

Hymn: Give Thanks, from Singing the Living Tradition

Readings:

Let Us Give Thanks,

By Max Coots

Let us give thanks for a bounty of people:

For children who are our second planting, and, though they grow like weeds and the wind too soon blows them away, may they forgive us our cultivation and fondly remember where their roots are.

Let us give thanks:

For generous friends...with hearts as big as hubbards and smiles as bright as their blossoms;

For feisty friends as tart as apples;

For continuous friends, who, like scallions and cucumbers, keep reminding us we had them;

For crotchety friends, as sour as rhubarb and as indestructible;

For handsome friends, who are as gorgeous as eggplants and as elegant as a row of corn — and the others — as plain as potatoes, and so good for you.

For funny friends, who are as silly as brussels sprouts and as amusing as Jerusalem artichokes, and serious friends as complex as cauliflowers and as intricate as onions;

For friends as unpretentious as cabbages, as subtle as summer squash, as persistent as parsley, as delightful as dill, as endless as zucchini, and who — like parsnips — can be counted on to see you through the long winter;

For old friends, nodding like sunflowers in the evening-time, and young friends coming on as fast as radishes;

For loving friends, who wind around us like tendrils, and hold us despite our blights,

wilts, and witherings;

And finally, **for those friends now gone**, like gardens past, that have been harvested
— but who fed us in their times that we might have life thereafter;

For all these we give thanks.

The Guest House, by Rumi

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

For All Life Is A Gift, by Rev. Dr. Nina D. Grey
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman
November 23, 2014

I have been going to or hosting Thanksgiving Dinners for my whole life. Probably most of you have too. For a number of years I've gone to my sister's house. The nieces, nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews of this extended and blended family range in age from 1 and ½ to 40 years old. There are usually a lot of us so we set up the tables end to end. Most travel considerably farther than over the hill and through the woods so we stay for the long weekend. On Thanksgiving itself as we sit around the table, set with mounds of colorful and various food offerings responsive to our food predilections or sensitivities, we began by going around the table to say something we are grateful for. People mention all kinds of positive things, friends, family, good food, nobody ever brings up certain of those states that Rumi identifies as guests – a depression, a meanness, a crowd of sorrows as causes for gratitude.

One of our storytellers a week or two ago, told a story that you can find in various versions and with similar titles. Is it good or is it bad is one title. Is it lucky or unlucky is another version. The story is about the farmer who has a beautiful horse, and he also has a young adult son. The horse runs away and the neighbors come by to console him for his bad luck. And he answers I don't know if it is good or if it is bad. Then the son goes looking for the horse and rides him back and with him comes a whole bunch of wild horses and the neighbors come by to congratulate him on his good luck, and the farmer answers, I don't know if it is good or if it is bad. The son tries to tame one of the horses, is thrown, and breaks his leg. Same story, neighbors come consoling farmer responds I don't know if it is bad or it is good. The army comes to draft the son to go to war, the son is excused from this responsibility because of his broken leg, the neighbors return to say, what good luck that is, and the farmer again responds, I don't know if it is good or it is bad.

The story could go on for a long time, but this is where it usually ends because by then, everyone has gotten the point.

This story is a Chinese story, a Zen story, a middle eastern story, and in every form it tells a truth. Things happen. And they may seem good or bad, lucky or unlucky on the surface, but as time unfolds, they may turn out to be other than we thought they were. Whichever they are, whether they bring pain or pleasure, sorrow or joy, Rumi says, welcome them in, be grateful for them, for that which comes to us, in Rumi's poetic language is a gift from beyond. In a sense a gift. Something to be entertained, meaning not something that you or I dance a jig, but that like a thought we might consider, we plumb more deeply what possible meaning might attach to or discover in this thing we did not ask for or want.

One of my friends believes all things happen for a reason. You may think this too. Or not. I've heard this belief expressed also as "There is no such thing as a coincidence". Or, "God or the universe or the great spirit provides. We get the lessons we need." The psychoanalyst, the late Carl Jung, believed meaning was to be found not only in cause and effect relationships, but in synchronicity.

For example, because a butterfly, a creature which emerges from the immature cocoon to become a beautiful flying being, because it landed on your windowsill at a particular moment when things were tough, it is a sign of transforming change and hope meant especially for you.

That things happen to me or you for a reason, that there are no coincidences, is not exactly my philosophy or worldview, though I respect it and my friend who holds it. I am willing to entertain the idea that she could be right in her surmise – after all, the world and all its beings are in some ways interdependent despite their sometimes apparent separateness – and science and philosophy admit of paradox and mystery, but so far about how events relate to one another, and regarding causes and effects, I can only say I am agnostic.

What I don't believe is that illness comes to us ordained to teach us a particular lesson about life. Or that if we are victims of oppression, it is because there is a lesson in there somewhere that we need to learn.

Or that a war or the weather happens because on some level we as individuals needed or deserved it. Or that we were saved from a disaster because God has something still for us to do and we will learn pretty soon what it is. That philosophy taken to its extreme, I would have to imagine that victims and or perpetrators of a holocaust or genocide were targeted by God or Karma, or the Universe to learn a life lesson.

If as the process theologians thought there is an emerging, evolving, loving force in the universe, I believe that such a loving force would not by its nature send us tsunamis or earthquakes, or cause policeman to kill young Black men on the street, or states to ban certain people from getting married because they love someone of the same sex.

On the other hand if I do not see the universe as fore-ordaining life lessons for my soul, I do hold to our UU principle about all of us being participants in an interdependent world. I do think what we do or leave undone makes a difference, affects the lives of others in our family or community or world.

And how we behave toward another or others or how others behave toward us becomes fodder for both their and our learning and growing, if that is, we will be open to seeing more clearly, if we will be willing in Rumi's words to entertain what comes to us or what we bring to another enough, if we will consider our part in the scheme of things enough to take responsibility for how we are relating to each other.

When the poet Rumi said “This Being Human is a guest house, every morning a new arrival, a joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor” – when he said, “Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they are a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight,” – when he said, “the dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. Be grateful for whatever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond,” when he said these things I know that he had had an experience of and understanding that love is at the core of reality; that the divine or sacred self within us is inseparable from the divine love at the center of the universe and is who we are.

He grasped that all of life, not just the pleasurable and joyful parts, is our teacher. And anyone we encounter, whether they rub us the wrong way, or we discover we like them immediately can be our teachers. He encouraged practice that would carry us deeper toward what some call awareness, others call mindfulness, still others call contemplation and which enables us to see ourselves and the world more clearly and truly.

Brain research has shown that when a person spends regular time entertaining life affirming beliefs and thoughts, through devotional literature, prayer, conversation, meditation, thinking about and responding to the wonders of creation, making room for gratitude and thanksgiving, walking in nature, serving others with kindness, then in time they will demonstrate greater compassion, respond more readily to the needs of others, and generally practice kindness.

We are made not only skin and bones and all the rest but also of love-stuff and capable of great compassion and kindness. As we realize this more and more we foster within us ever more capacity to treat others as we would like to be treated, to respond to meanness with a good heart rather than with meanness of our own.

Unitarian, transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau said, “Why should we live in such a hurry and waste of life? I wish to live deliberately...I wish to learn what life has to teach.” He went to the woods, seeking in the natural world an experience of the reality beneath the skin of life. Rumi was something of a profligate, licentious in his behaviors with others until he met someone who helped him see in a different way, strip away the distractions of superficial things through a practice of movement, twirling. With spiritual practices, there can come a letting go and opening up to something deeper.

How I take his wisdom in his poem *The Guesthouse* is this: when something happens, for whatever apparent reason it happens, say, you catch a cold, and decide to blame it on a virus or bacteria,, this cold may also bring with it a learning. You may realize that you have not been giving yourself enough rest and this is a gift. Maybe it gives you time to rethink your schedule and what’s really important and establish a different rhythm or shape to your life.

When I got sick with pneumonia in the spring, diagnosed on Easter, I became less able to take care of the ordinary daily tasks and our Caring Committee stepped up to the plate as they do so often, offering the support I needed until I was ready step by step to take on more myself. And I learned that there was great love in this congregation (I knew this here – pointing to head, but not as much yet here – pointing to heart) and I learned that I was both more vulnerable and stronger and more resilient than I thought. While I wouldn't have wished it, and don't wish illness on anyone, I can see where the gifts were in that particular guest.

And my colleague and friend, Charles, who would not have wanted to get cancer ever, sat in our Greenfield Group after he was better, thankfully he did get well, and remains healthy today, he sat there with his hair still growing back and curlier than it was, and told us that his cancer was for him transforming. He received such an abundance of love and care. And he also had time to reflect. And his cancer became for him a learning and growing experience. Soon after he began a program to learn how to be a spiritual guide and to help others who dealt with life-threatening illness.

I took the Family Promise Training yesterday so that I could learn more about this program for families who are homeless that we are involved with, and so that I could become one of the volunteers. When families become homeless, often the reasons have to do with something outside their control, the loss of a job, - perhaps the economy tanked, or it improved but the costs of housing increased beyond their means – any one of a number of things could happen, and suddenly the parents and children are without the necessary resources. A parent living at Family Promise visited the training with the children, and told us what volunteers do that is helpful – introducing themselves by name, first; giving them enough privacy - and what is not so helpful, for example, getting into their private space, helping too much, disempowering them - I could see this loving parent who wanted for the children what I wanted for my child, and it reaffirmed for me something I knew in my mind but hadn't totally embraced in my heart.

They are no different than I am, than we are, who have the comfort of home. Sun and rain pour on all of us no matter who we are. We might be the giver, we might be the receiver, at any time in our lives. Helping when someone faces trouble is a circle. And helping teaches us even greater compassion.

In her book "How to Live Beautifully in an Uncertain World", the Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron mentions The Three Vows or Commitments of Tibetan Buddhism. She writes, "These are ...methods for embracing the chaotic, unstable, dynamic challenging nature of our situation as a path to awakening." The first, Pratimoksha, is a commitment to be good to each other; the second, Bodhisattva, is a "commitment to keeping our hearts and minds open and nurturing our compassion with a longing to ease the suffering of the world;" the third is Samaya, a "commitment to see everything we encounter, good and bad...as means by which we can awaken further."

Consider, when asked at Thanksgiving or any other time to give thanks, consider the unexpected and possibly disruptive guests that may have entered our doors one morning, which in some way might have woke us up to our own compassion and sparked our willingness to offer that compassion out to the world. An awakening for which we can say thanks. Amen.

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