

“Gratitude”

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Here comes the big steamroller of the Holiday season! Do you greet it with joy or with anxiety? I think for a lot of people it is a potent mixture of both. We get to see family! We have to put up with family. There’s so much food! So many calories. And so on. I find myself wondering, is gratitude tempered with anxiety still gratitude at all?

My wife and I don’t do Thanksgiving. That is, she is from Canada, so we celebrate Canadian Thanksgiving, which is in October. For us, and for countless Canadians, by the time November rolls around every year, Thanksgiving is old news. Why do Canadians celebrate the holiday on the “wrong” date? Well, many of us are aware that the “first Thanksgiving” that we were told of in schools was painfully inaccurate.

For instance, the first Canadian Thanksgiving took place in October 1578 - this was 43 years before the Pilgrims ever landed in Plymouth. Obviously, the Pilgrims did not invent the concept of gratitude, nor did they invent the tradition of holding a feast of celebration to express gratitude for a bountiful harvest. Almost every human civilization has celebrated its own Thanksgiving tradition, from the ancient Egyptians, ancient Chinese, Koreans, Greeks, and so on. The influence of the Roman Empire spread the custom of a fall festival throughout Europe and up into the British Isles, so that by the

time white folks were exploring the Americas, Thanksgiving was a custom that was brought along with them.

But of course, the Native Americans, the First Nations, already had their own traditions of Harvest Festivals and Gratitude. I've recently been reading Charles C. Mann's wonderful book, "1491: Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus," and the major takeaway that Mr. Mann wants to get across is the ongoing revelation that the extant culture in the Americas before the white man invaded was much more highly evolved and busy, highly populated and impressive than any of us have been led to believe. At the time that the first white men were stepping foot on the East Coast, there were Incan and Aztec cities that were more densely populated than any city in Europe. It is thrilling to learn about the constant discoveries and verifications that are happening now, mostly in central and South America.

Thanksgiving is a fraught holiday, in part because of the high societal expectations and in part because of the enormous historical baggage that it brings. Thanksgiving puts us in mind of not only gratitude but of our history as a people - in a way that is so universal. Regardless of religion, race or creed, we are all touched in some way by what European explorers began in this land centuries ago. Charles Mann wants us to know that The level of cultural advancement and the settlement range of humans in this land was higher and broader than previously imagined and that The New World was not a wilderness at the time of European contact, but an environment which the indigenous peoples had altered for thousands of years for their benefit.

Awareness of this history invites us to place ourselves within it. My ancestors did horrible things. Perhaps yours did too. There is so much here - so much history and so much pain. How does it speak to me now? In this life? Is gratitude still gratitude when it is tinged with anxiety? How about guilt? What does shame do to gratitude?

It makes us defensive. Suddenly this is not a day of gratitude but a day of stress. It is no longer a time of authenticity and love but a time of forced smiles and heavy drinking. American Thanksgiving feels like the final frontier between us and the dreaded madness of the holidays, Christmas especially. Whether or not your family celebrates Christmas voluntarily, we all are dragged into a commercialized hellscape featuring all of the things that we loved about the season as kids, like the fun music, twinkling lights, candy - except now it seems that the volume on everything is turned way up to grotesque levels - incessant music, inescapable lights, ugh, so much candy.

And, did you get a tree yet? And why do the trees cost like \$80 now? And is it really kind to be putting a poor innocent tree into my house to basically starve to death? In a few weeks, Rev Carl is going to address The Hidden Life of Trees, and I don't want to spoil the surprise, but basically, no. The tree does not enjoy being in your house.

Ah, gratitude. I just sometimes feel like this is the hardest time of the year to feel gratitude. The original Thanksgivings were borne out of genuine gratitude - gratitude for the harvest. For the generosity of Gaia, gratitude for the overwhelming relief evident in having a reason to hope that you would survive the winter. A gratitude borne out of a connection to Mother Earth that very, very few of us feel today. When did Thanksgiving stop being about farming? About the earth?

For many of us, Thanksgiving is still about the earth, but how many of us are actually aware of whether the harvest was good this year? And feel grateful about it?

Certainly, we are lucky to have no reason to fear starving! But I imagine that as recently as our grandparents' generation, Thanksgiving was still intimately tied to the health of the environment.

And now, we are all aware of how very much our precious earth has suffered and continues to suffer just within the past few decades. That does feel shameful.

How do we turn to gratitude in the midst of our shame?

No matter how advanced our modern society is, no matter how many apps are on your phone and no matter what you say to Alexa or Siri, the days will get shorter and colder. It is easier to feel gratitude in the springtime when the light begins to pour in and the colorful blooms are back. How do we practice gratitude this Thanksgiving when there is so much to mourn?

Parker Palmer asks, "What artist would paint a deathbed scene with the vibrant and vital palette nature uses?" He wonders if "Perhaps death possesses a grace that we who fear dying, who find it ugly and even obscene, cannot see. How shall we understand nature's testimony that dying itself — as devastating as we know it can be — contains the hope of a certain beauty?"

Much is made these days of gratitude. If you are like me, you are confronted daily with reminders from well-meaning Facebook posts about articles about studies done on gratitude, and how you really should be keeping a gratitude journal. I sometimes feel guilty for not having a serious practice like a gratitude journal, and then I

remember that gratitude is supposed to feel good. Faithfully keeping a practice of gratitude can be done in writing, but only if that feels good to you. Otherwise, your practice can be something simple, like noticing something good that happened each day. Or setting an intention to be grateful each morning. Or taking a moment to feel the love that comes naturally when you call someone to mind who is precious to you.

These joyful practices will immediately benefit you in a multitude of ways.

Scientific studies have shown:

- Grateful people experience fewer aches and pains and they report feeling healthier than other people
- Gratitude reduces a multitude of toxic emotions, ranging from envy and resentment to frustration and regret.
- Gratitude increases mental strength and fosters resilience.

Many of the great thinkers of today, folks that we look to for guidance - folks that Krista Tippett interviews! Prescribe turning back to nature in order to foster gratitude. There is something medicinal, something deep and ancestral about our relationship to the outdoors and to the natural world. The recognition of this holy and mystical relationship to nature is reflected in the architecture of this very room!

Parker Palmer says that he is grateful for:

- For the ground on which I stand — whether it's the kind that grows greenery or the kind in which my soul can take root.
- For the people who've supported me — from those who know me well and love me nonetheless to strangers who offered help in a moment of need.

- For the natural world, which really does make things pretty — a beauty to which I often turn for solace, healing, inspiration, and peace.

He then goes on to say that:

The only way to keep a gift alive is to pass it along. So on Thanksgiving Day this year — in a world where so many have been deprived of so much — I'll give thanks by finding more ways to share the abundance I've been given.

Whatever you are grateful for in your life: Gratitude for family, friends, good company. Good health, good weather! Our mysterious interconnectedness, the astonishing beauty of nature and the universal energy that is life. Grateful for this community and all of the good that our congregation does in the world. Grateful for UU as a movement that will continue doing good in the world long after all of us are gone. We are called to be grateful. We are invited to a wild, extravagant, senseless gratitude.

You see, science has found that our very bodies and minds want us to be filled with gratitude, and they attempt to offer an incentive by rewarding us with endorphins, dopamine, and physical health when we practice holy gratitude. Gratitude is connection. Gratitude is a form of righteous and sublime love. Gratitude is healing.

- Cicero said that “Gratitude is not only the greatest of all the virtues, but it is the parent of all the others.”
- Gandhi said, “May the work of your hands be a sign of gratitude and reverence to the human condition.”
- The Dalai Lama suggests that practicing gratitude is the way to world peace.

So I thank you. Really. I am grateful to have the chance to worship with you, here today.

In a few minutes, we will sing “How Could Anyone” and I want that song to be a love song to yourself. This song is about you. Your loving is a miracle. You are connected to my soul. We are connected to each others’ souls in a very real, palpable, ecstatic and holy way! How can we keep from being grateful?

I’d like to leave you with these words by UU minister Gwen Matthews

“Today, we’re thankful for you and what you bring to our church.

Your spirit, talents, generosity, imagination, and dedication reaffirm our fellowship and create our Beloved Community. Our heartfelt thanks to you on this day and for all days to come.

For those who embrace Thanksgiving as a day to honor the gifts of family, friendship, abundance, security, we celebrate with you and join our voices to hold aloft all sacred blessings.

For those who hold Thanksgiving as a day of sadness, who mourn for the hurt and loss of native peoples, who are lonely, who grieve the loss of those dear and beloved, we hold your heartache and sorrow so you do not have to carry the burden alone.

Blessings be upon you.”

And now please stand as you are able and let’s join together in singing Hymn # 1053

How Could Anyone.