

GRATITUDE FOR FRIENDS part 2

Thanksgiving is the most American of holidays at least for those of us in the United States! (Probably not so much on the Reservations) Thanksgiving has been celebrated as a Federal holiday since 1863. It remembers a harvest feast celebrated in 1621 by 53 Pilgrims and 90 Native Americans at Plymouth Plantation with wild Turkey, Venison, and Indian Corn. The natives had taught those refugees from Europe how to grow corn and catch eel, according to some firsthand accounts, but they presumably were already familiar with hunting Turkey and Deer. The Pilgrims had already lost almost half their numbers in the first year, so whether they would have survived without assistance of the resident peoples is an open question. Fortunately for them, the Pilgrims were graciously welcomed to the lands only recently discovered by white folk! (As I understand it, those religious dissenters were not even properly vetted, nor were they imprisoned while their criminal and driving records were checked!)

Being welcomed by new friends or greeted by old friends or relatives to share a holiday is really a gift that we probably take too much for granted. I know Thanksgiving is way behind Halloween and not even on the same chart as Christmas for consumer spending, but it does start the Christmas buying season with Black Friday! Thanksgiving, though still widely celebrated, is kind of the Rodney Dangerfield of holidays, chopped liver, or something. Why, if it weren't associated with Turkey dinners with family and a long weekend, it might have already disappeared off the consumer holiday shopping chart.

I am glad that it hasn't become more of a consumer holiday, though Black Friday keeps trying to encroach! There is quite a bit of history now as a time to watch football games, but some families entirely skip that part of the holiday. Some churches have a special Thanksgiving Service, often led by youth. And my church growing up had a hike, breakfast, service and Turkey Bowl Football Game all led by the youth group. I carry fond memories of those gatherings, as well as of the family feast that followed!

Since we had all the church doings for Thanksgiving, we usually had the family dinner at our house, with my Aunt Margaret, Uncle Duane, and Cousin Nancy coming over to join us. When they hosted our family, the day usually included a drive or walk along the Indiana beach, but when we hosted we sometimes took a walk in one of the Forest Preserves or went to the Brookfield Zoo. My brother was the only one who usually watched much football! Even though my parents' generation is gone, I still can treasure the memory of those gatherings as well as the youth group gatherings on Thanksgiving morning. This year I get to be grandpa for Thanksgiving and I don't even have to cook anything! I am expecting all the kids and grandkids (and probably my first wife) to be there.

I have lost touch with most of my friends from High School. Occasionally I see one or two, but we haven't even had a reunion since 1985. Maybe someone will plan a reunion before our 50th anniversary of graduating, but I am beginning to doubt it. I have lots of memories of good times with friends in the High School and earlier years. Some of my old friends went to grade school, high school, and college with me. It was when I was in Seminary that I really started to lose touch with most of them, and then after I moved West contact really became rare. The memories are still vivid of some of the good times though! I am grateful for all my friends, the ones I grew up with, and the ones I have known since. Of course, as a Minister, I have also had to leave behind a lot of parishioners I considered friends. Ministerial ethics require that we do that, so only in rare cases have I stayed in touch with people from churches I have served. The only exceptions generally were a few folks I was very close to who contacted me after a respectable period of time! Each new church has offered a nice group of new friends, along with a few folks outside the church such as colleagues who have become friends, but it is hard to lose touch with friends one cares about!

I have been fortunate to have relatives spread out pretty widely across the country with several around Salt Lake City, and others now in Tennessee, Georgia, Connecticut, Washington, Indiana, and Michigan. My brother and his kids are still in the Chicago area so I do have a good reason to get home from time to time, usually in the warmer months!

Who are the people you most enjoy seeing for the holidays, both friends and relatives? Who are the people that come to mind when you recall your favorite Thanksgivings? Since a number of you are older than me, I expect that you have said goodbye to a number of close friends and family members over the years. Some have lost people this year or within the last couple of years. I hope that we all are at a place where we can remember with gratitude those people who have meant so much to us at earlier times in our lives. I want to invite you to think of the people that you would most like to celebrate with for Thanksgiving. What would you say to those special people this year? If they are still around, I hope you can tell them how much you appreciate them! If they are gone, I hope that you will remember them fondly on Thanksgiving!

Meister Eckhart preached in the late 13th and early 14th century, saying that if the only prayer you offered was to say Thank You, it would be enough. Thanksgiving is an opportunity to say thank you to people, God, and the universe. It is a time we set aside for appreciation, gratitude, and thanks! It is also a good time for letting go of hurts and anger, for forgiving those who have harmed us and celebrating the beauty and wonders of this earth that we share.

I have been accused of not saying thank you often enough at times over the years, so I am trying harder to express my gratitude to friends, relatives, parishioners and colleagues when they have done something for me or for the church. In that light, thank you to all of you who have supported and encouraged me and worked for the good of the church this year. If I haven't said it enough, thank you for all the good you each do! It is not always easy to keep a small church going these days, so it takes all of our efforts. The return on our investment is a community which is here to support us and care for us in difficult times, and here to provide a safe and honest space to be our real selves all the time. This congregation is a gift to as well as from each of us, and it depends on the commitment we each make to serve as leaders and on committees and to provide financial support for the well-being of the church. We are in the process of getting some new doors and enhancing security and protecting our investment in these facilities, and I hope that all of those of you who can give a little more to pay for these additions will do so.

These buildings were provided to us by earlier generations of UUs, and we have a sacred responsibility to keep the work of Unitarian Universalism alive here in Stockton, for we build on their shoulders. We know from historical records that even before Unitarians started this congregation, Rev. Thomas Starr-King preached in Stockton and rallied sympathy for the Union before the Civil War. When Unitarians made the first and second starts of a church, they were already building on what the Minister from San Francisco had started. Starr King was ordained and credentialed as both a Universalist and a Unitarian, by the way. At other times in our history the American Unitarian Association and the Unitarian Universalist Association have helped us out. We ought to thank our friends in the Association and in other congregations who help us to sometimes thrive and always keep going!

We have so many things for which to be thankful, as individuals, families, and as a congregation! This week, I really would like to give you time to share a few words about the people and things for which you are thankful! So let me bring the microphone down and give you a chance to share!

Thank you each for sharing people and things for which you are thankful! I hope that this attitude of gratitude will stay with each of us throughout the holiday season, even with those of you who may be traveling and those who may venture out to the stores on Black Friday! To each and all, have a Happy Thanksgiving!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!