

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
 “Radical Gratitude”
 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore November 23, 2008

Homily

The Rev. Galen Guengerich, senior minister in All Souls, New York City, identified something really important for the future of Unitarian Universalism in his sermon on October 15, 2006. Sections of that sermon were reproduced in the Spring 2007 UU World issue that brought it to my attention. Here is what he said that resonated deeply with me and inspired me to bring it to you today:

Unless our [Unitarian Universalist] faith is mere intellectual affectation ... the defining element of our faith must be a daily practice of some kind. What kind of practice? For Jews, the defining discipline is obedience: To be a faithful Jew is to obey the commands of God. For Christians, the defining discipline is love: To be a faithful Christian is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. For Muslims, the defining discipline is submission: To be a faithful Muslim is to submit to the will of Allah.

And what of us? What should be our defining religious discipline? While obedience, love, and even submission each play a vital role in the life of faith, my current conviction is that our defining discipline should be gratitude.

Gratitude! Gratitude as the Unitarian Universalist *core* spiritual practice! Wow. What do you think about it? Guengerich continues:

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.

I think he’s got something here worth our attention. I find gratitude can gently reintroduce me to my dependence on the biosphere and on others. Gratitude is an innate feeling response to being deeply aware of my participation in the interconnected web of existence of which I am a part. The more widely connected I feel to that web, the more whole and satisfied I feel. My challenge is to open my awareness up to the many ways I am both supported by and supportive of the web of existence -- a thin, fragile bubble around this planet I did not make, yet on which I am completely dependent.

Suggesting gratitude be the central spiritual practice of Unitarian Universalism is, well, a bit of departure from our rugged individualistic approach to religion. I don't believe gratitude is an automatic response for most of us to thinking about being dependent. More often we react to our dependence with offense.

When we were born, we were completely dependent on our caregivers who nursed us, kept us warm and dry, and helped us with gas in our stomachs by burping us. But even the best caregiver couldn't take care of our every want and need at every moment of the day and night. There is no way to prevent babies from getting frustrated, upset and angry. As the infant matures, it wants independence. I know I did. Some of my first words were, "Do myself!" From the time of taking our first steps, we've been trying to escape our dependency status.

This is particularly true of Unitarian Universalists. We don't want to be dependent on any authority outside ourselves for our religion. We don't trust authority. Many have felt betrayed by religious leaders. We want to figure out our religion by ourselves thank you!

The Buddha so keenly tuned in to this dissatisfaction with our dependence and vulnerability that he gave it a name: Dukkha. Not only are we dependent on the biosphere and each other, we are dependent on bodies that regularly break down in one way or another, eventually wear out and fail completely leading to death. There is so much unpleasantness built into the human condition, it seems almost insulting to focus on gratitude.

Unfortunately, the more we learn about the effects of our andro-centric approach to domination of the biosphere, the more we realize it is unsustainable and profoundly destructive. Every corner of our planet is groaning with the burden of supporting our lifestyle. Like a giant mouth, we gobble up everything in our path and enslave others to create the lifestyle we enjoy. These patterns of consumption and exploitation are rooted in an unwillingness to recognize our dependence and respond. World consumption patterns are even more deeply rooted in a lack of connection and gratitude.

Focusing on gratitude though, can actually begin to turn the tide of dissatisfaction and ignorance even while reconnecting with our dependencies. Reconnecting to our dependencies turns out to be useful as it *increases our appreciation* of our vulnerability to them. Our greater appreciation *sensitizes* us to these dependencies and can motivate us to change those relationships.

Gratitude is a natural, organic response to the core Unitarian Universalist spiritual experience of awe as we behold the wonders of the natural world. In witnessing the Milky Way galaxy on a clear, moonless night, sensing the radiance of flowers on a cool, damp summer morning, learning about the amazing intricacies of the cell or the many systems in our bodies that support life, marveling at the beauty of mathematical formulae, all these experiences inspire a thankful feeling of exhilaration being a conscious participant in existence. Whatever the source of all this, our intuition tells us it is good and worthy of our affirmation and support. We

are not focused on figuring out how to escape the human condition, we are interested in how to support its growth, development and abundance. In Guengrich's words, "A sense of awe and a sense of obligation, religion's basic impulses, are both experiences of transcendence, of being part of something much larger than ourselves."

This universe, this galaxy, this solar system, this planet, *this* is our home.
 We are very grateful to be here.
 We want others to enjoy this gift too.

And yet, we forget those experiences of awe and wonder. We forget about our obligation to support and share the gift of life with others. We are in need of a practice, a discipline if you will, of remembering our gratitude.

How can gratitude become a discipline? The Rev. Linda Hoddy, minister in Saratoga Springs, integrates gratitude into her spiritual practice. Every day, before going to bed, she writes down five things for which she is grateful. I've been reflecting on that practice this week and all the things I am grateful for.

At the top of my gratitude list is being welcomed, as a free seeker of truth and meaning, to serve you as your minister. Almost ten years ago, you were willing to give a young, relatively inexperienced minister serving a small congregation in Florida a chance to inspire your growth and development. You were willing to commission me to respond morally and ethically to the troubles here in the larger community. You trusted me to sustain and nurture this religious community. Although any ministry has its ups and downs, I don't ever walk through these doors to speak to you without a sense of the great privilege and the awesome responsibility you have given me. For this I am grateful, grateful in a way that only seems to deepen over the years.

Gratitude can also be a powerful communal practice. Like love, when shared you end up with more of it than when you started. Notice if you feel more warmly to me after hearing about my gratitude for and to this congregation. On one level, the key component that comes up again and again in our Sunday morning service is gratitude. Gratitude can often be found in the hymns, the sermon, in Joys and Sorrows, in the offering, even the announcements!

On another level, we've been talking around an even bigger theological concept, giving thanks to God. The followers of most other religions develop their feeling of gratitude this way and it works for them. For many people here, however, giving thanks to God shuts down their access to gratitude.

This is one of the big struggles going on in Unitarian Universalism today. Many of our ministers (and I include myself) are actively attempting to move our members from an exclusive approach to religion, to an intimate appreciation of the diversity of ways of cultivating a sense of wonder, awe and gratitude. We want to move people into their hearts, without betraying their heads, for the sake of everyone's well being.

One of the ways to cross this religious divide is through ritual authentic to this community. In a few moments, we'll be beginning the tenth enactment of this yearly ritual of thanksgiving known as "corn muffin communion." I've adapted it from another Unitarian Universalist congregation and tried to make it ours. I bake the muffins myself using the best and healthiest ingredients from the Honest Weight Coop.

Today, I encourage you to receive this corn muffin communion as a ritual way for us to touch inwardly the depths of our gratitude. As you mindfully participate in the ritual, I encourage you to reflect quietly on your many sources of gratitude in the religious or secular language that works for you. As we savor our muffin, may we all taste and develop a taste for gratitude!

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(note that poetry that was part of this service has been removed to avoid copyright violations. They can be heard as part of the mp3 version of the service)