

## **Gratitude as a Spiritual Practice** **By Connie Gibbons, November 2021**

Welcome everyone.

Our fellowship is a community of individuals who support each other in seeking spiritual meaning and direction in our lives. When we gather, we seek to create a sacred time and place. As Unitarian-Universalists, we take action in support of a fair, just and compassionate society. All are welcome in a spirit of mutual respect.

### **Chalice lighting**

This morning and every Sunday morning, we join with UU congregations around the world to light a chalice, the symbol of our faith tradition.

We light our chalice as a symbol of gratitude as we celebrate the abundance of our lives together. May we be grateful for this day and for all the ways we nourish and uplift each other.

### **Joys and Concerns**

And now we will share joys and concerns. We come together this morning bringing with us all that is in our lives. In this space we draw on the strength of our community. In this space we share from our hearts what brings us joys and sorrow, what brings us worry and delight, what makes us afraid and what makes us dance.

### **First Reading**

Our first reading is by Lucian B Watkins, an African-American poet who lived from 1879 to 1921, entitled *The Flower at My Window*.

O! my heart now feels so cheerful as I go with footsteps light  
In the daily toil of my dear home;  
And I'll tell to you the secret that now makes my life so bright—  
There's a flower at my window in full bloom.

It is radiant in the sunshine, and so cheerful after rain;  
And it wafts upon the air its sweet perfume.  
It is very, very lovely! May its beauties never wane—  
This dear flower at my window in full bloom.

Nature has so clothed it in such glorious array,  
And it does so cheer our home, and hearts illumine;  
Its dear mem'ry I will cherish though the flower fade away—  
This dear flower at my window in full bloom.

Oft I gaze upon this flower with its blossoms pure and white.  
And I think as I behold its gay costume,  
While through life we all are passing may our lives be always bright  
Like this flower at my window in full bloom.

## **Hymn - Spirit of Life**

Spirit of life, come unto me  
Sing in my heart, all the stirrings of compassion  
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea  
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice  
Roots hold me close, wings set me free  
Spirit of life, come to me, come to me.

## **Reading**

Our next reading is by Susan Manker-Seale in *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, ed Scott W. Alexander.

Deep in our innermost core we yearn to be connected with the mystery we call God, or nature, or the spirit. We yearn for that sense of oneness with each other and all creation, to know our place and our value. And, often, we yearn for someone to show us how to get there, to direct us to the right path that will lead us on the way to a deeper spirituality.

There is no one right path to a deeper spirituality. There are many right paths, and the one you choose may serve for a while, and then need to be changed over time. Like the Buddha who left everything to go off in search of enlightenment, you may find yourself going back to yourself in the end, as did he, to your own home and people, to a greater understanding of the value of the mundane alongside the spiritual, and the importance of learning to balance your life.

## **Sermon**

When I was around 35, I wasn't having an easy time. I had just made the difficult decision to stay in Australia permanently, I was in a painful relationship with a married man, I had to leave my lovely company-provided house in Toorak and move into to a fairly old and crummy house in the suburbs.

On the first morning after the move, I woke up alone in a house I didn't like, in a suburb I didn't relate to, surrounded by chaos, so many boxes, no chance of any help from my paramour, so much to do, all on my own. I was feeling overwhelmed, lonely, and a bit frightened.

And just as I stood around looking at all this mess, feeling pretty sorry for myself, wondering where to start, the doorbell rang. It was my friend Sharon and her husband Graeme. And Graeme was wearing his toolbelt.

When I think of that moment, I can still remember the profound feeling of gratitude I felt. I can still feel it. It's almost physical. Just thinking about it still makes me feel quite emotional.

Today I'm going to talk about gratitude as a spiritual practice – or at least a practice. But first, let's talk about gratitude itself. What is gratitude?

First and foremost, it's a feeling. Like the feeling I just described.

I'm expect all of you have also experienced an intense feeling of gratitude arising spontaneously in response to something good that happened in your life. Small acts

of kindness, generous offers and acts of help and support when we really need them. When these things happen, when we are given gifts – tangible or intangible – we can feel it. We know it – that’s gratitude.

And gratitude is an important way of connecting with other people. We’re taught when we’re young to say “thank you” when we’re helped or given something. Words of thanks signal acknowledgement of another’s part in benefiting our lives. “Thank you” is a part of our human connection. It says, “I noticed what you did, and I am glad, I appreciate you.”

This is an important way that we connect with the people around us. To feel gratitude and not express it would be a missed opportunity to make a positive connection with another person.

In our culture we have become accustomed to getting immediate gratification and for feeling entitled to all the gifts we have. Many, many good things come to us almost effortlessly throughout our lives. Feeling thankful and expressing gratitude reminds us we are not entitled -- and that many people – both near and far – do not have the gifts we have. To live without gratitude – to not express gratitude -- would be selfish. It would be an implicit claim of entitlement and privilege.

Gratitude reminds us of how dependent we are on those around us. The practice of saying “thank you” is a reality check on our tendency to think we don’t need others. It’s important to acknowledge the network of relationships that we live in. And not only our relationships with other people, but also our relationship with the universe, the interdependent web that we’re a part of.

Sometimes there’s a person to be grateful to. But other times, there’s no one person to thank. You’re just grateful for the gifts you’ve received or the situation you’re in. But who are your feelings directed to? Who are you thanking?

Many religions focus a lot on gratitude – gratitude to god. Praise God. Thanks be to God. Thank you, Jesus. We hear that a lot. The Judeo-Christian tradition has some wonderful language of gratitude. Here’s just a few lines from Psalms Chapter 104:

Thou makest springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills,  
they give drink to every beast of the field; the wild asses quench their thirst.  
By them the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the  
branches. From thy lofty abode, thou waterest the mountains; the earth is  
satisfied with the fruit of thy work.

But, if you don’t believe in a personal god, who do you thank for the shining sun or the sound of a magpie caroling? If you don’t believe in a “thankable” god up there collecting praise, you might wonder how to direct your gratitude.

But you don’t need to believe that there is a “divine someone” to experience and express gratitude. The important thing is to notice it and express it, if only to yourself. You might say “Thank you, Universe” or just, “I am grateful.”

The word gratitude comes from the Latin word *gratia*, which means gratefulness, but also grace or graciousness, depending on the context. In some ways, gratitude encompasses all of these meanings. Gratitude is a thankful appreciation of what we have received, whether it’s tangible or intangible. With gratitude, we have the grace

to acknowledge the goodness in our lives. In the process we usually recognize that the source of that goodness lies at least partially outside ourselves. As a result, being grateful also helps us connect to something larger than ourselves as individuals — whether to other people, to nature, or a higher power. It connects us to the interdependent web of all existence.

But why should we make gratitude a practice? Why make a conscious effort to count our blessings?

A quick search on the web unearthed quite a few articles about the research into the positive benefits of gratitude. It turns out that cultivating an “attitude of gratitude” has been linked to better health, sounder sleep, less anxiety and depression, greater satisfaction with life and kinder behaviour toward others.

For example, an experiment conducted at the University of California instructed people to keep a journal listing five things they were grateful for -- like a friend's generosity, something they'd learned, a sunset they'd enjoyed. Just one sentence for each of the five things — and done only once a week. After two months there were significant effects. Compared with a control group, the people keeping the gratitude journal were more optimistic and felt happier. They also reported fewer physical problems. After two months of once a week!

A Harvard study also showed that gratitude is associated with greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships. Another study showed that feeling grateful makes people less likely to turn aggressive when provoked.

Not just psychologists, but philosophers have also had much to say about gratitude.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of our own – a Unitarian Minister for a time, who lived from 1803 – 1882, said this: “Cultivate the habit of being grateful for every good thing that comes to you, and to give thanks continuously. And because all things have contributed to your advancement, you should include all things in your gratitude.”

Charles Dickens, another Unitarian, said, "Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has plenty; not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some."

Dalai Lama – “Every day, think as you wake up: Today I am fortunate to have woken up. I am alive. I have a precious human life. I am not going to waste it.”

Rumi, 13th century Persian poet: “If you have only one prayer in your life – make it thank-you.”

The philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who lived in the 1600s, advocated quite a specific gratitude practice. He suggested that we ask ourselves the following three questions 1) who or what inspired me today 2) what brought me happiness today and 3) what Brought me comfort and deep peace?

So let's consider the idea of a gratitude as a spiritual practice? First of all, what is a spiritual practice?

According to this book, *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, it is an activity in which you can regularly and intentionally engage. It is a time to focus on being the kind of person you wish to be. It can offer a "time-out" from the regular hustle and bustle of our days. And hopefully, a spiritual practice will help you feel spiritually connected or fulfilled. Scott Alexander, who edited this book, says a spiritual practice significantly deepens the quality of your relationship with the miracle of life, both within and beyond you. There are many forms of spiritual practice. This book mentions contemplation, mindfulness, creating an altar, sacred reading, prayer, fasting and meditation. Gratitude is just one possible focus for a spiritual practice.

But among the many spiritual practices available, gratitude is perhaps one of the most accessible and one of the most powerful.

And there are many ways to express gratitude as a spiritual practice. You can express gratitude out loud to yourself or to someone else. You can write down what you're grateful for. You simply silently and intentionally name what you're grateful for.

Let's look at a few practices.

### A Gratitude Journal

Keeping a gratitude journal is one of the ancient spiritual practices. It's been discussed in literature throughout the millennia.

A gratitude journal doesn't need to be formal. Some people keep a notebook on the nightstand and think about several things that happened to them during the day that they are grateful for before they go to sleep -- or when they wake up in the morning. Now we even have the ability to record on our phones.

Some people pick a number -- three or five -- that they will identify each week or each day. This is a very easy way to start. But as you write, try to be specific and think about the sensations you felt when something good happened to you.

The medium doesn't have to be permanent. One writer said she had gotten great satisfaction at writing what she was grateful for in the sand.

There are different views about whether to keep the records. Some people find benefit in rereading these journals when times are difficult. Or believe that reviewing your journal could help you get insight into yourself and your life. Others think maintaining an archive isn't the point and it isn't necessary to benefit from this practice.

Either way, it's the act of opening your heart and expanding your awareness to the abundance of good in the world that's the primary source of this benefit.

### Gratitude Walk

Another form of a gratitude practice is to combine it with walking.

Rev Lee Anne Washington, of the First Unitarian-Universalist Church of Jacksonville Florida described her gratitude practice that she incorporates into her daily walk. First, she becomes aware how her body feels and feels grateful for her body and for

the ability to walk. Then she becomes aware of her surroundings – the sights and sounds and smells and she appreciates the beauty around her.

Then she becomes aware of her own breathing, quiets her mind (or tries to) and lets the things in her life or in her day that she is grateful for come to her.

I like this idea because I find that developing a new habit comes more easily if I attach it to something that I already do. Making your daily walk a daily gratitude practice, could be a great way of incorporating this practice into your life.

### 7th Principle Gratitude

Rev Washington had another idea that I really love. She uses the 7<sup>th</sup> UU principle as inspiration for gratitude. 7<sup>th</sup> principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Try taking one small thing that you enjoy and find gratitude for all that has gone into it.

For example, if you like apples. Think about and be grateful for how easy it is for us to go to a store and buy an apple. Be grateful for the grocer who got up early and bought that apple for his shop. Think of the farmer, perhaps generations ago, who planted that tree. And thank the farmer who tended the tree, the worker who picked the apple and the drivers who brought it from the farm to the city. Thank the bees who pollinated the tree, the worms that cultivated the soil and the rain that watered it. Feel gratitude for the beauty of that apple tree in the springtime.

### Share your gratitude

You may wish to share your gratitude. What about writing a thank-you note to someone who had a positive effect on your life? Send it, or even deliver and read it in person if that works for you. You could make a practice of sending one gratitude letter a month.

### Other ways to cultivate gratitude

Create a wall of photographs that remind you of your gratitude, find an image that you use as the desktop for your computer or phone. You could keep a bowl that you drop a pebble into whenever you feel grateful. Any way that will enable you to bring your gratitude to mind throughout the day and to express your gratitude for all of the blessings in your life.

Sometimes we are suffering too much to feel grateful. There are days, even weeks or months, when we are overwhelmed by problems or pain or tragedy or disappointment. At those times, we may not feel lucky or blessed. Gratitude may feel out of our grasp.

Sometimes, well-meaning people point out that we still have things to be grateful for. But when we can't feel grateful, we can't. At least, not right now.

But this might be good time to try the 7<sup>th</sup> Principle method to focus on feeling grateful for one small thing and the web that supported it. In times of difficulty, even small feelings of gratitude can be a very healing practice.

My practice is to think of three things I'm grateful for just before I go to sleep. I like it. I never have trouble thinking of three things. And it leaves me with a nice, warm and comfortable feeling to take with me into my sleep.

So, gratitude is a feeling. It's a wonderful feeling. It can swell our hearts and make us feel safe, supported, loved, and lucky. A gratitude practice is a way of finding this feeling, to bring to mind and heart all the good that is in our lives and let that feeling wash over us.

May each of us find gratitude for all the gifts that we have received.

And may each of us feel the warmth of that grace in our hearts.

May it be so. Amen

### **A moment for gratitude**

Let's take a moment to think about the things we feel grateful for today. Then, if anyone would like to, they can share a gratitude with the group.

### **Hymn – For the Beauty of the Earth.**

For the beauty of the earth, for the splendor of the skies,  
For the love which from our birth over and around us lies,  
Source of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise.

For the joy of ear and eye, for the heart and mind's delight,  
for the mystic harmony linking sense to sound and sight.  
Source of all, to thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise.

For the wonder of each hour, of the day and of the night,  
Hill and vale, and tree and flower, sun and moon, and stars of light.  
Source of all, to thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise.

For the joy of human care, sister, brother, parent, child,  
For the kinship we all share, for all gentle thoughts and mild.  
Source of all, to thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise.

### **Chalice extinguishing**

We drink from wells we did not dig;

We are warmed by fires we did not build.

To those before us, we are grateful.

For those beside us, we are grateful.

For all things which come to us as gifts from sources beyond ourselves, we are grateful.

For this fellowship, which welcomes and supports us, we are grateful.