

The Practice of Gratitude

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What an amazing weekend this has been! For those of you new or who were not able to be there, this weekend was the “Start Up” weekend for my new ministry here at First Unitarian Church. This was a two day conversation with the members and leaders of the church to hear directly from you your stories about ministry, your expectations for the future, and to gain a greater sense of direction and purpose as a congregation. I may not be on the deck of an aircraft carrier in a flight suit, but I think we can claim mission accomplished, at least for this weekend.

My favorite part was listening to the history on Friday night; an event many of you were present for. I hear stories about the past ministries. It is a daunting thought to put one’s name next to John McKinnon, Robert Doss, and Patrick O’Neill. I thought of all the hard work done by these ministers to build up this church into the place that it is today. And it was reassuring to me to hear that they were all human beings—not perfect Supermen. Still, they built the office of Senior Minister at First Unitarian Church into what it is today, and I am the direct recipient of

the fruits of their labor. Some day, my name will be on the plaque in the back of the sanctuary next to theirs. An amazing thing to contemplate.

I also thought of the interim ministers that directly preceded me: Heather Lynn Hansen, Robert Latham, and Arline Conan Sutherland. Interim years are by definition a difficult time. These ministers served this congregation with one primary mission: set things up so that the new Senior Minister can succeed. They sacrificed their own comfort, their own innate need for positive feedback, and made the hard calls that leadership has to make sometimes for the greater good. I heard that it was not easy for this church in those times, although they were not universally bad either. Indeed, I was quite moved that they would be so forward thinking as to put the concern for my future ministry ahead of themselves.

The only possible response to these ministers for the new Senior Minister has to be gratitude. Gratitude for the work of the past, gratitude for their sacrifices and victories, gratitude to a congregation that stayed with it through the tough times. I am sure that we have not seen the end of difficult times in our congregation, but we are in such a better position now to handle it. For that I am so thankful. Gratitude, thankfulness, these are the things I wish to talk about this morning. They are good things to bear in mind as we head into the holiday season this week.

Gratitude is more than a mere feeling, it is a spiritual practice. The more we think about the things in our life that we could and should be grateful for, the more we cultivate the feeling of gratitude. So gratitude is a practice in addition to being an emotion. The more we seek out ways to be thankful, be they sitting around a large turkey this Thursday, or any day of the week, the more we reflect on the number of good things that have come our way in the past year, the more we will experience gratitude. I once read a Christian writer, whose name I forget, talking about prayer. He said that the greatest prayer we can ever utter is, "Thank You." This strikes me as a good practice regardless of whether you have a prayer life or not.

Even if we don't practice gratitude, it sneaks up on us of course. I learned the need to practice gratitude very vividly this summer. In mid July, just a few months ago, everything was a done deal. I had said all my good byes in Nebraska. The lease on the old house was ending and the lease on our new house in Delaware had already begun. We took a number of appraisals on our worldly belonging from moving companies and scheduled a date for pick up. We went with one of the big name moving lines. They came and packed many of our things for us; they did the entire kitchen. "We will be here on Monday at 10 AM to load up!" So my wife Sharon and my son Thomas, and I packed our suitcases and spent the weekend in a hotel in Omaha.

Moving day came Monday morning. The movers were late: one hour, then two hours, then three hours. Our phone calls were not getting returned. We were standing around amidst a mountain range of cardboard boxes with no TV or books to distract our worrying minds. Finally we heard back from the moving company. It seemed that their driver had had a mechanical problem with his truck. The moving company wired him some money so that he could get it repaired. It looks like we won't be able to come out until tomorrow. Well you know these things happen, surely this poor driver didn't mean for his truck to break down. I have had that happen to my car and it's a pretty miserable experience. One day's delay was not that big of a deal.

The next morning we took Thomas to his daycare, and we waited among the boxes again. One hour late, two hours late, then three hours late. We call them up again. Well we don't know where the driver of the moving truck is, exactly. We wired him money yesterday, and no one has heard from him since. He doesn't answer his cell phone. Can't you send another truck? You are a big time company, surely you have more than one truck. We have a crew but that is the only truck available. Besides, the driver has all of your paperwork. We need that paperwork before we can even begin. We will be by tomorrow morning.

Another night in the hotel. The next day, we wait among the mountain of boxes: one hour late, two hours late, then three hours late. Sharon and I begin to notice a pattern. Still no word from our missing

driver and more importantly our missing paperwork. Being nice over the phone hasn't worked. Yelling at them over the phone hasn't worked. I have the thought, "Why am I entrusting all of my worldly possessions to these people to haul half way across the country?" Sharon is on the couch crying. When will we ever get to start our new life in Delaware?

That was about the moment I turned to Sharon and said, "Well I am ready to start cold calling moving companies out of the phone book." So I did. I told our story of woe and suffering to every competitor this moving company of ours had. One was incredulous that such a big operation would do this; he had assumed that I was going to tell them that I had used some fly by night moving line I had found on the internet. But this was mid July, the busiest of the busy season for moving companies. Trying to book a move this late was like trying to get a table at a four star restaurant on a Saturday night without a reservation. Most companies felt sorry for us, but they were booked solid. Those that weren't would not be able to load us up for another three or four weeks.

We called one of the moving companies that had done an appraisal for us, but we had not selected. Allied moving company, and yes I am giving them free advertising here, had some paperwork on us already. They too were shocked. We can get a crew and a truck there by Friday morning. Yes! We were both elated and skeptical. We had heard promises from moving companies before. Friday morning rolls around,

and they are fifteen minutes early! Their crew was friendly, smart, and strong! Sharon and I bought them water and Gatorade. I took orders and bought them all sandwiches for lunch. We were so grateful for all the stellar work this moving crew did.

As they loaded the last box onto the truck, Sharon and I walked down to our landlord's office to turn in our keys. We looked at our old house that we had lived in for five years with a bit of sadness, sentiment, and most of all excitement that the whole fiasco was over. We saw this big moving truck in the driveway with everything we had in the world, the life we had built together, moving to the new chapter in our life. It was very symbolic. We watched the driver of the truck get in—and the engine wouldn't start! I swear I am not making it up. It took the guy twenty of the longest minutes of my life to finally get the truck started and on the road. I like to think that was God's little joke on the Buddhist minister.

When life throws you a curveball like that move, when nothing seems to be going right, you are so grateful for when someone jumps in and helps. When I sit down at the Thanksgiving table this Thursday, and we do the obligatory "What are we all thankful for", I will have my list: a great new church and a new ministry, a new baby on the way, and a dispatcher at Allied moving company who practices compassion. I see this as a story about karma. Karma in a literal sense means "Action" that the actions we take in this life matter. Of course traditionally it

means that good actions result in a positive rebirth and negative actions in a negative rebirth. But it isn't just about the afterlife. Karma is really an acknowledgement that we are all interconnected with each other. What one person does, the actions they take, affect me, no matter how indirectly it may seem at first.

The driver of the first moving truck probably didn't think or certainly didn't care, about the paperwork in his truck; the job he had to do. He may very well have just taken money from his employer and left his job. We did not pay them up front, thank goodness, so this man lost business. Your dollars to the operating budget that paid for my move did not go to this man or the company he worked for. But his actions had consequences beyond him, consequences that affected me and my family and created suffering. At the same time, the person at Allied moving company took pity on us. He had felt some connection of shared suffering, he had empathy. He also had some power; the ability to book us within a month of our original moving day. He responded with compassion. His company did get paid. The moving crew received free food and drink. But still it did not feel like enough. We felt so much gratitude to these strangers who had helped us out of a tight jam, and whose good karma reached out even to this place.

One of my central religious beliefs is that we all are interconnected in ways we can never fully know or perhaps not even understand. What one of us does affects the rest directly or indirectly, in large ways and in

small ones. In other words I believe in karma. Thanksgiving is a holiday that asks us to remember, or at least contemplate, the ways in which others have touched our lives for the better. This remembering is a spiritual practice because it makes us more aware of our interconnections. I believe that the natural reaction to this spiritual practice of remembering is gratitude. Thus gratitude is both a feeling you get, and practice to implement.

In some ways this is like the story of Paul who was a bone marrow donor. He didn't want to know exactly who he had done this tremendous kindness to—he had saved someone's life. By not knowing, he can imagine that he has done something kind to everyone he meets. I don't think he means this in a paternalistic way, although I imagine it could devolve into that. No, I have found that when you try to trace back all of the people who have blessed your life with their presence, its hard to go back very far. I know about the dispatcher who helped me, but what about his parents? Or that person's minister, priest, imam or rabbi who may have taught them in Sunday School to be kind to others when you can? I can't thank them, yet they too played a part. In situations like that, when you can't know or truly thank the person involved, the only option you have is to pay it forward. This is what Paul is doing—he is paying it forward, doing some great kindness to a stranger is a way of practicing gratitude for all of the kindnesses we have received.

That is what the spiritual practice of “Guest At Your Table” can do as well. You may not be able to really thank those anonymous strangers who played a part in bringing about all of the blessings in your life, all of the gifts you have received unbidden. I believe that we are still under an obligation to practice gratitude by being that anonymous stranger who gives a gift to someone they will never see and will never be thanked for directly. But what you are doing when you put your quarters and dollars and twenty dollars in those boxes is paying it forward. So that you, like Paul, can think, “Is that the person I helped?” to everyone you meet.

Rumi uses spring in his poetry, not in the literal sense of the season, but in the metaphorical sense of warmth in one’s heart and soul. The gratitude we feel toward spring, the thawing of the winter that has recently descended upon us, is an analogy to what the practice of gratitude does to our soul. When you hear that dispatcher say that the crew will be there on Friday, trust me; food tastes better, birds sing louder and sweeter, and yes, you would not be surprised to find spring flowers talking to each other! That is a good metaphor for what it is like to really experience gratitude.

So let us be a “community of the spirit” that takes seriously our karma, our actions big and small that touch those present among us this morning and that reach out beyond our walls to touch people we will never see or know. Let us be that community that sits down together

with our eyes closed and our hands open and is held by the others. Let us be a community that practices gratitude for with it comes the spirit of generosity, kindness, and love. May we be ever vigilant in finding ways to pay it forward with gratitude for all of the unseen and unknown gifts we have received from life. Let us begin our practice of gratitude toward that long line of ministers and lay leaders and visitors and newcomers and seekers and pillars and stalwarts of First Unitarian Church who sweated and toiled in unseen and unknown ways, who lived through good times and hard times, so that we may eat of the fruit of the orchards they planted. And in the word of Rumi may we, “Move outside the tangle of fear-thinking. Live in silence. Flow down and down in always widening rings of being.” Amen Blessed Be.