

“Otherwise”

A Sermon Towards Gratitude

Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
UU Church of Reading
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In her poem, entitled “Otherwise,” the poet Jane Kenyon reflects on her blessings:
“I got out of bed on two strong legs. It might have been otherwise.
I ate cereal, sweet milk, ripe, flawless peach. It might have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill to the birch wood. All morning I did the work I love.
At noon I lay down with my mate. It might have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks. It might have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed in a room with paintings on the walls, and planned another day just like this day.
But one day, I know, it will be otherwise.”

Kenyon wrote this poem in 1993, upon hearing her husband, Donald Hall’s cancer diagnosis. Ironically, it was Kenyon, not Hall, who died a year later from a fierce and swift onslaught of leukemia. “Otherwise,” came unexpectedly, with the sunrise one day, with no regard for the silver candlesticks, the paintings, the Birchwood, the flawless peach. Even so, Jane Kenyon continued to pen grateful verses. Life became “otherwise,” yet the poet rested in the grace of her days, as surely as she rested in the arms of her husband at midday. In a poem written during her decline, entitled “Twilight: After Haying,” Kenyon reflects that:

“Yes, long shadows go out
from the bales; and yes, the soul
must part from the body:
what else could it do?

These things happen. . .the soul's bliss
and suffering are bound together
like the grasses. . .

The last, sweet exhalations
of timothy and vetch
go out with the song of the bird;
the ravaged field
grows wet with dew.”

I’m awestruck and humbled by the attitude of gratitude expressed in Kenyon’s reverie. I’ll call it “otherwisdom.” In her, I recognize a strain of what my colleague, Gary Smith, calls “thankfulness, absolutely.” That’s what I’m selling this morning—“thankfulness, absolutely.” It’s a variety of gratitude that exists beyond comparison, beyond

entitlement, beyond “Why ME?” A challenge to be sure, in that, we’re asked to embrace gratitude as ideology and life practice, rather than as a response to individual life events...good, bad, or otherwise.

Given the savagely competitive society we’ve created and in which we live, many of us are lured, quite seductively, into the attitude of gratitude by comparison. We imagine life could be better or that we are entitled to have more than we do. If we are abused, living without basic needs, oppressed, or unfulfilled in destructive ways, then I would agree that life could and should be better, or “otherwise.”

For the most part, though, we live middle class lives in middle class towns. We’ve got lots of “stuff.” We are primarily a middle class religion. And, despite the liberalism we typically espouse as UUs, I fear that our consumerist society has brainwashed us, too, into thinking we can acquire happiness or virtues like thankfulness with our “Capital One” Platinum cards.

This equation employs a suspect thanksgiving theology, distinctly anti-Universalist, which we encounter, chapter-and-verse, throughout Scripture. It makes us good *doobies* for “thanking we all our God,” because He, (She or It) anoints us deservedly with plenty, while inexplicably, allowing so many others to waste away in famine, economic injustice, or oppression. Before we know it, entitlement becomes embedded like a splinter in the soft tissue of our privileged lives. More than a few analysts have connected the dots, for example, between our proposed US aggression towards Iraq (with the inevitable loss of innocent human life) and the seemingly bottomless gas tanks on our SUVs.

My colleague Peter Fleck explains thanksgiving by comparison this way. He says it’s a kind of “food chain” gratitude which points out that at least the person in the next hospital bed is sicker than I am. It’s the kind of thanks that, when we read about that missing 11-year-old, we run and hug our child; the type of gratefulness, that when we read the police blotter, we’re relieved that our name has stayed out of it for another week. This is the moment when we utter the prayer, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

Is this so bad? After all, I look out on a congregation touched by grief and by grace; illness, death, despair, frustration, malaise, as well as good health, success, vitality, new possibilities. Shouldn’t we be thankful that life hasn’t gone horribly “otherwise” on us? I’d argue that “other-wisdom” is truly wise when the comparison remains within the Universe of one’s own life. It isn’t “I’m better off than so-and-so,” but rather acknowledging down to the bone that “it might be otherwise” and, in response, cultivating “thankfulness, absolutely” in each moment.

To meet a person who embodies “pure” gratitude is rare. Many folks don’t truly appreciate what they have until it is gone. And having lost the opportunity to be grateful, they simply find another reason to be disappointed. With “other-wisdom” you’re better able to develop and maintain perspective; as in, “my life offers me some blessings, flawed as it is. At least for today, I have a ripe peach for my cereal, OR two strong legs, OR work that fulfills me, OR some combination of these blessings.” “Other-wisdom” preaches that although things are not perfect in my own life, I am still grateful for what I have, what I can do, because it could be so much worse within the small Universe of this one life. We waste far too much time resenting what’s missing, clinging to our entitlement and notions of cosmic fairness.

Greg Kreck, a Zen Buddhist teacher, asks us to pursue a gratitude practice in three parts: Notice, Reflect, and Express. He observes, “The more I think I’ve earned something or deserve something, the less likely I am to feel grateful for it. As long as I think I’m entitled to something I won’t consider it a gift. But when I am humbled by my own mistakes or limitations, I am more likely to receive what I am given with gratitude and a true sense of appreciation for the giver as well as the gift.”

Kreck explains that, “To experience a sense of heartfelt gratitude, you must develop a practice. Without

practice, there is no development of skill - only an idea. You cannot become a grateful person just by thinking that you want to be grateful. Rather, you need to develop a new habit of attention – to notice the concrete ways in which the world supports you each day. And we can then develop a new habit of speech – expressing our gratitude to others.” So start your practice today. Notice. Reflect. Express.

Of course, I want life to be blessed for each and every one of you gathered here in this Sanctuary, but I have no way of knowing what that might look like in real time, and neither do you. In a recent *Arlo and Janis* comic strip, Arlo admits: “I’m not thankful the azalea died...I’m not thankful for the interest we pay on our credit card. For everything else, I’m thankful!” “That was a strange sort of blessing,” says Janis. “I figured it’d be a heck of a lot faster that way,” Arlo responds. Is it realistic to expect Arlo to feel grateful for his dead azaleas? Probably not. Yet, he’s got it partially right. This human, finite existence is a package deal. The challenge resides in cultivating “other-wisdom,” thankfulness absolutely, and perspective, come what may.

Have I mentioned yet how exceptionally hard it is to accomplish this zen-like gratefulness? Oh, well let me do that right now. It’s very tough! Let’s be clear. I’m not suggesting that we shouldn’t desire any adaptations in our lives. No suffering martyrs need apply. What concerns me is when the script goes haywire and our lives veer off in unscripted directions, and we cry foul. Azaleas die on us. People die on us, too. *Us!* Characters we hadn’t anticipated enter stage left, while scenery from some horror movie drops down behind us.

It is not “unspiritual” to rail against such intrusions. Yet, when we grow bitter or petulant because we believe that we are entitled to that storybook script, the one with perpetual happily-ever-after, we run a serious risk of tumbling off the stage in the dark. Being a good person is no guarantee. Just look around you. We are good people touched by triumphs and tragedies. Circumstances could certainly be “otherwise” in many of our lives, and we needn’t relish everything that happens to us. That would be impossible, and would require us to live entirely without ego, emotion, desire, or attachment to others.

In practice, the art to gratefulness is quietly pro-active, beyond either whining or boasting. As we witness and experience life as co-creators on the planet, we are called again and again to acknowledge the amazing mix of pain and joy. The personal evolves into the universal, and we perceive ourselves as pieces of a whole beyond our own disappointments. We might awaken to the connection between the despair in our individual lives and the profound suffering in the world. This recognition alone may foster deeper gratitude.

Sometimes all we need is the proper question to sharpen our perspective. [In a story related by the Rev. Thomas Disrud], the writer Sue Bender and her husband, in their early 60s, decided they needed to get their financial affairs in order. They meet with a lawyer one bright November morning, and he asks them, "What would you like to do in case there's an exploding turkey?" "Exploding turkey?" Bender asks. The lawyer continues: "What if the whole family was together at Thanksgiving and the turkey exploded? If the four of you were killed at that moment, who would you want to have your worldly goods?"

At first, the question was a little unsettling and surreal for her. Perhaps it was the image of the bird blowing up in their dining room. But it later turned out to be quite fruitful. She writes that it made her think about what was most precious to her. She writes that now, when she has a particularly difficult day, she makes what she calls a gratitude list of all those things she has been thankful for that day.”

Naturally, I don’t wish for any of us to experience exploding turkeys two Thursdays hence, but I do hope we strive to cultivate intentionality and awareness about gratitude. As my colleague Tom Disrud suggests, “A life of thankfulness comes from putting ourselves forward in the world and seeing ourselves not as separate but connected.

We see that we are not alone, but in relationship with everyone and everything. We allow ourselves to fall down and embrace some mystery both beyond us and within us.”

Shakespeare put these words in the mouth of Henry IV: “O Lord, that lends me life, lend me a heart replete with thankfulness.” Shakespeare’s God is a Universal, life-affirming God, who equates gratitude with being alive. Ultimately, that’s what is meant by “thankfulness, absolutely ” – gratefulness in spite of *and* because of all the ways life might be otherwise, for better or worse. An attitude of gratitude that may empower you to stop grasping at the life you planned in order to embrace the life awaiting you, even if it involves exploding turkeys.

Fully aware that “it might be otherwise,” to paint a thank you note on your palm -- for the Cannon towels, the two strong legs; the respite at noontime; for the kettle boiling over, the chapel of eggs, the ravaged field grown wet with dew, the air-drying wishbone on Thanksgiving Eve.

To notice, reflect, and express. To utter that one all-purpose prayer from the depths of a grateful, hungry heart: “Thank you, thank you, thank you for lending me this life... good, bad, or otherwise.”

So may it be.

Amen.