

OPENING OUR EYES TO GRATITUDE
The Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
October 7, 2018

OPENING WORDS *To Remember Our Promises* ~Sarah C Stewart

Bring who you are as you enter our [Fellowship] this morning.
Bring your best self and your struggling self;
bring your mistakes and your triumphs;
bring your shortcomings and your recommitment to good.
Bring yourself here and open your heart to beauty, to truth,
to the door that is open to the presence of [the holy].
Here in this [congregation] we are trying to walk together on the peaceable way;
trying to hammer out division, and hatred, and all that separates one from another.
We try, and we will fall short, but held in love, we try again.
We come together this morning, as a [spiritual community],
to bow our heads in prayer,
to raise our voices in song,
to remember our promises and vow to live by them once again.
Come, let us remember our promises to one another, and to life itself.

STORY FOR ALL *Grateful* ~ John Bucchino
(This is a picture book using the words of John Bucchino's song, Grateful. "Grateful, grateful, am I. Grateful, grateful, truly blessed and duly grateful.")

PEBBLES OF JOY, SORROW & GRATITUDE ~ Gretchen Haley

For these few moments...
There is no news to absorb...No tweet to shake your head at
No lawn to be mowed, car to be washed, groceries to buy
No solving here for x, or y; or where you put your keys
No tracing the smoke, the fire, the wind, the worry, or the wishing for rain
... in this space, and in this time, there is only the breathing,
... and the beginning again in love.
We remember [with gratitude that] the earth that turns without our pushing
The stars that offered their light long before we came to see
And this gift of life, this love that is ours without effort, or earning,
without proof of citizenship, or positive net worth.
We practice together this surrender (which is not simple)
to know ourselves already enough, to be worthy of this much beauty,
[to be worthy of survival and healing and hope]
To learn to say again, and again: Yes.

READING *Open Eyes* ~ Victoria Safford

To see, simply to look and to see, is an ethical act and intentional choice; to see, with open eyes, is a spiritual practice and thus a risk, for it can open you to ways of knowing

the world and living it that will lead to inevitable consequences. The awakened eye is a conscious eye, a willful eye, and brave, because to see things as they are, each in its own truth, will make you very vulnerable.

Think of yourself as a prism made of glass, reflecting everything exactly as it is, unable to exist dishonestly – reflecting beauty where there's beauty, violence where there's violence, loveliness and unexpected joy where there is joy, violation where there's violation.

Here's the front page of the paper; here's that seedy, gossipy conflict at your job; here's a memory, unblurred by wishful thinking; here's a perfect afternoon in spring, and buds now on the trees, and blackbirds in the marsh. Here's the world, just as it is – now look!

That kind of seeing is a choice, and it is a sacred practice.

And then there is refraction – taking into yourself, as a prism takes in light, the truth of what you see and hear and transforming it somehow, changing its direction, acting on it, rendering it somehow, anew.

That again is holy work. The spring day, received, comes out again as gratitude (dispersed into a spectrum); a sorrow, yours or someone else's, fully realized and received, not denied, not covered up, not justified or explained away, ignored – some sorrow clearly, bravely seen is taken in, absorbed and felt, and re-emerges, bent now into compassion. To see clearly is an act of will and conscience. It will make you very vulnerable. It is persistent, holy, world-transforming work.

MESSAGE *Opening Our Eyes to Gratitude* ~ Rev. Stoneberg

Okay. Honestly? I am skeptical about gratitude. I have been witness to too many times when 'oh, thank you so much' smacked of insincerity. I have been on the receiving end of too many thank you notes that were little more than an obligatory gesture. I have written those notes myself, often feeling compelled to say 'thank you'...even when I didn't really mean it.

Saying 'thank you' has become as automatic, and potentially insincere, as greeting one another with 'how are you?' We don't necessarily mean it. We say it without fully acknowledging what we are grateful for. And, I suspect, just like smiling even when you don't feel like it, saying 'thank you' serves to remind one of their place...especially for women...coming out something like 'yes, sir. Thank you, sir.' It's part of a 'just be nice' culture that can numb us to our true feelings.

One of my pet peeves? It seems to me, that store clerks here in Canada expect ME to thank THEM for allowing me to patronize their business. I automatically and courteously thank them as they hand me my package, and they politely respond with 'you're welcome', but rarely does anyone thank me for shopping with them. Having come from the consumerist 'customer-is-always-right' culture of the US, I get a bit incensed when I don't receive the thanks I think I deserve!

Oh but wait. Some of that's on me, isn't it? Why do I feel compelled to offer them a 'thank you?' Well, it feels socially appropriate, even when I'm a bit miffed that they don't thank ME. But why does 'thank you' roll off my tongue without thought or intent? This got me thinking

about my deep-seated skepticism about gratitude; maybe because I've been conditioned to offer it, regardless of what I'm feeling, it has become empty of meaning.

And now it's Thanksgiving weekend, and I feel compelled to speak of gratitude; but I am not compelled to speak of gratitude that is empty of meaning or purpose. Just the opposite. Even in my skepticism, perhaps because of my skepticism, I believe in using a lens of gratitude to navigate our daily lives. Yes, gratitude can be over-used, but it also has some incredible benefits.

There is lots of research-based evidence to support this:¹

- There are health benefits. Grateful people have 10% fewer stress-related illnesses, are more physically fit, have blood pressure that is lower by 12%, have a stronger immune system, and get more sleep each night.
 - There are benefits in aging. For every ten years of life, gratitude increases by 5%.
 - Gratitude has social benefits. Grateful people have more satisfying and closer relationships, and are better liked
 - There are benefits for our youth: Grateful teens are 10x less likely to start smoking, have 13% fewer fights, and are 20% more likely to get A grades.
 - There are benefits at work. Grateful people's income is roughly 7% higher.
 - Gratitude has community benefits. Grateful people will have a stronger bond with the local community, are generally more helpful, and on average, give 20% more to charities.
- And, overall positive emotions can add up to 7 years to your life.

But...those benefits do not accrue if our gratitude is not true, and felt, and authentic.

But, oh my gosh. It is often really hard to feel authentic gratitude! At least for me...and honestly, I SO appreciate those of you who teach me about gratitude on a daily basis, because sometimes I just can't find it.

Let me tell you a little bit about myself. I was a kid with dreams. I had ideas of who I wanted to be, what I wanted to do, and how I wanted to look. But, both ideologically and practically, those dreams were both dismissed or not heard. And so I learned to manage my feelings. I learned to prepare myself for disappointment by trying to downplay my expectations. I strategized by first trying to see all the roadblocks to success before allowing myself to embrace the possibilities. These practices have indeed managed my feelings, keeping them on an even keel. But the effect of seeing the future in this way, as a series of hurdles, is that it has contributed to my tendency to live paying attention to what is lacking...and a feeling of lack and scarcity is not at all conducive to gratitude.

Having practiced this kind of outlook for decades, I am here to tell you that it doesn't work; it simply doesn't serve me! Trying to protect myself from disappointment only buries it more deeply within me. Seeing roadblocks first, which admittedly can often help me prepare to overcome them, still keeps those roadblocks right in front of my eyes, obscuring my vision,

¹ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/six_habits_of_highly_grateful_people
https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-JTF_White_Paper-Gratitude-FINAL.pdf

and keeps me from actually focusing on and embracing the dream. This is no way to live a life of vision and aspiration.

You know how optimists and pessimists are often defined by whether they see the glass as half full or half empty? I have much hope for the future and am definitely not a pessimist, so if I have to choose between just those two options, I am someone who sees the glass as half full. But, I have somehow managed to make it pretty difficult to be grateful for the water that's in the glass, let alone to dream of how to best use the water I have.

And there's the crux of it. Gratitude really has nothing to do with being an optimist - a Pollyanna - or a pessimist - a humbug. Gratitude is really about choosing to see honestly and clearly, and when possible, and when the time is right, to name the gifts and blessings that are present to us.

Look. There is a container with water in it. The water takes up about ½ of the space in that container. The container is plastic, or it's pottery, or handblown glass. It is placed on a flat surface within reach. What else do you see when you look at that glass?

I guess it depends on the circumstances. If you were with a group in a waterless desert where you've been for ten days, and you come upon this glass, most would probably wish for a lot more water and would find it disappointing that there's so little. In that moment, a ½ full glass simply does not attain the dream. If it were me, I'd be pretty devastated that that is all the water there is. Is it possible to be grateful in that moment?

An article in Psychology Today about the benefits of cultivating an attitude of gratitude, says that gratitude is "an antidote for attachment to what we want but don't have, as well as an antidote for our dissatisfaction with what we have but don't want."² "Gratitude," says the author, "is the opposite of being discontented."

So how do we practice gratitude in the face of disappointment and discontent?

This has been a hard couple of weeks. Yesterday's vote in the US Senate was devastating for me. I am longing for a world in which victims are believed. I long for leadership which works for the wellbeing of all rather than for the protection of the ruling principalities. So many people are hurting. So many people are being told that they are unworthy of credibility and justice. What in the world can we find to be grateful for in the midst of yesterday's news?³

Given my predilection for caution and suspicion, the last thing I want to do is to suggest that we simply look for the blessings and be grateful. Some are already lifting up positive messages. "More women are finding their voices and speaking out." "More people will surely be inspired to vote in upcoming elections." "This is an opportunity to get clear about our values and our commitments."

While all of this may be true, we have to be careful not to use gratitude as a way of avoiding serious problems.⁴ Gratitude does not make problems and threats disappear. Gratitude is not

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/some-assembly-required/201411/the-benefits-cultivating-attitude-gratitude>

³ The US Senate confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court

⁴ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/five_ways_giving_thanks_can_backfire

to be used as a broom to sweep things under the rug; that's the kind of gratitude that I'm most suspect of. But rather, gratitude is a source of sustenance for the work that needs to be done. Gratitude may well serve the attainment of our visions as it keeps us healthier, and more grounded, and better nourished for the journey. It connects us to one another and makes us stronger.

Here's a vision I do have! I want to be the Rev. Victoria Safford! Doesn't she write beautifully? Isn't she wise? The reading that Marion shared earlier really says it all, right? Seeing with open eyes is a spiritual practice, she says. Looking at things plainly and clearly is risky and opens us to vulnerability, she says. It can be painful to see what is. But it is holy work, sacred work, because to see plainly allows us, like a prism, to both reflect and refract what we see. When we see the world as it is, we can reflect and magnify its beauty and its loveliness, sharing that vision with others. When we see the world clearly, we can take in its violence and its pain, and refract them, bending those realities toward justice and compassion.

Wayne Dyer is quoted as saying, "If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." Look at the glass of water. Don't wonder if it is half-empty or half-full. It's simply the glass of water that you have. It is an opportunity to reflect on all-that-is as well as all-that-isn't. In truth, there are good days and bad days. We all have strengths and we all have weaknesses. We experience both intense delight and heart-rending disappointment.

The gratitude that I can best and most authentically access is gratitude for the ability that we have, each of us, to use what we are given for good. Each of us can choose to take in the pain of the world and refract it into compassion. Each of us has the power to transform an obstacle into an opportunity. Each of us, after fully acknowledging our grief at current events, can pick ourselves up and continue to resist the powers that be.

And, we have this place, where we are called to shift our perspectives and challenge our blindspots. We have this place, this community, where we can come with empty glasses and get them re-filled.

For this I am most grateful. For you I am most grateful. And I really mean it.
So be it.

OFFERTORY ~ *Michael R. Leduc*

May we look with gratitude upon this day, for the beauty of the world, for the first radiance of dawn and the last smoldering glow of sunset.

Let us be thankful for physical joys, for hills to climb and hard work to do, for music that lifts our hearts in one breath, for the hand-clasp of a friend, and for the gracious loveliness of children who remind us of the wonders of life.

May we be appreciative above all for the concern and love of those around us; for the exceeding bliss of the touch of the holy which suddenly awakens our drowsy souls to the blessed awareness of the divine within us and within others.

For all of this, and for the countless other blessings present in our lives, let us be grateful. Amen.

READING *Who Am I Not to Be Blessed?* ~ Chris Jimmerson

In moonlit shadows,
At the edge of night-darkened oak trees
I see it.

Across sunny pathways,
In the buzzing of insects, amongst the flowering forest greenery,
I hear it.

From the touch of ones loved,
The embraces of those gone before me,
I feel it.

In the poems I love dearly,
The songs that speak to my heart,
The sculpture that catches my imagination,
The discoveries still to be made,
I sense it.

It is in the fire of distant suns,
The cool drip of waters,
The slight chill in the breeze,
The laughter of children, no matter what their age, old and young, grown and still
small;

It is the breath of life, the stardust of souls, the magic of remembrance.
Who am I not to surrender to it in gratitude?
Who am I to not be blessed?

***SUNG BENEDICTION** *We Give Thanks* (adapted)

Oh we give thanks for this Fellowship
For all who've gathered here and the flame we've lit
For the treasures found, where love abounds
Oh we give thanks for this Fellowship
Go in peace and with gratitude in your heart. Blessed be.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME