

## **The Heart's Memory**

**By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 24, 2024**

Today, we acknowledge the annual celebration of Thanksgiving. It is a yearly remembrance of a story celebrated, today, however imperfectly, as a time of abundance and friendship and nourishment. In reflecting upon the origins of such a day, we wrestle with opposing tales. There is the commonly shared account of two groups – pilgrims and the indigenous peoples – “reaching across race and culture”<sup>1</sup> to celebrate the abundance of a great harvest with one another. A story of friendship, generosity, equality, and comradeship. It’s a story that centers the goodness of the Europeans amidst a time of displacement and violence. There is the indigenous narrative of this episode as well, as but a brief moment of peace between warfare, a break before the loss of independence, and a pause before a looting of their land. It is a reminder to this day of the impacts of colonization. Today we lift up the wisdom not of the former, but of the latter. In this moment of thanksgiving, we elevate the narrative not of the practice of dominance of the Europeans, but the indigenous practice of generosity. We lift up not the European belief of dominion, but the indigenous teachings of gratitude. We are guided today by the insights and wisdom of peoples carried through hundreds of generations of wise and loving ancestors, centering in this importance of gratitude. May we begin by simply offering thanks for the land we reside upon that was tilled and worshiped and tended to by generations these indigenous peoples.

Gratitude rests humbly as an underlying driver of indigenous culture: offering sincere thanks, in daily life, for the earth, for the elements, for the spirit world where our ancestors reside, for interdependence or appreciation for one another. Celebrated in the ritual of dance or the sacred act of gift giving, gratitude is honored, not as a momentary or periodic sentiment, however sincere, but a way of living, deeply engrained in culture and ideology and meaning making. In these blessed and wise cultures, gratitude for the natural world is held paramount, understood as gifts offered by all things residing in this sacred realm. I pause to lift up a piece of

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<sup>1</sup> *The New York Times* “The Horrible History of Thanksgiving” by Charles M. Blow

an indigenous Thanksgiving Address, created and offered by the Haudenosaunee tribe, deep and profound sentiments of gratitude for the abundance around and beyond us – a message of peace and appreciation for all that is. The stars that, quote, “spread across the sky like jewelry ... helping the Moon to light the darkness and bringing dew to the gardens and growing things.” The birds of whom, quote, “The Creator gave ... beautiful songs. Each day they remind us to enjoy and appreciate life.” How beautiful is it to thank the stars for dew, the birds for joy? To pause, furthermore, in appreciation for the trees that offer shelter, the winds that purify the air, the sun that brings with it the light of day.<sup>2</sup> The Thanksgiving Address is lyrical its appreciation for life’s abundance.

As mentioned above, all of life is an act of gratitude, and in reflecting upon of this ingrained belief of continuous of thanksgiving, two sentiments resonated with me. There is that gratitude for the multitude of small and mundane things, enriching our lives by deeply appreciating a cup of coffee, a moment to pause and breath, or the wind that touches our cheeks. There is also an opportunity to appreciate that of which may otherwise cause us distress. Offering gratitude for anger as an indicator of the passion we hold deep within or thanking a red light for a lesson in patience. This is a life of beauty, awe, wonder, and an appreciation that lifts and guides the spirit.

In addition to this sentiment of continuous gratitude, we lift up the wisdom of Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, who notes that a culture of ingrained gratitude is likewise one of reciprocity. As such, we are bound to one another in “reciprocal relationship,” gifts flowing generously from one being to the next, from plant to plant, from person to vegetation; a reciprocity of all that lives and resides in this finite realm.<sup>3</sup> As you, delicate flower, offer me beauty, I offer you, in response, abundant joy. As you, dear husband, offer me love, I offer you support and unconditional compassion. As you, beloved child, offer me trust and delight, may I offer you protection and guidance in each of your days. In receiving beauty and love and

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<sup>2</sup> Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address

<sup>3</sup> *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer

childlike trust with gratitude, we offer a piece of ourselves in return – joy and compassion and the guidance of the elders.

I am reminded of a beautiful French proverb, “Gratitude is the heart's memory.”<sup>4</sup> When we truly appreciate all that is life-giving and beautiful, no matter whether profound or mundane, it’s not simply stored in our minds, held superficially and in a transient manner of the intellect. It’s held deeply in our hearts, or perhaps what we would term spirit or soul. In holding this gratitude within our very beings, we cherish this goodness throughout any trials and tribulations – it offers a reminder of the wonder and awe of gratitude when we may be lost in distress or despair. As such gratitude becomes a spiritual practice – it tends to our souls and becomes a gift from the divine, offering the same calm and peace and introspection and faith associated with prayer or meditation or song or worship. “Gratitude is the heart's memory.”

In reflecting in preparation for this sermon, I contemplated my own practices gratitude. In doing so I had to consider what gratitude meant to me. It’s that awe of beauty, of a warmth in my heart, a feeling of wholeness and completion, an acknowledgment of goodness or kindness or inspiration, of a deep desire to show appreciation in return. What saturates with great beauty my heart, mind, and soul? I hold three above the rest: nature, faith, and love. Not only does nature offer me wonder and awe and a connection to all I hold divine, but it mirrors to me those inevitable cycles of life, of birth and death, of joy and sorrow. Held with deep appreciation my faith guides me in each of my days towards goodness and compassion and meaning making and purpose. And love – that which offers me life-giving relationships that tend to my heart and spirit. That which calls me to that inherent worthiness in all. That which I pray guides the world in response to prevailing hate and violence. I am so very grateful for love.

This month we focus on repair, and in our reflections this morning, we are offered healing in abundance. When paused in appreciation we intentionally focus on goodness and joy and beauty, not despair and hardship and hopelessness, reframing where we place our attention on

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<sup>4</sup> French philosopher Jean-Baptiste Massieu.

our brief time in this fleeting life; on where our energy lies. Monotony, boredom, distress, and inner hardship slip away from consciousness as our lives are permeated with small blessings and sacred, hidden treasures. Goodness, love, and friendship fill our conscious hours as at night we pause in a time of thanksgiving. Each moment becomes a gift. We are immersed in the selfless generosity of our blessed mother earth. The stars offering dew, the birds sharing joy and delight.

“Every time I see beauty around me, I appreciate what I am seeing, and simultaneously I have this sense of appreciation—for being alive to have this particular moment,”<sup>5</sup> writes author Jean Shinoda Bolen. A wonder at being alive in any particular moment. How can we embody such a sentiment, as everyday consciousness becomes a gift, and our lives are permeated with grace and blessings held in abundance? Initially I envisioned one of the most beautiful sunsets I had ever seen. My husband and I reached an overlook midway through a hike permeated with rocks to clamor over, with trees stretching towards the distant sky, deer grazing in nearby underbrush. We sat among a field of boulders, pausing amidst the changing colors of the cloudless sky, blue to orange to pick as the distant sun slipped quietly into the horizon and the deep, dark night began to blanket us as stars peeked through the atmosphere. That moment was a blessing – imbued with a true appreciation for being alive as the wonder and awe of nature saturated my very spirit. But in pausing with my fingers on the keyboard, another belief passed through my mind – the wild improbability that we are even alive. There is such a profoundly minute chance that we were ever even offered this blessed, sacred, and holy chance to exist as mortal beings in a finite realm. As such, each and every moment – sunsets, arguments, lunchtime, work – becomes a profound wonder as we take a moment to reflect upon the vast and incomprehensible mystery of it all. May we delight in and offer gratitude of all of creation – unknowable, unintelligible, mysterious, and awesome.

The more open we are towards gratitude, the more day-to-day blessings we encounter. When we perceive delights all around us, fall leaves, crisp air, the taste of apples on our tongues,

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<sup>5</sup> Quote Jean Shinoda Bolen

wonder and awe naturally emanate from our spirits, rippling out to all our senses as we see and hear and smell and touch that which elicits deep gratitude. The mundane becomes a blessing - weather, fruit, and a warm sweater - the typical is a gift. Gratitude emanating from our spirits profoundly affects our worldview as our philosophy of life becomes one of appreciating all the hidden gifts and our conception of the world is one of profound and unceasing natural beauty and awe. All of who we are is changed in this practice.

And worldview to me runs parallel to considering what sentiments allow for a full, meaningful, purposeful life. Monk and author David Steidl-Rast offers these reflections on a blessed life: it is to love with all of our hearts and being. It is to let our lives be guided by surprise – each act of goodness or love received with unexpected and gleeful delight. It is to offer praise, to lift up in others their unique compassion or talents or kindness. And it is to be grateful – perhaps that is paramount.<sup>6</sup> To appreciate each and every moment as one of a blessed gift. So, as we work towards a grateful life, may we likewise center those beautiful offerings of love and surprise and praise. May we live a blessed, meaningful, and purposeful life.

What can we invite into our lives by receiving it with gratitude? What gifts do we welcome to our consciousness when we encounter a blessed interaction not with indifference, apathy, or disregard, but with true, meaningful, and profound gratitude? When we encounter compassion may we offer sincere appreciation. When we experience wisdom, may we say, thank you, thank you for this gift. When we meet joy, may we offer profound thanksgiving, as our lives are enriched and enhanced and refined. We become a being not of anger or anxiety or jealousy but one of hope and peace and love, as we mirror the blessings we are offered.

So may we settle into the gratitude of this day. This day not of honoring European dominance and dominion but of commemorating indigenous generosity and gratitude. Of thanking this land that has been tilled and worshiped, the hands that harvested grains and prepared our meals, the sun that fed the wheat and the water that is the source of all life. For today we

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<sup>6</sup> Quote David Steidl-Rast

celebrate an abundance of gifts as fields of grain became the food that many of us carry in our hands. We offer gratitude for the mixing and baking that turned raw crops into delicious bread. And we offer thanksgiving for the stories that passed through the generations that we will share shortly. Today is a day to lift up thanksgiving in abundance as we share in nourishment, companionship, storytelling, and faith.

May it be so, and Amen