

Gratitude

Rev. Don Garrett

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The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

Bill Bryson opens his book, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, by congratulating the reader for existing. He says, “To begin with, for you to be here now trillions of drifting atoms had somehow to assemble in an intricate and intriguingly obliging manner create you. It’s an arrangement so specialized and particular that it has never been tried before and will only exist this once. For the next many years (we hope) these tiny particles will uncomplainingly engage in all the billions of deft, cooperative efforts necessary to keep you intact and let you experience the supremely agreeable but generally underappreciated state known as existence.”

He goes on to explore just how extremely unlikely all this is. He points out that in most of the universe, atoms find other things to do than being part of living things. He also points out that, in order to be here now, we had to be the beneficiaries of an extraordinary string of biological good fortune. After all, 3.5 billion years of evolution could easily have turned out quite differently.

All in all, being alive is like winning the lottery over and over again, every second of our lives – except that the odds against it are even higher. Your very existence should be front-page news. Can you think of anything that happened yesterday that was more extraordinary than just being alive?

In *For All That Is Our Life*, a UU meditation manual, Mary Feagan writes:

“I am a millions-of-years-old wonder.

“I am an international – no, cosmic – treasure.

“I ought to be safeguarded in a museum somewhere like Paganini’s old violin. I ought to be gasped at, talked about in hushed, amazed, reverential tones. Viewers would touch me gently and feel lucky.

“Daily newspaper headlines could say, “Mary Feagan Exists Again Today!” Radio and TV shows could discuss me, my ordinary events – that I saw a bluebird with my millions-of-years-old eyes and heard it sing with my highly advanced,

evolutionary ears; that my graceful hands with opposable thumbs fed my sensitive mouth delicious strawberries that it tasted.

“Then, without a conscious thought, my brilliant brain directed my masterful, complex digestive system to assimilate and use them for fuel to wash dishes, write poems, hold babies, laugh, and give kisses.

“No one would completely understand or dare to finally say how my marvelous magical, famous, fine self exists, really.

“I am just, bottom line, a millions-of-years-old wonder. You are too.”

When you factor in the fragility of life, how easily it can be lost, you’d think we’d all be overwhelmed with gratitude all the time. But this would entail overlooking our powerful capacity to take things for granted.

Consider a person with a good home, family, plenty to eat, good friends, and good health who loses a parking space to someone coming from the other direction half a second sooner – and is immediately filled with rage? The tiniest disappointment can overshadow a whole world of good. How much good do we overlook because we’re not looking for it?

Humans have a remarkable ability to overlook the obvious. Sometimes when it seems that people are in denial because they claim not to see the proverbial – or literal - elephant in the room, standing right in front of them, they actually really don’t see it at all.

A few weeks ago I referred to a 1999 Harvard University study entitled, “Gorillas in our Midst.” For this study, researchers asked people to watch a basketball game and count the number of times the ball was passed during each possession. At some point in the game a person dressed in a gorilla suit would walk onto the court, stop and thump his chest, and then continue walking off the court. When asked about it, nearly half the participants said that they hadn’t seen any gorilla. They were so focused on their task that they didn’t even notice an outrageous occurrence taking place right before their eyes, confirming the hypothesis that people tend to see what they want to see, what they are looking for. They filter out data that doesn’t fit their search parameters, even if it’s a gorilla.

We humans have the capacity to overlook some very big gorillas in our midst. Focusing on what went wrong, what disappointed us, and what might go wrong can blind us to the many wonders right in front of us. The news doesn't spend much time informing us about all the things that went right today. When I was young there was a hit song that went, "When I am weary and cannot sleep, I count my blessings instead of sheep, and I fall asleep counting my blessings." I thought that song was embarrassingly silly. "Who would do that?" I wondered.

But recent psychological research has learned that by doing just that – counting our blessings – we can develop our skills of gratitude. Keeping a gratitude journal, for example, is one of the most effective ways to increase our happiness.

In the struggle for our attention, annoyance almost always wins out over gratitude. This is strange because being annoyed feels bad, and gratitude feels good. When we are angry, we put a lot of energy into disapproving of our experience and wishing it was otherwise. But when we're feeling grateful, our energy goes into appreciating the good fortune that makes the positive aspects of our experience possible, making feeling good feel even better.

Actually, gratitude rarely even comes into the picture. When things don't go our way we tend to place the blame outside of ourselves; hence, anger at disappointment. But when things go right we tend to attribute the success to our own efforts. So we feel satisfaction. Feeling gratitude requires that we extend the boundaries of our satisfaction outward beyond ourselves, an unnecessary step if we've already take the credit for our success.

One of the basic purposes religion serves is to help us appreciate the artificiality of the way we place a boundary between ourselves and others. As Norman Cousins put it, we are individual cells in a body of 6.5 billion cells – the body of humanity. We received our genetic makeup from our ancestors, we derive our bodies from the food which others grow, harvest, transport and sell to us. Our growing personalities were shaped by our parents and families, friends and teachers. And we are continually being shaped by our culture, its media, values, and institutions. Everyone is a link in a long chain of giving and receiving.

Every once in a while we decide that we need something and then that desire is either satisfied or not, and we often think that our happiness is dependent on satisfying that desire. We even think that it's appropriate to be unhappy if we're unsatisfied. But the Buddhist teaching on this points out how arbitrary it is to choose to base our happiness on the outcome of such a small number of factors out of the millions and millions of things that need to go right every second in order for us to exist at all.

Mohandas Gandhi said that there is no way to peace – peace is the way. The Vietnamese Zen teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, extends that into area of happiness, “There is no way to happiness. Happiness is the way.” Peace and happiness, like gratitude, are fundamental religious sentiments that can be cultivated in their own right. We tend to think of peace, happiness, and gratitude as being dependent on good outcomes, but religious teachers of all the ages have told us that they are not. That is what spiritual practice is all about. We practice feeling what we want to feel. Unless we practice our feelings, we let others control others the amount of peace, happiness and gratitude we feel in our lives. This is why it is so absolutely important for us to have a spiritual practice. What's yours?

It doesn't have to be that way. It's been said that religion is what we do with the knowledge that we are going to die. The non-religious answer to death is to ignore it – pretend it's not there – hope we'll live forever. It's also a non-realistic answer. Death is one of the things of which we can be absolutely certain. It's a pretty big gorilla to ignore.

When I was a young adult, I struggled with a cancer and was not expected to survive. Living in the light of death gave me a transformed appreciation for even the simplest of things: the taste of food, the texture of fabric, the feel of warm water cascading over my body, even the consolation of sleep became precious beyond words.

I woke every day and lived every moment with a deep appreciation of all that I received as a gift of being from beyond myself. Dorothy N. Monroe wrote about this in her poem “The Cost:”

Death is not too high a price to pay
for having lived. Mountains never die,
nor do the seas or rocks or endless sky.
Through countless centuries of time, they stay
eternal, deathless. Yet they never live!
If choice there were, I would not hesitate
to choose mortality. Whatever Fate
demanded in return for life I'd give,
for, never to have seen the fertile plains
nor heard the winds nor felt the warm sun on sands
beside the salty sea, nor touched the hands
of those I love – without these, all the gains
of timelessness would not be worth one day
of living and of loving; come what may.

I love this poem, but disagree with her about one thing: I don't see death as the price of life – death is an important part of life. Death became my teacher and my friend. I'm grateful that I survived, but I'm also grateful that I cannot forget death's certain inevitability. Death gives life depth, richness, and meaning.

Gratitude is what we feel when we accept life as it is: a gift we receive from beyond ourselves. Gratitude is what we feel when we relax the tight boundaries of self that give the illusion that we're not part of the interdependent web of all existence. Gratitude means being thankful not just for pleasant experience of eating, but also for all those things that made the meal possible. You could begin a meal with a prayer of gratitude to the interdependent web of existence of which you are a part, beginning: "This food is the gift of the whole universe – the earth, the sky, and much hard work." By connecting us with the greater whole of which we're a part, gratitude also helps us to share our gifts freely with all in need.

Peace, happiness, and gratitude are available to us every moment in which we accept life as it is: an incredible ongoing miracle. And we can feel as much of

them as we choose to feel – they’re not limited to the outcomes of our little dramas. This is the real meaning behind prayer and other spiritual practices.

When I rejected the God of my childhood church, I threw out prayer along with it. Eventually I realized that was like throwing the baby out with the bath water. True prayer isn’t a conversation with an invisible friend – prayer is a spiritual practice, and spiritual practices have real value. They can help us grow in ways that we cannot achieve in any other way. Spiritual practices exist to help us create peace, joy, happiness, and gratitude in our lives. Gratitude can be like a prayer of thanks that doesn’t require any concept of God to be meaningful.

In his book about gratitude, entitled *Thanks*, Robert A. Emmons quotes the late Catholic priest, psychologist, and devotional writer, Henri Nouwen, who said: “Gratitude as a discipline involves a conscious choice. I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are steep and hurt and resentful. It is amazing how many occasions present themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of a complaint. I can choose to be grateful when I am criticized, even when my heart responds in bitterness . . . I can choose to listen to the voices that forgive and to look at the faces that smile, even while I still hear words of revenge and see grimaces of hatred.”

Emmons continues, “What does it mean to say that gratitude is a choice? It means that we sharpen our ability to recognize and acknowledge the giftedness of life. It means that we make a conscious decision to see blessings instead of curses. It means that our internal reactions are not determined by external forces.”

Ben Stein, the often contrarian actor, comedian, economist, and former speechwriter for Richard Nixon, explained gratitude in this way: “I cannot tell you anything that, in a few minutes, will tell you how to be rich. but I can tell you how to feel rich, which is far better, let me tell you firsthand, than being rich. Be grateful . . . It’s the only totally reliable get-rich-quick scheme.”

Gratitude is totally reliable because it is a reality-based strategy, a spiritual practice grounded in an appreciation for the incredibly unlikely concatenation of circumstances by which we exist at all. We’ve all won the evolution and creation lottery just by being here. The rest is, arguably, gravy.

The gorilla in our midst is how incredibly lucky we are to be alive, to experience air, breath, sunlight, food, friends, and rest. It's really much more work to be unhappy than to be deeply, gratefully happy.

There have been studies that claim that a person's degree of happiness has a kind of "set point" that doesn't vary too much, up or down, no matter what the circumstances. Gratitude as an independent variable is the gorilla in the room in the way these studies were structured. It's been found that developing feelings of gratitude, through simple techniques like a daily gratitude journal (which is really a scientifically operationalized method of falling asleep while counting one's blessings), can help one increase one's happiness set point by 25%. Who ever thought that paying attention to reality could make us that much happier?

In light of all this, I invite you to practice gratitude as a spiritual discipline. Instead of paying attention to it on certain holidays or moments when you happen to get exactly what you had wanted, I invite you to make giving thanks a daily practice. Why not work at it? It will bring you a better life and help make a better world.