

It Could Be Gorgeous

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 9, 2025

For one blessed month while living at a Quaker retreat center, I filled my mornings with the art of gardening. Dark green spinach leaves peeked through the hard, dry earth. Decomposing compost hid in a corner of the garden remained ready to feed the vegetables. Together, we harvested each evening's meal. At other times I sat in hard, wooden chairs, eyes closed and breath calm and mind quieted for an extended period of meditation. My sabbatical was filled with myriad and perhaps tangential experiences, yet one thing that remained constant was my journal, pink, blue, and floral. I held a small notebook in my purse for each of those four months, writing down phases and meditations and quotes that spoke to my spirit. One quote came from the book *Moloka'i*, a tale of young children facing devastating leprosy. Quote, "There is beauty even in the least beautiful of things."¹ A second quote arose as I sat around a lunch table at the retreat center, the taste of fresh salad on my tongue, speaking to my fellow sojourners. The quote reads, "it could be awful, but it could be gorgeous." To me, these quotes are powerfully applicable to this month's theme: gratitude. Even in the least beautiful of things – illness, heartache, addiction – gratitude can create beauty. Any experience could be awful, there are innumerable hardships we each inevitably face but if met with gratitude, it could be gorgeous. We can find strength, wisdom, compassion, and hope.

Who among us has not faced hardship and suffering? Through illnesses our body aches. Addiction tears at our spirits. Loss breaks our hearts. Relationships end and we feel broken. Politics inundate us with fear and anxiety. I'm sure you can add to the litany of what breaks us. I offer one vignette, however, that of my mother. My grandmother was facing old age and the ailments that accompany it. My stepfather suffered with end-stage dementia and the corresponding afflictions he faced. These ailing and aging beloveds both lived with my mother at the same time as she tended to them with great tenderness. Serving as a primary

¹ *Moloka'i* by Alan Brennert pg. 82

care giver, she was often exhausted and overwhelmed. And while experiencing these overlapping difficulties, how does one find strength and perseverance? Gratitude. “It could be awful, but it could be gorgeous.” Which will you see?

Both my stepfather and grandmother quickly deteriorated with my mother’s care as she worked alongside hospice to tend to them in her home. And yet, after talking to her about this experience that drained her body, mind, and spirit, she offered gratitude. Through this intimate time with her mother, she felt closer to her than she ever had. Through these times of compassion and care, she found new ways to connect to her husband of many years. Through caretaking she could offer a unique and profound love, one that is only evoked in draining yet sacred times as exemplified in this simple yet profound story. What drained the body led to gratitude and a deep, profound love.

Author David Mezzapelle writes of a dichotomy – the seemingly good in contrast with the seemingly bad; and how we need to find gratitude for each.² Without gratitude, we will never be satisfied with what we have and who we are. Opportunities for appreciation are readily available, no matter how much hurt we hold inside. There are plentiful days throughout the seasons when the sun warms the air as clouds slowly take shape and pass through the light blue sky. When a stranger on a crowded street offers us unexpected kindness. There is beauty and awe all around us – even that which is entirely unexpected, even that which is found in our most broken of times – that is deserving of our appreciation as we build up all that is needed to endure and carry on.

We are called to be truly grateful for that which we understand to be a failure or a misstep or a regret. Perhaps we misguidedly ended a relationship or evoked harsh words in an unnecessary argument. It is these encounters through which we foster wisdom. Mezzapelle writes that these are the experiences through which we accumulate the perseverance we mentioned.³ When

² From *Soul Matters 2025-2026 Worship Archive*

³ *ibid*

love deepens. When we create beauty. What we might understand to be our greatest strengths – compassion or unconditional love or resiliency – often come, not from days and months of tranquility and beauty – but of those shrouded in darkness and hopelessness. That is the human condition. “There is beauty even in the least beautiful of things.”

If we can be grateful for hardships, can we take this one step further to be grateful for all that is? The finite and the infinite, the animate and the inanimate, the sacred and the profane, the nature made and the human made? There are precious, imperfect blessings all around us – a butterfly with a broken wing. And we can train ourselves to search for gratitude and not train our minds to focus on the bad. We wake up at 4am when our alarm clock is set for 7. This occurrence can cause us to settle in frustration and impatience that only serves to harm us. Or can we revel in the opportunity to see the sunrise – beautiful reds and oranges and pinks peeking over the horizon that we often miss in our slumber. I think of hiking with my beloved husband Eric. Many of the trails we hike inevitably have a steep incline, lined with trees as we clumsily clamber over rocks. On my off days, I get caught up in what I deem misery of exhaustion and proceed uphill rather cranky. It is at moments like this where my husband touches my arm, points to the distance, and invites me into wonder at a view that we would have missed if we had not ascended the hill. I had a choice. For my strenuous uphill climb, I chose gratitude.

I always find it breathtaking to think of the wild improbability of our very existence. How profoundly fine-tuned the universe is for life. How exploding stars lightyears away create carbon which is the source of all life. How consciousness even began – a great and profound mystery for theologians and scientists alike. Is it biology? Is it God? How single celled organisms evolved and evolved into dinosaurs until an asteroid miraculously hit which led to just who we are today. What if our parents had never met? If our great, great, great grandparents had never met? It is astounding! In this way, be grateful for each and every breath you take. Be grateful for the sky and the wind and the clouds. For what you see or hear or smell or touch or taste. For tears of lament and tears of joy. Be grateful for it all.

I want to reflect on ancient teachings of the Jewish faith. Jewish thought offers that it is easy to be dissatisfied and focus on what one does not have; what we lack. Excessive monetary gains, all things tangible and frivolous. True faith is to revel, instead, in what we do have, which allows us to acknowledge that our lives are filled with innumerable blessings. “Woven into thousands of years of Jewish thought,” writes Hanan Harchol and Rabbi Leora Kaye, “is the overriding idea that taking time to recognize what you have in life is one of the uniquely beneficial rituals we can undertake.”⁴ It makes sacred, holy, and blessed each opportunity to offer appreciation, to the animate or the inanimate.

Rabbi Kerry Olitzky and Daniel Judson write, “There is a blessing for almost everything in Judaism.” Judson and Rabbi Olitzky elaborate on this statement with a litany of examples, ranging from waking up to eating to studying faith to hearing of someone’s death. Rabbi Olitzky elaborates, “In the Talmud, one Rabbi instructs us to recite one hundred blessings throughout the day.”⁵ If we dissect this statement mathematically, we cannot possibly merely be grateful for the noticeably life-giving or opportunities for wisdom, but of the mundane and monotonous. For a bowl of cereal, a half-full tank of gas, the space heater that I place, strategically, right beside the desk from which I write this sermon. How profound is this? According to Hassidic philosophy, saying a blessing over an ordinary activity or object creates a bridge between heaven and earth. Quote, “Jewish tradition encourages a daily practice of reciting blessings of thanksgiving to God for the goodness in our lives each day.”

As a Unitarian Universalist, I offer, thank Goddess. Thank spirit of life. Thank stardust. Thank love. Thank all that is divine for dead leaves that turn red, for a particularly good dinner, for a new toothbrush. Thank the sacred for the ability to taste chocolate, for a comfortable mattress. How can this theology transform us? Appreciation is not only fulfilling, but it becomes a true and basic tenet of any spiritual life. It becomes a tenet to be practiced by those

⁴ “Gratitude: What Does Judaism Teach Us?” by Hanan Harchol and Rabbi Leora Kaye

⁵ “Jewish Ritual” by Rabbi Kerry Olitzky and Daniel Judson

of any faith tradition. We are guided in our daily living through an endless spiritual practice of gratitude. What of this moment? What of these spiritual sojourners? What of these pews and stained-glass windows and silence and candles and prayers and music? What a blessing!

So, tenderly hold these sacred tenets in your spirits. Know the blessing of the sun and the moon and the sky. Live, in this practice, as a person of faith, a person who embodies spirituality. Make your faith life-giving. Revel in the wild improbability that your heart beats and lungs breath for this is a blessing above all others, from which no others could be known. Know, when steeped in hardship that with gratitude “it could be awful, but it could be gorgeous.” That “There is beauty even in the least beautiful of things.” And that in that beauty we find appreciation and gratitude and as such we deeply know the power of hope and love and compassion and strength. Bring this with you to the world, hold this in your very being, grasp it in the spark within, hold this in the divinity of your spirit, this power of gratitude. Hardship and suffering are inevitable in this forever finite realm; we each mourn and face fear and face anger and feel destitute and get ill. Yet just as universal is the opportunity to offer gratitude for the joyful and the sorrowful, the celebratory and the heart breaking, the broken and the hopeful. So may we leave this sacred and hallowed space with gratitude in our hearts and spirits and minds, ready to meet this day and every day in joy and in celebration and in love and in spirituality and in faith.

May it be so, and Amen.