

GRATITUDE

I don't always say it, but I am grateful for so many things and for so many people that have touched my life. I'm glad we have the Holiday of Thanksgiving in these United States, for it comes as a wonderful reminder of all the things for which I am thankful! This year the holiday is a little later in November than in most years, but thankfulness and gratitude are always appropriate, so I am starting a little early to celebrate. I am really glad that Halloween has become a bigger event each year, but I wish Thanksgiving weren't becoming the next commercial opportunity to stretch the Black Friday sales! I used to know it was a real holiday because so many stores were closed. I'm not anti-commerce, but there is something nice about having one or two days a year when most of the stores are closed! I guess there will still be a lot of stores closed for Christmas and New Years, but I digress!

I am grateful for beautiful people in so many beautiful, spectacular, and interesting parts of the world! I am grateful for my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles who are no longer with me but who helped create such wonderful memories for me. I am grateful to my friends, my brother, my exes, my kids, nephews and nieces, and to my grandkids for making my life more interesting and sometimes more challenging. I am thankful for the gift of life, with all the opportunities to learn and grow and to feel the whole range of human emotions.

I am grateful for those people who have shared their stories with me in preparation for weddings and memorial services, in new member classes, in books, in magazines, and in daily life, for it is those human connections that reveal so many amazing things about people and the world. I am grateful too, for scientists who discover amazing things and for science fiction authors who dream and imagine amazing worlds that may someday be created or discovered!

I am also grateful for trains! For planes and ships and cars, too, but especially for trains, trains large and small and in-between; trains to ride and trains to play with and trains to watch! I am also grateful for dogs and cats and other animal companions who don't ask a lot from us but make life more interesting.

I am grateful for friends new and old, for connections in this Unitarian Universalist universe that make it easy to meet other UUs. I am grateful for the churches I have served before, but I am especially grateful to be here with you now in Stockton. As we prepare for my formal Installation, I am grateful to so many of you for working on this event! I am a little bit afraid to name names for fear that I might forget someone, but I really appreciate all your efforts and I am looking forward to next Sunday! Thank you one and all for all you have done, are doing, or will do to make that day really special!

When I was a kid I always had to be prompted to write thank you notes. I probably am a little better with thank you e-mails, but if I forget to thank you for all the good you are doing, I apologize in advance. I appreciate you all, and I appreciate all that you do for this church.

By the way, in a few minutes, I am going to give you the opportunity to share one or two things for which you are grateful, so be thinking about what you might like to share!

Meister Eckhart said, "If the only prayer you say in your whole life is 'thank you,' that would suffice." Matthew Fox introduced me to Meister Eckhart, the most prominent Dominican Preacher and Theologian of his era (c 1260-1327). He preached in both German and Latin, and was a teacher of preachers. Matthew Fox, also trained as a Dominican Theologian, found in Eckhart an alternative perspective to the fall/redemption idea of Original Sin that has for so long dominated Christian thought. Matt Fox's foundational work, *Original Blessing* (Bear & Co. 1983), presented this alternative perspective in 4 sections

also stemming from Eckhart's work: *the via positiva, the via negativa, the via creativa, and the via transformativa*. The Via Positiva, the way of affirmation, thanksgiving and blessing, celebrates the gift of creation, of life and love. In this crazy world, we could use more time for thanksgiving, more opportunities for expressing gratitude.

Practicing Mindfulness also leads to appreciation. How could one not be appreciative of this beautiful world and the amazing creatures and people in it if one is truly mindful? To truly see the flowers and plants in a garden or in the wild leads most of us to gratitude for their beauty. To see puppies and kittens playing is to bring forth gratitude for the life force that they express. To see children exploring the world, discovering amazing things, playing together is to know a deep satisfaction and appreciation for the generations to come.

To live mindfully and appreciatively is to be more fully alive. In the busy-ness of modern life, it is easy to not notice people or things, to focus on getting done those things with which we are tasked or have tasked ourselves. But it is in our interactions with others and with the world in which we live that we truly find meaning. It is not in the ordinary chores and tasks, the grind of work, that we are likely to find deeper meaning and satisfaction. It is in the beauty of life itself, the first flower of the spring, the Crayola box of fall colors in the leaves, the elegance of newly fallen snow, the deep blue of the ocean.

To live in gratitude is to notice the little things, the kindnesses of a friend or neighbor, the wet nose and slobbery tongue of an overgrown lapdog, the sandpaper massage of a cat's tongue, the call of a bird, the howl of coyote or wolf. There are so many things from the natural world to appreciate! There are so many people to appreciate, and even the annoying ones give us something to talk about!

We live in an amazing world. And even when times may be challenging, life is a great adventure, a great opportunity. No matter whether we

believe in a creating God, Goddess, or the Big Bang, we ought to be grateful for whatever force brought forth this amazing universe. We will not likely find out the truth about God or Goddesses, or heaven in the midst of life anyway, so all we can really do is choose how we will live our lives. I recommend mindfulness, awareness, appreciation, and gratitude, for they are so much better than other alternatives.

In our national mythos, the pilgrims took time to feast and celebrate Thanksgiving with the indigenous peoples after the first harvest in their new world. The turkeys may not have fared so well, but the pilgrims took time to show their gratitude for the harvest and the blessings they felt in their new home. For the sake of indigenous peoples, I wish that idyllic scene might have continued to typify the relationship between the new Americans and the native people. For at least a couple of seasons, the new Americans joined the natives in celebrating Thanksgiving, and Thanksgiving became far more recently a national holiday in which stores closed and people took time to celebrate their gratitude with loved ones, friends and family members.

Even though Thanksgiving this year is not until the 28th, I invite us to make the rest of this month a time of mindfulness, awareness, appreciation, and gratitude! And if you must shop on Thanksgiving Day, I encourage you to do so with an attitude of gratitude, even if the lines are long, the stores crowded, the shoppers and clerks crazed!

And now, I want to invite you to share a few of those things and people for which you are grateful. As you think about your lives and the world in which we live, what do you appreciate, what would you like to celebrate?

Thank you for sharing your thanksgivings. Let us all try to keep thanksgiving gratitude in our hearts and minds even in the coming holiday season! Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!