

## Gratitude Marie Tweed

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Each year as we decorate for Christmas I find myself being grateful for the many people who have been part of my life. This occurs to me because we don't have a theme Christmas tree, that is one in a particular color scheme or design style, but rather a tree that is filled with memories of our friends and family. Each year as I hang the ornaments, I recall how each one arrived in our home and the people who gave them to us. There are the ornaments that graced our parents' trees, the ones that were gifts from an aunt who lived on Cape Cod, those bought as reminders of vacations, as well as those made by our children. And there is a special collection of felt ornaments designed and made by a good friend. I had never told these people how glad I am that they are part of our life and how special each of them is to me. As I was decorating the tree last year, I decided to share my thoughts with the friend who so diligently crafted one felt ornament each year. I sent her a thank you note telling her how much I valued our friendship that started when we were college freshmen and now spans almost 50 years. I told her how fortunate I felt to have had her friendship these many years. Expressing my gratitude to her opened a new, positive dimension to our relationship.

To express thanks is a simple act and I was well trained as a child to thank people by writing a note for gifts that I received. But how often do I thank people for those gifts that are less tangible - a smile, listening to me when I ramble on, just being there? Not often enough and there are the greater gifts that we so often take for granted - a new day, sunlight, a beautiful moon, the trust of a child, the companionship of a friend but a few. I feel good when I give thanks for something and my thanks do not have to be directed to a person. Giving thanks means that I have noticed and truly experienced my surroundings. That should

be a cause for multiple celebrations each and every day. It reminds me of my dependence on others and the world around us.

I am fortunate to have many positive things in my life right now so you may say gratitude should be easy. But what if things are not going so well. All of us experience times when it is hard to be grateful. Some years ago when our daughter, Amanda, was hospitalized because she was anorexic, the world looked very glum and we surely did not feel very grateful. There were meetings with psychologists and psychiatrists, treatment plans, medical doctor visits and the like. Progress was slow, sometimes non-existent, and there was backsliding. But Amanda was fortunate that she had some very good friends who went out of their way to help her. I found myself being grateful for the lifeline they provided and wrote notes to each of them thanking them for their kindness. They provided a bit of hope in what seemed a hopeless situation. After several years, we were more grateful than words can express to the therapist and minister who worked together and helped Amanda conquer her illness.

How can one show gratitude when the affliction is not going to go away? Hugh, a man who worked for me for several years, had a diving accident and became a quadriplegic in his late 20's. I didn't know him at the time of his accident but I heard that he was a very angry young man. The Hugh I know is a happy, life loving man in his 40's. He relies on carers and his elderly parents for assistance when at home; at work, his co-workers assist him. He frequently expresses his gratitude to everyone, those who help him in even the most minor way. He tells them how much their caring means to him. It was necessity that expanded his connections but so much giving and receiving has enriched his life and the many lives he has touched.

What exactly do we mean by gratitude? We have an everyday sense of the concept. When I am grateful, I acknowledge I have received a gift. I recognize

the value of that gift, and I appreciate the intentions of the donor. The gift may be material or non-material, emotional, or spiritual. It has to do with kindness, generosity, giving and receiving. Gratitude is pleasing and motivating. We want to share the goodness with others. It may be helpful to think of gratitude in two stages. First, gratitude is the acknowledgement of goodness in your life. The second stage is recognizing that the source of this goodness lies at least partially outside oneself. The goodness in my life when I trim the tree is remembering people and the good times we shared. Hugh is recognizing the improved quality of his life when he interacts with people. In both instances, thanks are directed outward, toward the giver. One does not typically show gratitude towards oneself.

Gratitude also requires some effort. It takes some thinking to explore your life to see to whom thanks should be given. Gratitude requires that recognition, knowledge, and appreciation come together. And my thanks do not have to be directed to another person. Our world is full of beauty and our hearts sometimes fill with wonder at what our senses convey. When driving early in the morning, I recently saw a spectacular pink sky just before the sun came up and was grateful that I was up so early that particular day. I can tell you that gratitude wasn't on my mind when the alarm sounded so early that morning. But I truly appreciated the glorious sky, the beauty in that short-lived moment of awe. It helped me start my day in a positive frame of mind and made me eager to share my good fortune in being out so early with anyone who was willing to listen. I had done nothing to deserve such a gift and know that no person could create such a wondrous scene. I was aware that a larger force, the Great Spirit, perhaps God, painted that beautiful sky and that it was mine to behold and enjoy. My thanks that morning were best expressed in the words of the Psalmist, "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."

But why can it be so hard for us to express gratitude? Often we take the good things in our life for granted. I forget to notice and I would guess many of you have the same thing happen. If our busyness is a barrier to even noticing what we have to be grateful for, how can we express our gratitude for those things in our life? Suzelle Lynch says that gratitude is when we become aware of the beauty of and in our lives and our hearts say “thank you” to the universe. She goes on to ask, “What if you woke up one day with only those things and people you consciously gave thanks for today?” For me, that would be a very bleak existence. If I am lucky I might have a few people in my life and perhaps some sunshine, maybe a garden. I might not have a house to live in or much food to eat. Well, my children and grandchildren might disappear. It’s not that I am ungrateful for these people and things but I do not express my gratitude for them every day. Would your life be as bleak as mine or would it be filled with those people and things you care about?

Gratitude has the possibility of expanding our outlook on life and can enhance our faith if we embrace it and express it as often as we can. As Meister Eckhart said, “If the only prayer you say in your life is “thank you,” it would be enough.” Thank You. Such simple words, but potentially so full of meaning. We need to actively recognize that life is a gift and that we are blessed to have the opportunity to learn, grow, love, create, share and help others. This awareness can give us a sense of humility, wonder and desire and the desire to give thanks and pass along the love that is within us.

In his essay, “the Heart of our Faith” Galen Guengerich puts forth the argument that gratitude should be the center of Unitarian Universalist theology. He states:

If we have any sense of mission, we need to be able to say what we believe in language that is positive, relevant, and even playground-friendly. In my view, religion is constituted by two distinct but related impulses: a sense of awe and a sense of obligation. The feeling of awe emerges 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, which is the part about God, and then leads to discipleship, which is the part about the discipline of faith. The idea of faith as a discipline may also sound like heresy to many of us but unless our faith is mere intellectual affectation, however, the defining element of our faith must be a daily practice of some kind.

He goes on to say

Disciplines teach us who we are. They remind us of commitments we have made and show us the path to walk. When Muslims pray five times each day facing Mecca, they remember who they are as people of faith. When I say “I love you” to my wife and daughter when we go our separate ways in the morning and when we retire at night, I remind myself that I am, first and foremost, a husband and father.

He continues

I believe that Unitarian Universalism should be defined by gratitude.

Why gratitude? Two dimensions of gratitude make it fitting as our defining religious practice. One has to do with a discipline of gratitude, and the other has to do with an ethic of gratitude. 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.

As I read this, the suggestion that I, as a Unitarian Universalist, embrace gratitude as a spiritual practice, struck a chord with me. Gratitude might be a way to help me live several of our principles. Specifically I am thinking of:

- "The inherent worth and dignity of every person."

Expressing my gratitude to someone for helping me or sharing an insight or for serving the church in some way - RE teacher, usher, committee chair to name a few - enhances their worth and dignity. I recognize their contribution and express my appreciation for their effort.

- "Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations."

Expressing gratitude requires that we accept one another. If we practice it on a regular basis, I believe it will enhance our appreciation of this beloved community.

- "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part"

As we consciously recognize the gifts we take for granted in the natural world, be it a beautiful sunrise, the bird songs outside our window, the sound of a river running over rocks and give thanks for these gifts, we become more aware of how dependent we are on everything that surrounds us.

If you, like me, are considering a spiritual practice of gratitude, here are some ways I have found that will help me get started. My goal is to be more aware of how much I have to be thankful for so all of these ideas focus on taking less for granted.

I like the idea of starting my day with a prayer of gratitude, perhaps something like the simple prayer of Thich Nhat Hanh:

Waking up this morning, I see blue sky.

I join my hands in thanks

For the many wonders of life;

For having twenty-four brand new hours before me.

Such a prayer helps me to be grateful for the gift of life and to make good use of the day I have been given. By focusing my awareness early in the day, I am more likely to notice all that is around me - and not only on the blue-sky days.

The recent book, "A Simple Act of Gratitude", tells the story of the writing of 365 thank you notes, and how the author's life was changed by the people who received them. John Kralik, the author, says "I learned to be grateful for the life I had, recognizing that the love I had for my children made my life already richer than the many people I envied. I became thankful for the many people around me who dealt with challenges far greater than the ones facing me, with courage and style. I learned to recognize the many people in my life who had protected and cared for me." He believes that all these things happened because of his willingness to be grateful, by acknowledging his thanks in those many notes.

To write 365 notes is a very ambitious undertaking, but what if you were to write a note to a special person in your life. You could thank people for the gifts they have given to you, a teacher who helped you on your way, a relative who was there at a special time in your life, a friend who listened when you needed it most. Or it could be thanking a child for a wonderful smile, or telling someone, perhaps a friend or your child, about a quality that you treasure in them.

I have written very few thank you notes for such reasons. There are teachers who had a great impact on my life but I never told them how important they were in forming my life view or expanding my horizon. As a college student, I sent a condolence note to the widow of my high school math teacher, Mr. Raymond, whom I loved dearly. I told her how much this man influenced my life and that he was the reason I was in a math education program in college. She was a most gracious woman who gave me the gift of sharing her life as a result of my

note. But how much better it would have been if I had sent that note to Mr. Raymond while he was alive.

I continue to learn that it is not good to wait. I had planned to tell my elderly aunt how special she was in my life as part of a Mother's Day greeting this year. I had it all mapped out in my head but sadly she died unexpectedly at the end of April. While I later shared some of my thoughts with my cousins, it was not the same as my being able to tell her how I valued her role in my early childhood, her humor, her courage, her love of life, her love for me.

Whole books have been written about gratitude journals and the benefits that come with creating one. This may appeal to you or you may just want to write a list each day of a few things for which you are grateful. It can be enlightening to notice how much abundance we have in our everyday lives that we usually take for granted.

There are many other ways to increase awareness of the many gifts you are given on a daily basis. Find one that suits you and try practicing it. Gratitude is one of those rare things that you get more of by giving it away.