

April 22, 2008
UUFTC Douglas Flat

Thanksgiving has always been my favorite holiday. It has no religious, nationalistic, or military overtones. And it provides an island of relative peace and sanity between the consumerist orgies of Halloween and Christmas. Thanksgiving emphasizes three things: good food; companionship with friends, and gratitude. Some of my fondest childhood memories are of helping my mother to prepare and stuff the turkey, and the sense of anticipation as the smell of cooking turkey filled the house. We always had a large gathering of family friends, and we really did treat it as a special time in which to be thankful. I always look forward to Thanksgiving as a day that we can take out of our busy lives to sit and talk with friends and to be with our families; it is a time when we can renew our sense of love and caring for the people around us.

I have been told that it's your custom here in Douglas Flat to gather on the Sunday after thanksgiving, and to share the leftover bounty from your various Thanksgiving meals. What a great tradition to have created! Clearly, something special happens when we join together with friends or family, or both, to share a meal. There is the feeling of connectedness, the warmth of the company of people we care about. But it seems to that there's something more than that when we eat together. At the best of those times, when there is an intentionality about our getting together to share food, there is also a spiritual dimension to it all. I remember the Thanksgivings of my childhood for the food and the company – especially the time to play with other kids. But I think there was always something more than that. I think there was a spiritual sharing

that was special about those occasions. We were aware that we were having this meal to share our gratitude, and this attention to gratitude made it a special occasion.

And this spiritual aspect to breaking bread together extends way back in history. In the Middle East, for example, it is the custom to offer food to any visitor to one's home, and it is considered very rude to refuse that offer. So it was that Abraham invited three wandering strangers into his tent and offered them food. Only after he had done so did he become aware that one of the three was Jahweh himself. And of course, Jesus ate together with his disciples every day. And one of the signal moments of his ministry was the sharing of bread and fish with the crowds who came to hear him preach on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. And of course, there was the Last Supper, the Passover Supper in Jerusalem. At that meal, Jesus offered bread and wine to the disciples, in what would eventually become the rite of communion among many Christians. For most of these, of course, the ritual of the Eucharist has become tied up with notions about transubstantiation, and so forth. But not always! Our Unitarian brothers and sisters in Transylvania still follow the practice of sharing bread and wine but they view it as a simple sharing of food rather than as a theologically complicated ritual.

Over in Sonora, we are contemplating moving to yet another place to meet on Sundays. And the reason is simple – at our present location, there is not opportunity for us to mingle after the service, over coffee and food. We have come to realize that this time is so important in building community that we are willing to move yet again just to be able to gather together to share food and drink.

[PAUSE – TRANSITION]

Last Sunday in Sonora, we discussed the Greek myth of Sisyphus, the former king of Corinth who was punished by being forced to push a boulder up a mountain for all eternity. Particularly, we were pondering the puzzle posed by the great French thinker and writer, Albert Camus, who wrote that “One must imagine Sisyphus happy!” And what we saw is that the story of Sisyphus is really a metaphor for the human condition. Life is not a steady progression, higher and higher up the mountain. No – we struggle to the heights only to have that damned rock roll back to the bottom. We never quite reach the point where there is nothing more to strive for – there is always more. And so, just as we imagine Sisyphus happy, we ourselves can find happiness in the struggles, the grind, of daily life. We find joy in those moments when, like Sisyphus, we get to rest, to walk back down the mountain before we have to take up the labor of pushing our boulder back up the hill. And we also find joy in the struggle itself. We realize that the joy lies in the doing, not in attaining the result.

And if imagine Sisyphus happy, we could also imagine Sisyphus thankful. Despite his punishment, what we might call his Karma, Sisyphus lives, he has existence, albeit in the underworld. And, as we heard in the poem by Mary Oliver, we too have this “one wild and precious life.” We get to enjoy all the miracles of this cosmos we inhabit – the mountains, the oceans, the trees, the animals, the rocks! We experience our own breath, the feel of our muscles as we exert ourselves, the wonders of our bodies.

Even in his torment, Sisyphus has his consciousness! Indeed, his punishment would be no punishment at all if he were unconscious. Without his consciousness, he

would be like any other creature of the earth, plunging onward, but unaware of his fate.

As Camus writes:

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him?

Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory.

And, like Sisyphus, we have the precious gift of our consciousness. We have the ability to determine the course of our life, to determine our fate. We have the ability to see the world created every morning, to observe the rising sun as it touches the highest branches. And there are those times when we carry within us a thorn that is heavier than lead. There are those times when we are like Sisyphus – when our burdens weigh us down like lead, and all we can do is to keep on trudging. But even then, within us, within our consciousness, is a mind that can observe and appreciate that each hill, each tree, each creature, each pond with its blazing lilies is a miracle, again, every morning.

The story doesn't tell us, but I have always wondered if Sisyphus was able to love, was able to feel compassion. (I have this fantasy that perhaps Sisyphus had a lover who would meet him partway down the hill as he walked back to resume his labors). But we can be thankful that we have the ability to love; that we can feel compassion; that we can open our hearts to others. Of all the gifts I am thankful for, to me this is the greatest – the ability to love and to be loved!

[Pause – transition]

Galen Guengerich, pastor of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, argues that the defining discipline of our Unitarian Universalist faith should be gratitude. We welcome many different theologies, and we know what we don't believe, but we often

have difficulty stating what we do believe in. In an article that was published in the UU World last spring, Rev. Guengerich suggests that gratitude encompasses two essential elements of any religious tradition: a sense of awe and wonder at the mystery of the universe, and a daily practice that reminds of who we are as people of faith.

We pride ourselves on being self-reliant and self-sufficient. We emphasize the freedom and autonomy of the individual, with its emphasis on worth and dignity of every person and on individual rights. But, suggests Rev. Guengerich, we often forget that the first principle of all existence is our utter dependence on other people and the world around us. A language of gratitude reminds us of this state of connectedness, which we so often ignore. In the words of Rev. Guengerich:

Unlike freedom, gratitude is a uniquely religious virtue. Why is this so? A sense of awe and sense of spiritual discipline, religion's basic impulses, are both experiences of transcendence, of being part of something larger than ourselves.

The feeling of awe emerges from experiences of the grandeur of life and the mystery of the divine. We happen upon a sense of inexpressible exhilaration at being alive and sense of utter dependence upon sources of being beyond ourselves. This sense of awe and dependence should engender in us a discipline of gratitude, which constantly acknowledges that our present experience depends on the sources that make it possible.

So, this sense of gratitude that we experience at Thanksgiving could be seen as the principle that defines who we are as a movement. But whether we look at it that way or not, I would suggest that we could do far worse than to learn gratitude as a daily practice. Having such a practice, or discipline, reminds us every day of the gifts of life, of consciousness, and of compassion that we experience. Guengerich suggests that one way to do this is to keep what he calls a "gratitude journal." Each morning or night, make a list of things, people, and experiences for which you are grateful. Soon, we might find ourselves paying closer attention to our wild and precious life. We might notice the passing of the seasons, the fleeting smile of someone we pass in the street,

the quiet determination of a child headed for school. Life is made up of moments such as these; a practice of gratitude might give us a new way of looking at the world.

What I have found in my own life is that these moments of appreciation, of gratitude occur randomly. I would like to make them more a daily experience.

Sometimes, when Karen and I sit down to dinner, I look across the table, and my heart is filled to the brim with happiness -- with appreciation for the gift of life that we share, for the gift of the hearts that we open - - to each other and to the world around us. And we take a moment to give expression to that sense of gratitude.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates Gods and raises rocks. . .

The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a person's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.