

“THE GRATITUDE GRINCH”
A sermon by Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Reading

“You Reading This, Be Ready” by William Stafford
Starting here, what do you want to remember?
How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?
What scent of old wood hovers, what softened
sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world
than the breathing respect that you carry
wherever you go right now? Are you waiting
for time to show you some better thoughts?

When you turn around, starting here, lift this
new glimpse that you found; carry into evening
all that you want from this day. This interval you spent
reading or hearing this, keep it for life -

What can anyone give you greater than now,
starting here, right in this room, when you turn around?

Sermon

The year after we got married, Amy and I went on one of our favorite vacations. Portland, Oregon in the summer is just about as good as it gets. We had long conversations on my parents’ deck, often continuing through the dusk, while their carefully-tended garden faded into the soft dark. Our days were spent revisiting the haunts of my childhood and adolescence with my best friend, and discovering new places that quickly felt like old favorites.

Since our trip happened to coincide with my first wedding anniversary and since Google told me that the corresponding gift for a one-year anniversary is paper, I demanded from my beloved something made of it. Being practical (or unsentimental, depending on how you look at it), she invited me to select a present for myself. I chose a bright orange notebook, small and square. I was now the proud possessor of a Gratitude Journal.

And there was much to stir my sense of thankfulness. I had a great partner. I was footloose and fancy free, basking in time off. Life was sweet because I was happy. I’d never thought

much about the distinction between happiness and gratitude (more on that later!) but I was full of resolve to appreciate how much fun I was having being alive. I solemnly promised myself that I would journal about gratitude every day.

For a long while, I kept my vow faithfully, rarely ending a day without spending a few thoughtful quiet moments, pen in hand, with my journal. But eventually even the memory of vacation faded. I hadn't yet worked out what I'm realizing this month as we tackle grace as our learning and worship theme, which is that if grace is that hard to define state of experiencing favor or blessing, then I am always a potential witness to it.

I got busy and it made me a little detached from the joy of my gratitude journal. I skipped writing in it for a day, here and there...which led to a week, and then two weeks. And that stupid cheerful book was just lying on my bedside table indicting me for not oozing gratitude all the darn time. I thought about shoving it under the bed but that seemed like it would just give it the satisfaction it wanted. To my horror, I realized that I had become the Gratitude Grinch.

At the risk of over-excusing my bad attitude, part of the problem I encountered is the pressure, especially prevalent at Thanksgiving time, to appreciate everything. In my experience, obligatory gratitude is not spiritually helpful. It focuses us on trying desperately to be happy when I think a better practice is to ask ourselves is whether we have a relationship with grace. Are we able to notice favor when it appears in our lives? Can we offer it to others and participate in seeking it?

Here is an illustration of what it means to ignore that deeper question: A New Age magazine arrived in my mail with a headline proclaiming "Happiness: It's Under Your Control." The gist of the article was that counting your blessings keeps harm and hardship at bay. That is totally not true; if a bus comes out of nowhere and hits you, then you're still run over, even if you were, at that very moment, counting your blessings. Equally troubling, however, is that this article conflates gratitude with happiness. Want to be one of those people on Facebook who shares a long list of gratitudes? Well, just decide to be happy. I don't buy that automatic connection. People who suffer from depression, for example, aren't choosing to be sad. And the larger question is: Do we have to be happy to be grateful?

Thanksgiving, soon upon us, is heralded as the Gratitude Season. Often I find that at whichever holiday meal table I end up, each person says something for which they are grateful. I enjoy this practice, but I have noticed that most people don't follow the assignment exactly. Often it is easier to share something about which we are happy, something that makes us content or satisfied, like a thing that has been acquired or a status attained.

Don't get me wrong; it is wonderful to be able to celebrate your kid's promotion at work or that you finished college. If life is going your way, then good for you for recognizing that and feeling thankful. Yet gratitude casts a wider net. It includes more than just happiness, although the two are not unrelated. Gratitude is about holding an attitude of openness to

whatever gifts might be present in life. It is the practice of knowing that these gifts exist even in complicated times when all is not hunky dory.

If we shy away from the complexity of gratitude's gifts and concentrate only on happy success at the dinner table, we run the risk of unintentionally alienating people. This simple practice can heap additional pressure on those who are already struggling by making them feel like they have to pretend they are not. If family and friends are listing their triumphs, how would it feel to be holding in the silent sanctuary of your heart a wanted pregnancy lost to miscarriage, a home in the process of foreclosure or the impending death of a parent. Connie's Call to Gather emphasizes this; it is damaging to pretend like being grateful is a simple and effective formula for happiness. It leads people to believe that it's their own fault if they aren't happy. This fallacy is what my magazine claimed: "Happiness: It's Under Your Control." And swallowing that is a recipe for Grinchiness if I ever heard one.

I'm lucky that my abandonment of my gratitude journal was not caused by the more serious situations I used as examples, like a dying loved one. But I did fall pray to the cultural mandate that I should be able to be happy automatically. When I couldn't do that, I figured that gratitude itself was out of my reach, because I made the mistake of believing that the only way to arrive at gratitude was to begin with contentment. I didn't bother to dig deeper.

But I missed my gratitude journal! I wanted to get back to my little orange book because it felt so satisfying to see the lined pages fill up with my handwriting. I had to reframe the assignment. Instead of listing that which was going well, could I find gratitude even in a lackluster day? I started small. Could I find just one moment worth gloating over gladly? I could, it turned out. One day I wrote about the pleasure of slipping into bed between freshly laundered sheets. Another time I tried to find words to describe the sudden, bursting scent of lemon when I sliced into a fresh one. Then I listed a favorite tiny luxury: a new bottle of nail polish.

Next came a much deeper challenge. Could I discover gratitude not in that which was boring or mundane but mixed into the stuff that was actually hard? Was there a gratitude by-product even in unhappy, regrettable situations? I have found that, with effort, I can locate even that:

For example, the time came when my spouse and I hit some bumps in the road and headed to a couples' counselor to find a smoother, shared path. It was not easy. I felt shy, scared and emotional about needing outside help. Yet once we had a few sessions under our belt, I found myself humming a line from a song by Leonard Cohen: "There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

There was a crack in my relationship, caused by a small accumulation of issues that needed attention and repair. But those challenges let in light, it turned out. I wrote about it in my gratitude journal in this way: "I'm grateful my sweetie is committed enough to stay when it's not perfect. It makes me even more secure. It sucks to be at odds but we're getting better at hearing and speaking difficult truths with kindness so that's good."

Just this past week brought another chance to learn that gratitude can be found even in hardship when a dear friend sent me an angry email about something I texted. As I read her message, I could see that her points were valid. I did owe her an apology. But I felt blasted and defensive so I decided to sleep on the email before responding. I had to think long and hard while brushing my teeth about what I could truthfully write in my gratitude journal. Here is what I ended up being able to jot down: “I’m glad she told me how she felt. If she hadn’t, it would have poisoned our closeness. Hopefully her willingness to call me out is a testament to the strength of our friendship.”

I’m not trying to pretend like I’m more spiritual than I am. Let me be clear. I don’t greet unpleasant situations with glee. I do not like the kind of gratitude that must be rung from stone. It’s horrible! Who wants a hard rock? A fluffy pillow would always be more comfortable.

Yet I find that being open to this kind of complex, gritty gratitude is more satisfying than trying to be happy. Happy is not something I can usually control. But I am finding that I can always search (within myself and any situation I encounter) for some worthy lesson or observation that helps me move forward. For that, I can be grateful.

Anne Lamont, who has so far appeared in both services this month, puts it this way: “This is not the best possible day. But it is the only day, the only day we have on all this earth.” Here is where the grace enters. Of all our themes, it’s been the most slippery one for me, but I did figure out one piece of the puzzle: I don’t agree with what Roger said last week in his excellent sermon when he talked about grace as undeserved and unasked for.

I don’t like the idea that grace is undeserved. I believe that all living beings deserve some experience of the world’s goodness. Being undeserving seems too close to the orthodox Christian idea of original sin that I don’t hold. Yet, I also understand that acknowledging the mysterious origins of our blessings can help us cultivate humility and compassion; that helps me get on board with grace as undeserved.

My real quarrel is with the idea that is unasked for. How I understand it, I do ask for grace. I want life to bless me; I seek that actively. Unitarian Universalism is a seeking tradition. We are always asking for meaning. Trying to find grace is part of this process. When I sit down with my journal, evening after evening, I am asking for the grace of gratitude. When I looked for a marriage therapist, I was asking for the grace of help. When I called my friend after her email, I asked her—directly, in this example—for the grace of accepting my apology.

In each of these cases, I have been lucky enough to receive. Not all longings end in fulfillment. I don’t know why our asking sometimes goes unanswered. It’s a mystery why some seekers find and others do not. I can only conclude that grace cannot be guaranteed. It is not selected from a menu or served to order. It’s broad and mysterious enough for us to devote a whole month to trying to get our minds and hearts around it.

Yet wanting it is a human impulse. Humanist theology can help us here. Humanism tends to reject the idea that some deity grants and denies us grace, proposing instead that the universe itself is the steward of grace, and that what matters is that we are open to it, that we try to locate it.

Not only is this a human endeavor, it's one I recommend! I think that we should seek grace actively. It speaks well of us if we value finding it because to genuinely ask for grace is to wade into the blessing and complexity of the universe to see what we might locate there. This is actually part of our mission here at the Fellowship. As we say at the beginning of each and every service, we want to grow in mind and spirit.

Asking for grace is not a cure-all. Even a successful search for it will not grant us control. Vacation memories fade. Life offers various hardships and there's no reason to pretend they are fun. The good news, which causes me real gratitude, is that we need nothing (other than ourselves) to offer and witness grace. Just being alive is enough to start where William Stafford's poem (our reading) leaves off: "You Reading This, Be Ready: Starting here, what do you want to remember?... What can anyone give you greater than now, starting here, right in this room, when you turn around?"

Closing Words

"Give up to grace. The ocean takes care of each wave 'til it gets to shore. You need more help than you know."

– Rumi, *Words of Paradise: Selected Poems of Rumi*

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