

Order of Service "An Attitude of Gratitude"

Sunday, December 27, 2009

10:00 AM

Welcome and Announcements: Board Host

Chalice Lighting: #452

Opening Words: #515

Opening Song: "For All That is Our Life" #128

Sharing Service: "What will you be grateful for next year?"

Reading: "Otherwise" by Jane Kenyon

Musical Interlude

Sermon: Why Gratitude is a Unitarian Universalist virtue, and How to practice it

Musical Interlude

Spoken Response

Sung Response: "My Life Flows in Endless song" #108

(aka "How Can I keep from Singing?")

Candles/Offering

Meditation: Count your blessings in silence

Closing Song: "Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly" #235 (v 1 & 2)

Closing Words: "We Lift up our Hearts in Thanks" #515

Closing Song: "Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly" #235 (v 3 & 4)

Sermon

"An Attitude of Gratitude" by Sheila Smith

"There is nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so" Hamlet Act 2, scene 2.

I'm going to tell you today that thinking or attitude is what makes all the difference and an attitude of gratitude is the best attitude. I will quote from more learned Unitarian Universalists than I in order to show you that gratitude is a Unitarian Universalist virtue. Then I will show you how to actually practice gratitude.

About a year ago, Kathy Kopczynski sent me and a couple of other fellowship members excerpts from a dog's diary and a cat's diary that I shall quote:

Excerpts from the Dog's diary

8:00 am Dog food! My favorite thing!

10:30 am Got rubbed and petted! My favorite thing!

1:00 pm Played in the yard! My favorite thing!

8:00 pm Wow! Watched TV with the people! My favorite thing!

11:00 pm Sleeping on the bed! My favorite thing!

Now, an excerpt from the cat's diary:

Day 983 of my captivity.....

My captors continue to taunt me with bizarre little dangling objects

Although I make my contempt for their rations perfectly clear, I nevertheless must eat something to keep up my strength.

In an attempt to disgust them I once again vomit on the carpet.

The only thing that keeps me going is my dream of escape.

You get the picture. Two house pets, same situation, different attitude. Let me segue to the human condition: One of our congregants sent me his vision of Old Man Syndrome. In a nutshell Old Man Syndrome is What If Something Goes Wrong? Our congregant concluded with Old Man Syndrome reminders:

"All those times when I nearly was involved in serious/terrible traffic accidents. (Obviously I am past due)

The storms that wreaked havoc near by but not to me (next tornado will get me)

The tree that fell and missed my house (next tree will crush it)

The many happy, trouble-free outings (disaster is due)

Spend a weekend at the coast? Well, isn't the Big One due?

Visit family in Eastern or Central Oregon? What? And get trapped over there by deep snow or a landslide? Maybe in April or May!"

I reply and rebut: Accidents are rare events; that why they're called accidents. The many happy trouble free outings prove disasters are rare. One doesn't become due for a disaster. The probability of an accident on a particular outing is not affected by what happened on previous outings any more than the next throw of a die is affected by previous throws.

According to Martin Seligman in *Learned Optimism*, human beings in general and old men in particular came by this Old Man Syndrome pessimism during "our recent evolutionary history. We are animals of the Pleistocene, the epoch of the ice ages. Our emotional makeup has most recently been shaped by one hundred thousand years of climatic catastrophe: waves of cold and heat; drought and flood; plenty and sudden famine. Those of our ancestors who survived the Pleistocene may have done so because they had the capacity to worry endlessly about the future, to see sunny days as mere prelude to a harsh winterWe have inherited their capacity to see the cloud rather than the silver lining." In other words the gloom and doomsayers helped their band of followers to survive and pass on their genes.. "The glaciers are coming, the glaciers are coming, we gotta go south." But folks, we're not in the Pleistocene any more.

Some Unitarian Universalists may think being thankful implies belief in a supernatural being that you grovel to. If there is such a supernatural being or God, this being doesn't need our prayers of praise and thanksgiving. I quote John Gottman: in *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work*: "In Judaism prayer is used primarily either for thanksgiving or to praise. Yet the religion claims that God does not require endless praise, flattery, or thanks. So, what is the purpose of these prayers? They are not meant for God's benefit but to help the person who is praying. These prayers are designed to help us appreciate the works of God, this beautiful world we have inherited, to notice and to be thankful for the blessings we continually receive."

Let's start with our Unitarian Universalist first source of religious inspiration: a sense of awe and wonder. That sense of awe and wonder naturally leads to a sense of gratitude. Let me quote *From Heart to Heart* by Christine Robinson, senior minister at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, NM, and Alicia Hawkins, leader of small group ministry at First Unitarian, "You may have always thought religion was primarily an affair of believing, and if you were not sure how a person goes about "believing" you may have thought you were not a religious person. Gratitude on the other hand, is something that all of us can practice and that makes us all religious."

Here's another way gratitude is religious. I'm going to paraphrase from an article, "The Heart of Our Faith" by Dr Galen Guengerich from the *UU World* Spring 2007. The Rev Dr Guengerich is senior minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City where he has served since 1993. Dr Guengerich's article is subtitled "Gratitude should be the center of Unitarian Universalist theology."

One day on the playground, his daughter's friends asked her, "What do Unitarian Universalists believe?" She answered, Whatever we want."

Guengerich replies freedom to believe whatever we want is not stating what we do believe, only that we believe in freedom, the absence of coercion. People come to Unitarian Universalism because we don't make them believe in something they find abhorrent, but they won't stay because of what's missing. You wouldn't go to Carnegie Hall because of what you won't hear.

Secondly, Guengerich says, how does believing whatever we want make us a religion? In his mind religion consists of two related impulses, a sense of awe and a sense of obligation. He says, "The feeling of awe comes from our experience of the grandeur of life. This feeling becomes religious when we feel a sense of obligation to the larger life that we share."

Obligation implies duty or a daily practice. When we think of different religions we think of what members of these different religions do. For example, Jews praise and thank God. Jews also eat kosher and study the Torah. Muslims read the Koran, pray facing Mecca; Catholics go to mass and confession etc. What do Unitarian Universalists do; what distinguishes a Unitarian Universalist from a member of other religions? Hint: it's not potlucks.

Guengerich believes Unitarian Universalism should be defined by gratitude. He says, "Unless our faith is mere intellectual affectation, the defining element of our faith must be a daily practice of some kind. Gratitude reminds us how utterly dependent we are on the people and the world around us for everything that matters. From this flows an ethic of gratitude that demands that we nurture the world that nurtures us. Gratitude is the natural outcome of the two elements of religious experience, awe and obligation."

Now, just how do we practice gratitude? Here is one exercise in gratitude from Gottman: For one week try to be aware if your tendency to criticize, to see what is missing, to focus on what is not there and comment on it. Try instead to focus on what is right. Notice what you have and what others contribute. Search for things to praise. Begin with simple things. Praise the world. Appreciate your own breathing, the sunrise, the beauty of a rainstorm, the wonder in your child's eyes, Utter some silent words of thanksgiving (to no one in particular) for these small wonders in your day. This will begin to change your focus on the negative.

If you write these things down you have a Gratitude Journal. You make a list each day of things, experiences and people for which you are grateful. Soon you will notice the fleeting good moments in life. Your perspective, your attitude will change.

Another gratitude practice: Grace before eating: The Guengerich family says a line from Psalm 118. "This is the day that we've been given. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

As a former Catholic, I like religious Stuff. Here's a visual and tactile aid for counting blessings and practicing gratitude.

HOLD UP CHAPLET

This is a one decade rosary. I begin with the crucifix to acknowledge the evil and suffering in life such as torture, the death of innocent people. Then there is a single bead where I acknowledge what I learned from bad things. So many things that seem bad at the time turn out to be learning experiences. Moreover, you learn you can survive bad times. Our Old Man says, "by age 55 or 60 one has survived enough close calls that there's definitely a negative edge to life."

Yes, but not only did you survive these bad times, you learned how to survive them. Here's a personal case in point: In my fifties, I had seven years bad luck. A good friend died of cancer, another moved to Nebraska, two other friends dumped me, my father died, my aunt died, my dog died. I had health changes, got fired because of the health changes, got a job from hell, left my

spiritual community, and broke up with my partner. I can truly identify with Stephen Sondheim's lyrics:

Good times and bum times, I've seen 'em all. And my dear, I'm still here
Plush velvet sometimes. Sometimes just pretzels and beer, but I'm still here
I've run the gamut, A to Z. Three cheers and damn it, C'est la vie
I got through all of last year and I'm here!

Now back to our tactile aid. We have the crucifix and the bead representing silver linings in the dark clouds. Then there's a medal showing the Virgin Mary. It's smooth, no rough edges. To me the medal symbolizes the fleeting moments of joy that can fill our days if only we pay attention. Then there are ten beads on which to count ten blessings and you're back to the medal again, representing joy. Telling these beads makes us aware of joy and blessings in our present and past lives. Even in the midst of grief, we're sometimes surprised by joy.

So, to sum up this morning, we learned you don't have to be a traditional theist to practice gratitude and it's Unitarian Universalist to practice gratitude We also learned some methods to practice gratitude.

And let's look towards blessings in the future. The Thanksgiving Day editorial in the New York Times says, "it's worth raising a glass to be thankful for the unexpected, for all the ways life interrupts and renews itself without warning...What would our lives look like if they held only what we'd planned? [By next year] we'll have to take account of how the unexpected has shaped our lives....[There will be] time for blossoming and ripening for new friends, new family, new love, new hope. It is our job to welcome it and give it meaning. So let us toast what we cannot know and could not have guessed and to the unexpected ways our lives will merge in the New Year. Let us toast what we cannot know and could not have guessed and to the unexpected ways our lives will merge in the New Year." Let us be grateful for those things.

With respect, responsibility, and relish for the process.

Acknowledgments

Celebrants: Sheila Smith, Lorene Hales
Musician: Susan Christie
House Manager: Mina Carson