

Taking Gratitude to Heart

Alison Wohler, November 29, 2009
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I'm grateful for so many things, one of which is that I'm grateful that I have the capacity to feel grateful. I'm also grateful that I'm grateful I can feel grateful. Think about it. Our human minds work in many layers.

Sometimes poetry serves us well in reaching some of those deeper layers. My friend Mary Wellemeyer wrote a poem I would like to read for you, about some of the feelings we have at this time of celebration and gatherings.

It's called *Is It the Potatoes?* ([Admire the Moon](#), p. 60)

Is it the potatoes?

They are roasted in the oven with a coating of tasty things including garlic, and I know that garlic warms the heart.

Is it the kitchen?

The flowered wallpaper, the old-fashioned table and chairs, the plants in pots in all the windows, something homey and nostalgic?

No, I can be sitting in a car in the dark with these people, driving through the rain, and feel this way – comfortable, relaxed, warmed with affection.

We do talk of life and politics, of children and the economy, we speak freely of religion, of life, the universe, and everything.

So I can say Yes, I learn from them, feel invited to go farther, grow, but the central thing is the circling back, the circling around, the circling up together, the blessing of soul-deep friendship.

It's all about relationship.

This year I thought I was going to do Thanksgiving differently: fewer guests, more pot luck contributions, I would use the everyday dishes so they could just be thrown in the dishwasher. The fewer guests idea happened, but it's hard to actually end up with "more pot luck contributions" when you've invited "fewer guests." And something interesting happened to my resolve about using the everyday dishes.

What happened was that when I was being interviewed by Dylan Klempner (one of our new UUSA friends) for the Thanksgiving Day article on the front page of the Gazette, I started talking about how much it means to me to get out the old family dishes and crystal

and silver ware. Bringing out the celebratory dishes, I told him, makes me feel like I am gathering the *entire* family at the table, even the ones who have been gone for years.

I feel like I should break into that song from Fiddler on the Roof: *Tradition!*

Then, by total coincidence, I bought flowers for the table that perfectly matched the good china my grandmother had given me as a wedding gift many years ago. My fate was sealed – out came the china. I couldn't help myself.

I've spent some time reflecting on this ritual of holiday entertaining with the good dishes. A considerable amount of that reflection happened while I was washing all those good dishes after dinner when everyone had gone home. There will be no dishwasher treatment for Grandma's gold-rimmed plates and goblets as long as they are in my care.. But as I stood at the sink elbow deep in suds and hot water, I was filled with a certain contentment at the thought of returning these things to the china cupboard clean and shiny – ready for the next celebration. I am grateful that these beautiful things have been preserved through the generations, and I feel tied to those generations when we use them and when I run my hands over and around them in the soapy water. Who else ate off this plate, drank wine from this glass, served cranberry sauce from this bowl, at past Thanksgiving dinners? I thought to myself. Who will use them in the future?

There are many things for which it is easy to be grateful. There are some things in our lives or in our past for which it is not so easy to feel grateful. I always think of holidays, like Thanksgiving, as times when we are reminded to pay attention to sentiments and ideas that are often overridden by the events of the everyday. But at Thanksgiving we can take time off from our usual busy schedules. There is time to reflect. Time to take gratitude beyond the realm of the routine and the mundane. Time to take gratitude a little more seriously than usual – to take it to heart.

I find it interesting that Thanksgiving is thought of as a secular holiday. To me, and this is why I love hosting the Amherst area Interfaith Thanksgiving service, an emphasis on gratitude is something that spans religious particularity yet is an integral part of each. Gratitude has the ability to unite us all in one communal, spiritual, attitude, regardless of the tradition within which we practice that attitude.

To be grateful, to me, is to stand in wonder and awe at the mystery and miracle of the web of existence, and to be glad to be a part of it. I am grateful that the universe has gone the way it has and that "existence" is. I am amazed and grateful to know I am a living part of that existence. Practiced, this gratitude is what carries me across the rocky streams that intersect the otherwise beautiful landscape of my life.

Richard Gilbert has written: ([On the Cusp of Life](#), p. 33

*In the caress of this cosmic moment we pause to wonder.
In the caress of this place of the spirit we stop to think.
In the caress of this people we contemplate our lives.*

*We are beacons of brief fire between the portals of life and death.
Like shooting stars we flash across the dark sky giving light for a time,
and then are no more.*

What are we to make of this wonder while it lasts?

Forrest Church's thoughts are similar: (Lifecraft, p. 96)

Reckon the odds. That we should even exist staggers the imagination. All of us are connected genetically to the beginning of life and kinetically to the beginning of time. The universe was pregnant with us when it was born. I find this far more amazing and inspiring than most theological reflections. Simply being here – my having written, [you having listened]- is a miracle. We should never be blasé when reflecting on the creation and our place in it.

Seven hundred years ago Hafiz was also inspired by thoughts of mystical wonder: (The Gift, p. 180)

*I want both of us to start talking about this great love
as if you, I, and the Sun were all married and living in a tiny room,
helping each other to cook, do the wash, weave and sew,
care for our beautiful animals.*

*We all leave each morning to labor on the earth's field.
No one does not lift a great pack.*

*I want both of us to start singing like two traveling minstrels
about this extraordinary existence we share,
as if you, I, and God were all married and living in a tiny room.*

And here we are, you and I and the great wonder and mystery of it all, eating on the good dishes.

Just to add a touch of realism to the day, there is much about which we are *not* grateful – we have to say that out loud on occasion, it seems to me. Saying the words, “suffering is a part of life,” is important. Last week we talked about “bringing hope where hope is hard to find,” acknowledging that hope comes in all shapes and sizes, from the global to the personal.

Gratitude, to me, is not only for what we have, but also for possibility and hope for what we would like others to have as well. Gratitude without humility for all that others “have not,” would be shallow and incomplete. One of A. Powell Davies' Thanksgiving prayers (I have spoken of this prayer before) warns us not to be too loudly grateful lest those less fortunate might hear. “This bounty did not come to us because, beyond the rest of men [and women], we were deserving. We are one family,” he writes. (The Language of the Heart, p. 81)

Just as we should remain humble in our gratitude, so should we not harbor feelings of entitlement in our thankfulness. Not even that we exist. I believe that life and its evolution, including our own presence on Earth, has been a glorious and wonderful accident, a moment of extraordinary grace, something that in our human perception appears to have happened for the good of the universe and with positive purpose – but nonetheless an accident of physics, chemistry and biology. We are not, in my way of thinking, to feel special in our human abilities and gifts – they just happened. And yet, I feel no contradiction in also believing that it is good for my life, and for all of our lives, if we hold ourselves in gratitude for that wonderful accident. Some refer to my “accident” as the intention of God.

Taking gratitude to heart feels, to me, like an acceptance of myself as a part, neither significant nor insignificant, of the grand scheme of things – the interdependent web. In humble thanksgiving I understand that my place on Earth and in the history of my life and also among you is as it should be. To you, also, I extend my heartfelt gratitude.

My intention this morning has not been to tell you how *you* should be grateful. But I do sincerely hope that in my reflections on my own gratitude you may have found something of your own.

I used a Max Coats reading for the Interfaith service earlier this week. He expresses some of the same mystical sense I experience when I take my own gratitude to heart:

Let us pray to the God who holds us in the hollow of his hands – to the God who holds us in the curve of her arms – to the God whose flesh is the flesh of hills and hummingbirds and angleworms – whose skin is the color of an old black woman and a young white man, and the color of the leopard and the grizzly bear and the green grass snake – whose hair is like the aurora borealis, rainbows, nebulae, waterfalls, and a spider’s web – whose eyes sometime shine like the evening star, and then like fireflies, and then again like an open wound – whose touch is both the touch of life and the touch of death – and whose name is everyone’s, but mostly mine.

And what shall we pray? Let us say, “Thank you.”

Thank you.

