

## **The Gift of Gratitude**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 19, 2023**

In my early days of regular prayer practice, I focused on prayers of petition – please heal, please guide, please intervene. While this is important to many prayers and meditations, and still is an intimate piece of my own spiritual practice, I gradually began to reorient my conversation with my sacred. I began – I begin – with a moment of gratitude. Thank you for the gift of life. Thank you for this earth of small and grand wonders. Thank you for your love, your companionship, your presence. While this is my own theology, I believe we can each converse with all that is greater than ourselves in gratitude for awe, for love, for beauty. In framing my prayer for that which I am grateful, my relationship with the holy has changed – my faith grew deeper. I no longer engage with an entity solely to respond to my broken heart but converse with one who has already given. My new interaction allowed me to focus, not only on wants, but on blessings – that of the awe of nature, of red and orange fall leaves, that of divine guidance and connection, that of the wonder that life exists at all. Framing interactions in gratitude is not simply a practice for prayer, but something we can carry into each of our days. Instead of simply focusing on receiving, we can offer profound thanks for that of which we already have.

This month we have focused on the spiritual practices that accompany generosity. Generosity and gratitude are, in many ways, cyclical. Gratitude, a spirit of abundant thanks, is the foundation of each act of generosity. A true act of generosity is a practice of relinquishment. We are unable to meaningfully relinquish that which we have unless we hold it treasured in our hearts – unless we are grateful for it.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, when someone generously offers us a gift, it is incomplete – it is meaningless – unless received with gratitude. If received with blatant indifference, with judgment, with carelessness, with rejection – this is not a gift at all – and the

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<sup>1</sup> “As If There is Nothing to Lose” by Sallie Jiko Tisdale

giver knows this. Furthermore, the act of giving is a true wonder. If we hold on with a tight fist to that which we have – the tangible, and that of the spirit – we deny ourselves that basic gift.

I offer a narrative of one who, in their young adult years, had very little, while later in life acquired money, success, and prestige – pulled from author Sallie Tisdale. When was our protagonist most grateful? During those early times when each mundane object – each piece of clothing, for example – was a gift, when each simple sandwich was an opportunity for celebration, when there no distractions for basking in gratitude and delight for all those profoundly simple gifts she was presented with – she was most grateful when she was poor. Each item mattered and was received graciously. When surrounded by small wonders, giving was easy. She volunteered; she shared what little she had with her friends. And yet money and prestige entered her life. She offers a brief narrative, and I elaborate with sentiments I have witnessed in my own life. She began to grasp on to that which she acquired through wealth - cars, for example, or other material goods – her fists held tightly closed – slipping into a lifestyle of greed. Poverty offered gifts in abundance, while wealth led to a selfish outlook, grasping on to material objects as they became possessions to be protected from others.<sup>2</sup> No matter how many goods one has, if centered in this mindset, they are held not as gifts to be treasured and shared, but as items to be tied to. How are we changed when a sandwich becomes a feast, when each article of clothing is held in gracious gratitude. When we celebrate abundance, we can give in abundance. And when we give in abundance, we receive in abundance. It becomes much more difficult to take life for granted. It becomes much easier to see oneself as surrounded by riches. We say thank you, thank you, thank you. Otherwise, we foster isolation, anxiety, self-centeredness, and greed.

Mary Olive wrote, “Love still as once you loved, deeply and without patience. Let God and the world know you are grateful. That the gift has been given.”<sup>3</sup> What more is there to life than a greater essence and the earth we inhabit? What can we graciously receive, each day, each

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<sup>2</sup> “As If There is Nothing to Lose” by Sallie Jiko Tisdale

<sup>3</sup> “The Gift” by Mary Oliver

hour, each moment – entirely altering our relationship with life and all that is? Let God and the world know you are grateful. I began in my reflection this morning with my own practice of prayer – yet barely scratched the surface of what the divine offers, whether understood as nature, or an entity in the sky. May we find a gift in knowing that there is something far greater than ourselves inherent in all that was and all that will be. May we offer gratitude for goodness and beauty. For the wild improbability that is life. For the capacity to feel and engage with awe. To our sacred we offer thank you, thank you. May we offer gratitude to the world – for wonders both big and small – for mountains and oceans, for butterflies and ladybugs. For cycles of birth, death, and decay, of summer to fall to winter, that remind us of the cycles of joy and sorrow inherent in any life. Trees offer flowers, birds sing at dawn, the night is peppered with stars, the sky is as blue as an eggshell. What of the animals she produces? What of the people she produces? Parents, siblings, mentors, friends. May we be surrounded – not by the mundane – but by true, sacred treasures. The gift is given if we graciously receive it. The more we offer thanks, the more we notice, the more beauty there is in the world, and the more we receive.

I reflect on another poem – the sentiments offered by Ross Gay. “You are the air of the now and gone ... All you love will return to dust, and will meet you there.” We will die, those we love will die, we will all return to dust, we will lose that consciousness, faith, and reasoning that ties us to our bodily selves. And yet, as Gay writes, “curl your toes into the grass, watch the cloud ascending from your lips. Walk through the garden’s dormant splendor.”<sup>4</sup> We are called to reflect upon the finitude of life as a catalyst to connect to beauty and gratitude. Death could potentially tie us to fear, anxiety, or hopelessness when, alternatively, we can face it by finding more delight in the grass beneath our toes – those wondrous things offered in this fleeting time during which we are conversing, breathing, and loving. Life is so very precious. Life is fleeting. Life is wildly improbable. And that improbability? May that tie us to a deep gratitude as well – grateful that we are even here to experience life. In reflecting on death, we note that we need gratitude the most when life is hardest to bear. When faced with a beloved’s death, with illness,

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<sup>4</sup> “Thank You” by Ross Gay

with oppression. That is when we are called to see the breath leaving our mouths as if a cloud, to note the abundance of colors in fall's leaves, the embrace of a beloved, the smile on a child's lips. Why? Gratitude and abundant beauty keep us from despair, from solitude, from abandonment, from hopelessness. It reminds us that the world is a kind, generous, beautiful place. We are part of an expansive, interconnected network of all that is. Never abandoned but held in eternal love.

I think of a day both sorrowful and joyous – when my family gathered to spread my grandfather's ashes. He was an avid boater and loved the open sea, so we climbed into his beloved boat, ashes in hand. We were faced with death, and yet as the tears streamed down my face what I remember is the beauty of the warm breeze, the bright blue of the water, the loving companionship of my cousins, aunts, sister, and mother. It was a celebration of life – that veil between life and death held thin as I connected to all I hold holy, and to the great, beautiful world. We were not lacking that day, but held in the abundance of love, nature, and compassion. We shared with one other – laughter, tears, precious memories. In giving and receiving we both honored his life and facilitated our own healing. We met death with beauty; we met despondency with the gift of familial bonds. In that day, in that moment, I was wanting of nothing more than those simple joys. Together, we returned his ashes to all that is, dust to dust. And yet we were held, that day, in gratitude.

And so today in this space made holy by our presence we are invited into a time of both gratitude and generosity. Sharing food has bound society together for millennia, gathering for meals, generously offering all we have, and gratefully receiving all that has been given. The foods we bring today not only offer sustenance but story – story that imbues each dish with deeper meaning. We share the recipes of our ancestors, the focal point of feasts, that which ties us to the simple days of childhood. Let us thank the laden farmlands for providing these grains, let us thank the ancestors for having created these special dishes, and may we thank each other for love and companionship. May we, in connecting with all this bread means to us,

share with a feeling of abundance. May we give, and may we receive, saying thank you, thank you, thank you.

May it be so, and Amen.