

Gratitude as a Spiritual Path

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Thanksgiving is a day when, many of us stop our lives and give thanks.
-Thanks for the coming around again of this Fall festival,
-Thanks for the many gifts of the Earth, and the harvest season.
-Thanks for those we love and all that sustain us in body, mind and spirit.

At the same time, **may we remember** our brothers and sisters who observe this day as a National Day of Mourning.
May we remember our Opening Words this morning by our UUA President, Rev. Dr. Susan Frederick-Gray.
that we are part of one great family of all souls,
that our destiny is bound together, and no one is outside of the circle of love.

May we remember to challenge any system of damaging theologies that harms not only others but us as well.

And especially at this time, it is important that – as we are a people of faith who work for justice and equity for all. act in whatever ways we can to support the well being of Native Americans and lessen the divide that separates.

That being said, and importantly, **remembered by all of us**, I now want to focus this sermon on gratitude.
I attended some years ago a session at one of our UU General Assemblies where I heard Rev. Dr. Galen Guengerich, Senior minister of All Souls Church in New York City, speak about the importance of gratitude as a spiritual path.
Much of today's sermon derives from his recent book, *The Way of Gratitude*, 2020, which as he states, is his work of nearly thirty years of thinking about gratitude as a spiritual path for us as Unitarian Universalists.

He defines spirituality as *the practice of opening ourselves to everyone and everything else*.
Gratitude, he says is *the leading indicator of our spiritual progress*¹.
Our second Reading this morning reveals the profound influence Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy and theology had on Rev. Galen Guengerich's perception of reality.
Whitehead's thinking impacted Galen's perspective that gratitude plays a major role in helping us live lives that are closer to understanding that reality.

¹ Galen Guengerich. *The Way of Gratitude. A New Spirituality for Today*. New York: Random House, 2020, Kindle edition, p. 12.

Whitehead's central insight is that "*everything becomes whatever it becomes by virtue of how it relates to everything else.*"
Inspired by Whitehead, Galen writes,
"*whether you are a proton, a person, or even God, your identity over time develops through a process of relating to everything else.*"
This is, of course, our seventh Principle, as Unitarian Universalists,
of *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are each a part.*

Both Whitehead and Galen have a deep faith
in this interrelatedness of everything to everything else,
a faith where one cannot discern all that there is –

As Whitehead eloquently wrote,
"*To experience this faith is to know that our experience, dim and fragmentary as it is, yet resonates with the utmost depths of reality.*"

Thus, even though we cannot perceive everything accurately,
what is most important are relationships.
Whitehead believed that what is true in the material world
– that everything is related –
is also true in the spiritual world.

Just as atoms are combined in physical reactions,
we humans are interconnected
through all the interactions within our human experiences –
and nothing, from deep suffering to ecstatic joy
is ever not part of the interactions of all that is.
And is never forgotten.

It becomes part of the fabric of the whole.

Whitehead describes his thoughts this way:
everything that happens in the universe,
"*its suffering, its sorrows, its triumphs, its immediacies of joy*"
become part and parcel of the Whole.
And it is this binding of everything into one cloth
that Whitehead states is an enduring refuge,
and that he labels God.

Not a God of any traditional religion,
but this "God" is Whitehead's way
of describing spiritual experience as a **feeling**,
that connects everything and everyone.
A **feeling** that is deep, expansive, profound.
A **feeling** of connection to all that has occurred in the past,
and as Galen states, *all that is possible*.
Galen concurs with Whitehead's term of God,
meaning as being *the experience of ultimate belonging*.²

² Galen Guengerich. Kindle, p.81

So, you may be thinking, okay. That's cool.
But pause a bit with me to ponder this way of thinking about reality.
This is a radical idea in our culture which values above all,
the individual and his/her/their rights to live as separate beings,
not connected, not perceiving the negative effects of harmful actions
that affect how one interacts with others nor with the earth.
Today we are even more separated by a pandemic,
by ideologies that value one form of being human as superior to all others,
by technology that yes, provides a lot of good, but also at the same time,
spreads disinformation and fake news to the detriment
of people understanding what is true and what is not true.

As human beings, we are made not of sound bites,
but of the elements of our universe.
The earth element is our home, as Native traditions have long taught.
The water element flows through about 70% of who we are.
The air element is so essential for our living, as we breath in
our first breath at birth, and breath out our last breath when we die.
And the fire element gives us the energy to do what is possible.
We best be thankful and grateful for these elements that create life –
Our lives and the lives of all creatures on our earth today.

As Galen writes, *"We are formed within and from the natural world,
And we are nurtured by it. The practice of gratitude calls us to a spiritual way
of living that returns the natural world to its place of reverence."*³
Reverence, reverence for the natural world.

If we had such reverence, would there be a climate crisis today?
Would our soil be damaged by chemicals, or our water polluted by plastics?
Would our forests, especially in the West, be devoured by fire?
Would our air be unbreathable and unhealthy in parts of the globe?
I believe definitely not. And so, this is a good goal for us, as UUs.
To restore a reverence for our earth and its elements, as part
of what we are truly thankful for, because such reverence would then mean
that we care not only for the earth,
but for our very selves and for generations to follow.

I enjoy, as I know many of you do, living here in central New Hampshire.
Unlike many people in our world, we are fortunate to have clean air,
clean water, good earth to grow our gardens,
and, as of yet, no devastating forest fires.
I suspect that many of us here understand the true joy
of being connected to the natural world,
through a walk in the woods, a day in our yards, time at a lake,
enjoying the birds and animals and plants that surround us.
We are fortunate to live here, and may we be grateful for this.
I'm sure you all have lots of memories of experiences

³ Guengerich, p. 85

in the natural world that bring you joy.

I do, too. Right now, allow me to share one.
This past summer I was sitting on a bench in Jeri B's garden
with glorious flowers all around, enjoying the rich canvas of colors and scents.
As we sat chatting about the two doves living in her eave right above us,
and their gallant efforts to raise a family,
a ruby throated hummingbird flew right at us,
stared at us for about 30 seconds, and then flew away.
There was for me true joy in those moments.

Galen Guengerich urges us each day, to look around and see
what needs to be nurtured and sustained.
May we have as a gratitude goal for every day to
*"take personally, each in our own way, the needs of the natural world."*⁴

In terms of our human relationships and gratitude, Galen suggests that
*our gratitude goal should be to increase the quality of our relationships.*⁵
Our relationships consist not only of the past experiences we have accumulated,
but also, of all the possibilities of how we might proceed with our relationships.
Whitehead believed that what makes some relationships
better than others is the intensity of the relationship.
We have more connection with another
when we value the relationship more.
We also value a relationship more if it is reciprocal,
in terms of the benefits of the relationship.

Just remember with me a few of the people
who have passed on from our congregation
over the five years I have been your minister -
people whom we came to value, love, and received
from them their individual reciprocal gifts to us:
Ramona White, who shared with us through joys and sorrows Coffee Hours and
book club the realities of her life.
She felt a part of us and gave back to us,
valuing us as her spiritual home.
It was a privilege for me to sit with her as she took her final breath.

David B, who served as our Moderator at our Annual Meetings,
gathering us all in a role call in the sanctuary
before we could escape an Annual Meeting which would
be held a few minutes later downstairs, during coffee hour.
David cleverly made sure he had a quorum for our Annual Meetings.

Bill Z, who loved our congregation,
enjoyed preaching as well as singing in our choir.

⁴ Guengerich, p.87.

⁵ Guengerich, p 92

Bill always spoke with me after a service,
with words of encouragement for my ministry here with all of you.
He was constantly giving back though out his life and ministry.

Susanna D, whom we helped out of homelessness
and into a beautiful apartment, who often cried during the Lovingkindness
Meditation during our meditation group when she read the lines
“May my parents be well happy, and peaceful, may no harm come to them.”
She would stop and say, “I don’t know why I am crying.”
And someone else would finish the reading for her.
Suzanna loved being part of our congregation,
and gave back whenever she could, such as being a Greeter,
member of our Social Justice Committee, and regular at Meditation.

So, Galen’s point that reciprocity and valuing of relationship are
ingredients of what makes for a deepening of relationships is clearly
demonstrated by these dear ones who have passed on but are still with us.

We can do the same litmus test with every relationship
we have today in our lives.
I can feel the influences and sense of presences
in my life of those whom I have just named,
and how each of them is part of the wholeness that makes up who I am.
For these folks and many others, I am truly grateful.

The late British novelist Iris Murdoch wrote that “*love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real.*”⁶
Whatever arises in any relationship is depending upon
not only whomever we are and what we need in a relationship as well
but also, whomever the other person is in his/her/their own unique ways.
As Galen states, “*Relationships never happen in general.
They always develop between two particular people.
If two people are fortunate, they both realize that the other person is also real.*”

Thus, when we are grateful and can express gratitude for another person,
this is a way to focus not on what he/she/they can do for us,
but to honor who the other is, as a person.

So, Galen concludes that *our gratitude goal
should be to increase the quality of our relationships.
We accomplish this goal one person at a time, one interaction at a time.*⁷

And consider this. We live in a world
where we are interdependent with all that sustains us.
There is no way that one can live the myth of the totally self-reliant person.
We depend on our environment to support us.
We look to others for to help to make our lives possible,
and we each need to be responsible for our own share

⁶ Guengerich, p. 99.

⁷ Guengerich. P. 103.

in making the world around us good for the earth and for all of life.
Living a life of gratitude can inspire us to feel good
about our relationships to the world around us.

We can become grateful for our daily bread,
the food and water that sustains us,
as well as all the creatures and plants upon our earth that surrounds us,
often giving us joy.
With a practice of gratitude, all creatures, great and small,
become a part of us, as does the earth itself.
And, importantly, with a practice of gratitude,
we can become more and more aware of how we humans
have harmed the natural world,
and work to repair such human-caused damage.

Native Americans traditionally bless
whatever they daily use to sustain their lives.
Theirs is a constant prayer of gratitude
for whatever they take from the earth and its creatures.
Just like in our children's story this morning
we too can practice, as do Native Americans, saying thank you for the water,
thank you for the sun that rises, thank you for the creatures of the earth,
thank you for the blessing of food and family and friends.

We often take for granted the gifts of our being alive every day-
I don't know about you, but I wake up in the morning, often with the thought,
"Still here, what is there to do today?"
I need to add to such thinking, "Still here and so grateful to be here."

A way of gratitude is a way of life that offers us,
not just on Thanksgiving, but every day,
a spiritual practice for our modern world.
I, for one, am grateful to Rev. Guengerich for writing his book,
A Way of Gratitude, for us as Unitarian Universalists
and for all interested in a daily spiritual path.
Such an everyday spiritual practice deepens our connections to all that is.
Our children's story, *The Secret of Giving Thanks*, says all of this in its own way.
Here are the final words from this beautiful children's book:

*The heart that gives thanks is a happy one.
For we cannot feel thankful and unhappy at the same time.
The more we say thanks, the more we find to be thankful for.
And the more we find to be thankful for, the happier we will become.*

May it come to be for all. Happy Thanksgiving. Peace and love to you.