanks for (among other things) “people, the earth, plants, water, trees, animals, birds, the ‘sisters’ (special powers that help people take care of themselves and look after each other), the wind, thunderors (powers that bring rain), the sun, the moon, the stars, the Four Beings (powers that bring enlightenment and strength), Handsome Lake (a member of the tribe who was particularly effective in spreading Christian values) and, finally, the Creator.”

Four days, sixteen chants, rituals, meals.

In the newsletter this week I shared a much more modest offering, my remembering of all (well at least some) of the things for which I am grateful:

My family. My friends.

Green grass... blue sky... scudding clouds.

Leaves golden and red and yellow... leaves falling... new vistas through bare branches.

Hingham Bay... Nantasket Beach... World’s End.

The rising sun... the setting sun.

The full moon... half moon... crescent moon.

Bach... Mozart... The Beatles... Pete Seeger.

Breakfast... lunch... dinner.

Tea.

This Old Ship community of ours... the very young... the very old... everyone in between.

American democracy... my vote... your vote.

Hope for peace which never dies.

Breathing in... breathing out.

The mystery and wonder of life.

And, in spite of too much pain and sorrow, too much suffering, in spite of injustice and war... I am grateful for oh so much more.

We’re told to “count our blessings”. St. Paul actually said we ought to “be thankful in all circumstances” (but note that he said “in” all circumstances, not “for” all circumstances...). But how often do we take the time to count our blessings, and to feel our gratitude? And why bother? Well, my experience in composing this list on the back of an envelope one afternoon about a week ago reminded me of “why bother.” The experience was almost physical in its effect. It was as if I could feel my heart softening

and opening as I remembered again that I did not make myself, and that I had little to do with creating most of the things which bless my life.

Take a moment right now and bring to mind just *one* thing for which you are grateful. Maybe you're having a good day; maybe you're having a bad day. You might be feeling content and peaceful; or maybe life right now is dealing you a very tough hand. But whatever your circumstances right now, take a moment and bring to mind, if you can, at least *one* thing for which you are grateful.

How does it feel?

Well, to get at it through the back door, if you will – for me, the feeling of softening and opening as I bring to mind things for which I am grateful is the precise opposite of what I feel in the midst of being irritated or annoyed or upset.

This past Tuesday, for example, I found myself accumulating irritation: a long wait at a routine doctor's appointment to start the day, then a long wait at CVS, and then in the afternoon discovering that our little dead-end street was blocked off by vehicles from the Aquarion water company and also the gas company, Keyspan (no doubt there to help... but they were in my way!) – so I had to wait to get home, and then ten minutes later I had to wait to get out again, this time on the verge of being late to the New England Friends Home, where I was due to offer a worship service – on the theme of... Thanksgiving.

And just these *minor* irritations – I mean, *really* minor after all - were enough to close my heart, at least a little, noticeably in any case.

But then, once I was there, in the beautiful setting of the Friends Home, surrounded by welcoming residents, singing with them, and talking about gratitude... I began to *feel* gratitude once again. My heart softened, once again. My heart opened, once again.

Well, which way do we want to live? Heart open? Heart closed?

And the next step? It is not complicated. When you are feeling grateful, you want to share some of what you have. Gratitude overflows from an open heart.

And it is true about the Guest at Your Table boxes, too, which we are passing out today in support of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Yes, as we learned in the children's story, there *is* no such thing as a big enough turkey to feed the entire world a Thanksgiving dinner. But we *can* each of us have a guest at our tables. And the contributions we make through our Guest at Your Table boxes really do accumulate, really do go a long way to healing some of the brokenness in the world. With gratitude overflowing.

And then our hearts feel even more open!

A word more about the programs that our Guest at Your Table contributions support through our gratitude overflowing.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, a human rights organization *in our name*, drawing its strength from our support, drawing its inspiration from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and from our own Unitarian Universalist Principles, has four primary program areas:

First, economic justice. Both domestically and internationally, often working with local partner organizations, the UUSC supports workers' rights and fair trade through grants, technical assistance, and public policy work such as the current campaign for a living wage.

Second, environmental justice, with a focus on the human right to water. The UUSC "works against inappropriate privatization (which often makes water more expensive) and supports efforts to develop alternative water service models that meet the human right to water while promoting sustainable use of water resources."

Third, preserving human rights during humanitarian crises. Over and over again, the UUSC rises to the meet human needs in the mist of natural and human-made disasters: the Indonesia earthquake and tsunami, Guatemalan floods, Hurricane Katrina, the South Asia earthquake, the ongoing crisis in Darfur, and on it goes. And in each situation, the UUSC targets aid and assistance to frequently marginalized and under-served populations, to those who are too-often missed by the larger humanitarian organizations, however good their work and however essential their assistance.

Fourth, civil liberties. And the focus now, through education and partnering with other human rights organizations, is to stop U.S. sponsored torture and extraordinary rendition.

So, here's how I think of it: Every year when I make a contribution to the UUSC, I know I am part of a worldwide effort lift our brothers and sisters from extreme poverty and to create peace by planting the seeds of justice and human rights.

And here's how it feels: Every year, when I make our contribution to the UUSC, my heart opens just a bit more. Which isn't just about feeling warm and happy inside... since an open heart is a heart that can feel pain and sorrow.

And it tears me up inside, as I'm sure it does you, too, to see the picture of a hungry child in Darfur, or to learn that a astonishing percentage of the world's population has little access to safe drinking water. It makes me angry, as I'm sure it does you, too, to learn that Americans are complicit in torture, or that anyone anywhere would torture another human being.

Of course, a few pennies or dollars or even hundreds of dollars will not and cannot and, really, should not, take away all of those feelings. But with our contributions we *can* know that we have placed ourselves on the side of justice, that we have put ourselves in the company of those who believe that we do have a responsibility to one another, simply because we are all human, regardless of where we are from or the color of our skin or the words of our faith.

And that is the company I would like to keep, as I know you would too. And if the price of keeping that company is not just the dollars from my pocket, but also an open heart that sometimes hurts, that is a price more than worth paying.

By now you realize that the message this morning is not just about the Guest at Your Table boxes, important thought they are and important though the work of the UUSC is.

For it is not only true that no one of us can feed the world or educate every child or stop all violence; neither can any one of us heal all the suffering of whatever kind in the world, nor can any one of us bring serenity to every troubled heart.

But, together we can not only bring more justice and more peace, we can also bring more healing, more serenity.

And not just by putting money in a box or a check in an envelop. For by staying in touch with that place of gratitude in our hearts, our gratitude will overflow in all sorts of ways every day, bringing more love, more peace, more hope, more kindness to the world around us, to each person we meet. A thoughtful word, a gentle touch, a calm presence... make a difference, an overflowing, rippling difference.

After the worship service at the New England Friends Home, I was invited to their afternoon tea time (remember, tea was on my list...). So I sat along with a number of the residents with a cup of tea. We chatted. We enjoyed and appreciated one another's company. A spirit of gratitude was in the room. A spirit of love and of peace and of hope was in the room. Kindness was in the room and in our hearts. And it was good.

As it is *this* moment, *this* place, *this* gathering.

It is actually very simple.

And quite natural too. One last thought:

One splendid morning a week or two ago I was running through the woods near our home, and suddenly realized how grateful I was for the trees rising above me, arching over the path. And then I remembered that it wasn't only their beauty for which I should be grateful. Their respiration, along with the respiration of millions and millions of other trees, bushes, grass... made possible my life-sustaining respiration. With every inward breath of mine I was using the oxygen that they had breathed out.

And *then* I realized further that the trees had reason to be grateful for *me* – for me and every other human, beast, and bird, because the molecules of carbon dioxide which I breathed out became their sustaining source of life.

Yes, this balance is woefully threatened on the planet today. But the truth of the cycle of life remains. With each breath in I am grateful to the trees. And with each breath out, my gratitude literally overflows and becomes a source of life for the trees.

And so the circle of gratitude and gratitude overflowing with generosity, and not just between us and the trees, is as natural as breathing in and breathing out. Would we but pay attention. Gratitude overflowing.

So it is, so may it be.