

GRATITUDE

Sermon IV in the Year-Long Series
“Twelve Gates to The City: Spiritual Pathways for Entering the Holy City of Your Own Life”
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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
Sunday, November 20, 2011

Today is Sunday... November the 20th...in the year 2011...and so far, at least, it is a perfectly ordinary day in my life. So perhaps this is the perfect day – falling as it does just four days before our big national holiday of Thanksgiving – for me to take in this public forum a brief spiritual inventory of some of the simple, ordinary, mundane things in my life that, when I stop long enough to think about it, I am truly thankful for as a human being. Now...the litany of everyday gratitude I am about to give voice to is, of course, my own idiosyncratic and personal list...but it is my hope that many of you will recognize some, or possibly most, of the kinds of simple satisfactions that are on my heart this morning.

Here is what – stripped to its essentials – my life is like on this run-of-a-mill Sunday just before Thanksgiving 2011.

First...I began my day by waking up!... hey, how about that for a wonderful start? I simply opened my eyes...and stretched the sleep out of my rested body...and by any measure that is a pretty spectacular beginning to the day when I consider the very real and imaginable alternative – that I might not have awakened with the sun this morning...but instead would be lost forever in the fog which lies just beyond human existence! But glory be...as luck would have it... here I am ...right here...once again able to give a run at the day! Just the mere fact of finding myself once again alive (and aware of my world) at the beginning of this ordinary day strikes me as a pretty special thing.

And there's so very much more! I woke up this morning wrapped in the luxury of a big, soft bed that I can call my own, beneath crisp, inviting sheets and a clean, cozy blanket...with my bedroom windows open to the breezy Atlantic...in a cool, comfortable, and familiar home, next to someone who loves and cares for me more than I probably deserve.

Despite the chronic arthritis in my knees, neck and back, I was able to get out of bed, creek my way cautiously to the bathroom, turn on the water, and jump into a steaming shower that graciously loosened much of the overnight stiffness that had settled into my muscles and bones and muscles as I slept. Stepping out of my shower, I dried off with a soft, fresh-smelling towel, slipped into some comfortable, loose fitting clothes, and moseyed my way to the kitchen, and – thanks to the miracle of a coffee maker with an automatic timer – when will the miracles cease! – pour myself that first, aromatic cup of steaming coffee. Ah...coffee...the elixir of the gods! I then moved quietly to my favorite end of the sofa (in our modest-but-sun-bathed living room over-looking the Atlantic...the crashing waves of which I heard through the open balcony slider) and between welcoming sips of coffee quietly perused the familiar-yet-ever-surprising pages of the morning's papers -- dappled as they are too in sunshine – to read the news (local, national and global) of this complicated and amazing bittersweet world of ours...including the comics which, despite my astonishing degree of intellectual sophistication!, never fail to bring a quiet/knowning smile to my face as they variously poke fun at the ironies and absurdities of being human.

As the morning moved on and the sun steadily rose higher in the sky...and the perused sections of the newspapers steadily piled up on the floor...I moved to my clear-glass dining table, which by then also danced with the embrace of the morning's sunlight. I sat and quietly enjoyed my simple

breakfast – consisting of both halves of a liberally buttered English muffin, shamelessly adorned by big globs of strawberry preserves, offset by refreshing sips from a tall, frosty glass of ice-cold skim milk and the last of my coffee. These simple tastes mingled on my palate and fed my body with satisfaction and sustenance.

Preparing for my day at work – and how blessed I am to be able to say that I am gainfully, and meaningfully, employed in this world! – I shaved...brushed my teeth...took my daily medications (who doesn't have at least few of those?)... and then dressed for my 30-minute bike ride to church. In a few minutes, as I stood up in my bike, pedaling vigorously up the steady incline of the Barber Bridge, heading West over the Indian River lagoon, I was fully aware and glad that I was both alive and moving with the morning. I took delight in all the simple sights, sounds and sensations that surrounded me:

- the fresh morning air snapping in and out of my lungs...
- the exhilaration of my muscles pumping and my heart pumping...
- the excitement of watching the hungry Pelicans already dive bombing after fish for breakfast...
- the pleasing patterns of the early sailboats boats working their way up and down the sun-drenched Intracoastal...
- the puffy white clouds and the far-off green horizon of the tropical trees inviting me on.

In what seems like no time, I arrived here at the Fellowship – safe and sound, without (hallelujah!) suffering a flat tire or a crash – ready to take another shower, put on my best starched dress shirt (and a bit of cologne to sweeten the pot!), and busily got about doing the work I so love to do – making sure our building is clean and inviting...going over the service elements one last time...then greeting all of you as you “dribble in”...and finally now leading worship in this wonderful and beautiful space. How blessed I am to serve this congregation, which is comprised (something else I am thankful for) of people who are so routinely kind, appreciative and generous.

And as if all this weren't enough to make someone a grateful, non-complaining human being there is even more for me to be thankful for on this Thanksgiving week of 2011.

When I pause to catalogue the many human relationships (that animate the interesting tapestry of my life), my heart swells with the realization that I have a close circle of family and long-time friends who love and enjoy me...and an even wider circle of acquaintances, co-workers, colleagues, parishioners and others (including countless strangers) who appreciate, respect and enjoy me. In my 62nd year of living, I am held gently, faithfully (and invisibly) in a kind and nurturing web of relationships that is hardly of my own clever making, but is among the greatest of gifts a human being can possess. I am grateful that I do not live my life alone, but rather pass my days in the company of so many charming and interesting and caring souls.

What's more, I, as you, live in a miraculous natural world that – even in these times of climate change and violent swings of weather – is incredibly beautiful, hospitable and charming. Rather amazing, isn't it, that through no merit of our own we find ourselves in a creation adorned with spectacular rainbows and sunsets, soothing rivers and ocean beaches, gentle winds and refreshing, cleansing rain showers, inviting forests, billowing clouds and singing birds. Yes, there are hurricanes, blizzards, tornadoes, tropical storms, alligators, rattlesnakes, mosquitoes and “love bugs” on this planet, but when you take this creation all together, even a pessimist must admit that it is an overwhelmingly hospitable, gracious and pleasing place.

And there is even more for me to be grateful about!

Each day, here in the most abundant country on earth, I have enough food to eat and enough liquid to drink...I have a solid roof over my head at night and plenty of clothing to make each season comfortable...I have reasonably good eyes which permit me to read poetry and see sunsets...I have a nose that allows me to take in all of this creation's intriguing aromas...and ears that (while not as keen as they once were) nonetheless enable me to hear the manifold music of this world... and I have a brain – a reasonable piece of hardware, most of the time connected coherently to my mouth – in ways that allow me to express myself and communicate meaningfully with the world and other persons.

And – worsening arthritis aside – I have legs that carry me wherever I choose...and hands with which I can touch and tend the world...and lips that let me talk and kiss...laugh and smile...and a body that most of the time feels like a happy old friend.

All this is mine...without me particularly earning it... and on this Sunday morning, November 20, 2011, I am quietly but genuinely grateful...grateful for the life that is mine.

Now...nonetheless...with all this cheerful gratitude given voice...don't get me wrong! Like all human beings, I have my share of complaints and caveats about the way things are working or not working out for me in this creation at this time. And I'd be happy, without much urging – on some other occasion, maybe – to painstakingly catalogue those existential gripes for any of you who have the patience or inclination to listen! But for today...this Sunday days before Thanksgiving...I simply want to affirm with full and grateful heart the overarching truth and undeniable reality of my life. All in all, I am blessed...all in all, I have much to be grateful for. Mine is an abundant life in an abundant creation, and I know – deep to my heart this morning – that I am truly a pretty darned lucky guy.

And what about you this Thanksgiving week?

What does your spiritual inventory look like?

When you think about the routine shape and substance of your life – you know...the big picture...taking things all-in-all – how are you feeling about life? And even more important a question: what are some of the everyday aspects and unostentatious elements of your life for which you are personally grateful? I hope that your heart is able to come up with a positive list that at least somewhat resembles mine...for surely we are all blessed, to some degree or another, in countless big and small ways as we make our way through this rich and interesting creation.

This morning, I am offering the fourth sermon in my year-long series on the “Twelve Gates to the City,” which explores 12 distinct spiritual pathways or avenues of human being which I believe will enable you to enter “The Holy City” – the “sacred space” – of your own life. I believe that gratitude – simple, everyday, uncomplicated gratitude for gifts and graces of the life we have been given – is an “attitude of the heart” (a way of seeing and being in the world) – that enables you to lead a life of satisfaction, purpose and peace. This is because gratitude opens and energizes us, it stimulates that “divine traffic” between you and the world which I have talked about in each of the previous sermons in this series as so essential for full living.

I can't imagine any of us being truly satisfied or happy in life here on this earth without a healthy dose of gratitude for the blessings of everyday life. Indeed the great 20th Century British Unitarian minister and writer L.P. Jacks once went as far to say (and I think he's precisely right!), “Religion is primarily an affair of gratitude.” And it was Catholic mystic Thomas Merton who said, “If you manage only one prayer in your life, and that prayer is simply ‘thank you,’ it will be sufficient.”

Actually, I prefer the rather pointed way the same thing is affirmed by my favorite Pogo cartoon character, Porkypine.



Here is a picture of Porkypine with Pogo. In my favorite strip, the turtle character (Churchy Lafemme) is sitting with his friend Porkypine in that leaky little boat of theirs, in that leaky little old Okefenokee swamp, reading a newspaper whose headline blares “Sun to burn out in 30 billion years, ending all life on earth.” In the next panel, Churchy (feeling quite sorry for himself) is crying those big tears of his, saying, “Woe is me...I’m too young to die!” To which in the next panel the ever wise Porkypine remands, “Aw SHUT UP...You’re lucky to be here in the first place!”

As far as I’m spiritually concerned, dear friends, that humorous-but-blunt statement pretty much sums up our existential condition on this planet. No matter what gripes or grievances you might have about how your particular life is going – and who doesn’t have them? – and no matter how long your personal list is of the irritating and unfair ways life doesn’t seem to be singularly devoting itself to your happiness, the truth is that – spiritually speaking at least – difficulties aside, you are pretty lucky just to be here in the first place! Think about it!

Theologian Matthew Fox writes about the spiritual importance of gratitude even in the face of human hardship:

“Gratitude,” he writes, “changes our lives. It fills us with energy and vitality. When I was 12 years old, I had polio and could not walk for 6 months. The doctors could not reassure me I would ever walk again. As it turned out, I did get my legs back. But I learned a lesson in the process that I have never forgotten: don’t take for granted. I had taken my legs for granted – legs that work, legs that run and play ball, legs that take me exactly where I want to go. When my legs returned to me, I was filled with gratitude. Not gratitude for the ‘miracle’ of my legs being healed, but rather gratitude for [my] having legs at all! I was filled with energy,” Fox concludes, “and promised myself that I would not waste my legs for as long as I lived.”

As I thought about this quality of everyday gratitude of the heart that is so essential for spiritual health, satisfaction and happiness, 3 G’s came to mind.

Gratitude. Grudge. Granted.

The first G stands for routinely having or finding gratitude – simple, everyday, heartfelt, life-satisfying appreciation – like the kind I felt this morning as I went about my usual routines. For some people such gratitude comes simply...and gives them energy for getting through all the complications and challenges of the day.

But the second G stands for holding a grudge against life...which is, It seems to me, the polar opposite of having gratitude. Some people I have known over my lifetime seem to specialize in holding grudges...and the worst grudge of all to hold is a grudge against life itself...which means you simply begrudge life for all the ways it seems to be unwilling to singularly devote itself to your personal happiness. Over the years, I have known a handful of human beings who fall victim to this tragic and diminishing spiritual stance...raise your hands if you have ever known anyone like this???

Rather than everyday gratitude, which is an open "gateway" that leads to "The Holy City" of your own life, begrudging life is a dark and shuttered door of the heart that is sealed tight and angry against the outside world and all of its "Divine Traffic." Those who begrudge life wake up every morning and instantly begin cataloguing in their souls all the ways in which "the glass is half empty"...rather than open their eyes and their hearts to all the many satisfying ways in which "the glass is half full."

Let me share a quick joke Garrison Keillor tells which makes this "chip on the shoulder" attitude about life clear. It concerns a grandmother who was walking with her five-year old grandson on the beach, when a rogue wave comes up and grabs the child and sweeps him out to sea. She looks up at the sky, shakes her fist and says, "God, this is unacceptable, unbearable!" But no sooner do those words come out of her mouth, when another rogue wave comes up and deposits the smiling child back at her feet. The Grandmother picks the child up in her arms...looks to the sky and says... "THIS CHILD HAD A HAT!"

Do any of you possibly recognize this kind of spiritual behavior? It's easy to hold a grudge against life and circumstance, for as you all know...things are never really quite good enough in this imperfect world. Broadway lyricist Oscar Hammerstein once wisely wrote:

"I don't believe any of us can enjoy living in this world unless we can accept its imperfection. We must know and admit that we are imperfect, that all other mortals are imperfect, and go in in our imperfect way, making mistakes, and riding out the rough, bewildering, exciting and beautiful storm of life until the day we die."

How easy it is in this life to not accept life's imperfection...and allow that imperfection to make us miserable.

But – and now I arrive at the third G – an even far more dangerous and prevalent spiritual trap – and that stands for taking for granted. We get into the biggest problem with seeing our lives for what they truly are, when we fall victim to taking for granted...taking for granted all the many miracles, kindnesses, and blessings that graciously flow our way out of the simple cornucopia of daily life. Taking for granted is a way of spiritually falling asleep in the richness and meaning of your own days – as Matthew Fox did before he lost the use of his legs. Taking for granted is a kind of sleepwalking...a kind of numbing spiritual passivity that renders us unmindful, and therefore ultimately ungrateful, for the everyday miracle of human being which is – for today at least – ours for the using and enjoying.

Perhaps it is the very ordinary-ness of daily life which makes us susceptible to taking it "for granted." Cynthia Ozick, in her essay "The Riddle of the Ordinary" points out how we human beings quite naturally often fail to have or express gratitude for life's ordinary blessings.

"The ordinary," she writes, "by making itself so noticeable (it is around us all the time) has gotten itself in a bad [spiritual] fix with us: we hardly ever notice it. The Ordinary, simply by being so ordinary, tends to make us ignorant or neglectful. When something does not insist on being noticed, when we aren't grabbed by the collar or struck on [the side of] the

skull by a presence or an event, we take for granted the very things that most deserve our gratitude. And this is the chief and deepest point concerning the Ordinary; that it does deserve our gratitude. The ordinary," she concludes, "is above all what is expected, and what is expected is not often thought of as a gift."

I like the way my colleague Roy Phillips once put it in a newsletter column addressed to the members of the congregation he served:

"This is it! This is the day you have been waiting for. If my words come to you when you are down in the dumps, you may ask, 'What's so special about today?' We notice the special-ness of this day when we consider the imaginable opposite: no day – that is un-life, non-being, death. [Right now] your chest rises and falls; air streams in and out of your lungs, blood courses through your veins – you are aware, you are alive. But there is this that I'm worried about; there's that which troubles me, there are these things going on today which keep me from enjoying myself, my world, other people...life. I do not want to be hard on you," Phillips continues, "yet I must say it. If you plan to wait to live fully until a day comes when there are no obstacles, no hardships, then you will wait past your time for waiting. Life is to be lived and enjoyed now – in this time, right now, in the midst of all the [imperfection] and troublesome circumstances. This is it. This is the day you have been waiting for."

Today is November 20th, four days before Thanksgiving day, 2011. Today (yeah, I know, it's a terrible cliché, but it's true) today is the first day of the rest of your life. And this is the day you have been waiting for. Being grateful...sincerely grateful, for the chance we have been given to hang around this rich and interesting creation for awhile...is a gateway to the holy, satisfying depths of your life. And the good news – for all of us as we individually try to cope with life's many inevitable diminishment, disappointments and difficulties – the good news is that gratitude for the gift of being can be cultivated in the human heart. Every day, you are quite free as an independent spiritual agent in this world to reflect on your life, and open yourself to the many small wonders, the riches that are always, always there to bless you....to enjoy waking up...smelling the coffee...eating your breakfast...reading the newspaper...writing e-mail to your grandkids...taking a walk on the beach ...working at something you care about...and so on until you crawl into bed at night and cast yourself back to sleep.

In the Gospel of Thomas, (one of the ancient narratives about the life of Jesus that did not make it into the final collection of writings that we now call *The Bible*, it is reported that one of the disciples asked: "Jesus, when will the Kingdom of God come?" And Jesus responded... "It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, 'Look here,' or 'Look there,' ...rather the kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it."

Jesus, of course, was right. The kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth – it is available to us all – and yet people do not see it. If you take your life for granted – or worse if you begrudge life for not devoting itself to your imagined happiness – you will not see the holy kingdom that is so richly spread out upon the earth before you. And if you do not see it, it will be unable to bless you, sustain you, and make your days both purposefully and glad. This Thanksgiving week, dear friends, hold this truth close to your hearts. We are saved from both despair and dullness of heart when we quietly cultivate gratitude for the simple blessings in our everyday lives...when we refuse to begrudge life, or take the great gift of life for granted. We are saved when – day after day – we quietly whisper in our own hearts, "Thank You"... "Thank You."

Amen.