

**THANKS A LOT!**  
**BELIEF UNBOUND**

**A sermon given for the ‘Touchstone of Gratitude’ service by  
The Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on  
Sunday, November 25th, 2018**

**Few topics seem less controversial than gratitude. It usually invites bromides, not debates. Count your blessings! Give thanks! But philosophers through the ages have not been of one mind on this topic. The Roman philosopher Cicero maintained, “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.” But Aristotle believed that gratitude was a sign of weakness and a failure of valor, since magnanimous people would not place themselves in debt to anyone or anything. Neitzche was suspicious that expressions of gratitude were essentially veiled requests for further favor. Yet Seneca argued no debt could ever truly be repaid without gratitude being offered as the first installment. Adopting a more neutral stance on the subject, Heidegger declared simply, “Thinking is thanking.” There’s wisdom in that, I believe. How we consider our condition will indeed determine how grateful we feel.**

**Recently, concepts of gratitude have drifted out of the domain of philosophy and into the purview of the social sciences, where more and more questions about the examined life get investigated these days. In his book Thanks: How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier, Dr. Robert Emmons, a university professor and leading**

**scholar in the field of positive psychology, writes: “Gratitude, we have found, maximizes the enjoyment of the good... Happiness is facilitated when we enjoy what we have been given, when we ‘want what we have.’” Dr. Emmons states: “Gratitude is a knowing awareness that we are the recipient of goodness.” This knowing awareness involves our both recognizing and acknowledging the good in our lives.**

**Cultivating knowing awareness seems a straightforward enough task, but it gets complicated by mix of emotions and experiences we all have, by the reality that our bad days exists alongside our good days, and not always in equal proportion. Beyond that, we live in times that are troubled and troubling all around the globe, where we see whole populations suffering serious misfortune. Who are we to be spared? Dr. Emmons notes that our natural human inclination toward the so-called “negativity bias” directs all our attention to what is not right in the world. With our 24-hour news cycles and constant media barrage, we have no shortage of wrongs to preoccupy our minds.**

**“The good news, they do not print,” observes Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh. “They only print what is wrong. Look at each of our special editions. We always offer the things that are not wrong,” he contends, but we are not encouraged to notice those things, much less broadcast them. If anything, we are encouraged to keep quiet about things that are not wrong, lest we appear glib or boastful. But then we lose sight of what is still possible, of all that remains available to us. Thich Nhat Hanh is encouraging us to recognize and acknowledge our gladness for the people who are already present in our lives, to honor the power of the relationships we have. “The latest good news,” he maintains, “is that you can do it.”**

**According to Dr. Emmons, gratitude can “measurably change people’s lives” and improve their overall well-being. Numerous studies have found that it benefits their physical, mental, and emotional health; it improves the overall quality of their relationships; it even promotes creative endeavors and altruistic behaviors. “Gratitude elevates, it energizes, it inspires, it transforms,” Dr. Emmons notes. “People are moved, opened, and humbled through experiences and expressions of gratitude. Gratitude provides life with meaning by encapsulating life itself as a gift.” But this perspective is not one that is given widespread credence today.**

**“The ability to choose gratitude may not come... naturally, or effortlessly,” Dr. Emmons cautions. “While gratitude is pleasant, it is not easy... It must be consciously cultivated”, just as several forgotten virtues must. These days, we all perceive the premium placed on self-sufficiency. We not only want to earn our costly keep, we want some assurance that we are making valued contributions. Our sense of worth too often depends on our achievement and our deservingness. Our contemporary culture applauds us as producers and consumers and further instills in us feelings of entitlement and self-importance. So the notion that we ourselves might be mere beneficiaries startles us. It injures our pride a bit. We might worry that we have fallen short of an Aristotelian ideal or Nietzschean standard and compromised our personal philosophy somehow.**

**If we comprehend that gratitude is actually a spiritual discipline (and a therefore an impersonal undertaking), we can surrender some of most popular self-aggrandizing myths. As the Rev. Richard M. Fewkes**

reminds us, there are so many “things which come to us as gifts of being from sources beyond ourselves,” among them “the sun and the dawn which we did not create... the moon and the evening which we did not make”, things we take for granted day after day. What might change for us if we no longer took them for granted? The sun and the moon would still occupy their familiar places in the firmament, but what might be different within us if we viewed them differently, if we imagined them in a different sort of relation to our earthly existence?

“For a person who has religious or spiritual beliefs, gratitude sets up a relation to the Divine,” Dr. Emmons states. “Choosing to live in that space... repositions one into a heavenly sphere of humility, awe, and recognition of how blessed one is to have the opportunity to learn, grow, love, create, share, and help others.” He notes that each of the great religious traditions regards a grateful outlook as a hallmark of spiritual maturity and an important attainment. Some traditions even issue believers the challenge to be grateful in all circumstances.

Admittedly, these can seem almost impossible mandates. Buddhist teachings call for people to express gratitude even for their enemies. The Dalai Lama has repeatedly told audiences that he is grateful to the Chinese occupiers in Tibet for giving him decades to cultivate this. For years, Thich Nhat Hanh recited a prayer of thanks “for having twenty-four brand-new hours” in which he might find gratitude in his heart. Adopting such routines and setting such intentions can go far in developing our own capacity for gratitude. As Dr. Emmon himself notes, what the “new science of gratitude” lifts up is the effectiveness of certain time-honored practices.

**Pay attention, for example, to the actions and attitudes of moral exemplars like Thich Nhat Hanh or the Dalai Lama. Go through the motions of giving thanks, even if it's not your immediate inclination. Use the language of gift, blessing, fortune, and abundance in both your internal monologue and in your communications with others. Make a vow to practice gratitude, or at least commit to stop taking so much for granted in day-to-day living. Give yourself regular prompts to count your blessings. Keep a running catalogue of things that you are grateful for in your life; write new entries as often as you can. Recall the hardships you have survived and the lessons they contained. Ask exactly how or what you might give back as an expression of your gratitude. Offer prayers of thanksgiving, either communally or individually. Notice your health, or if your health is compromised, notice your ability to draw breath, this breath and then the next. "The good news", declares Thich Nhat Hanh, "is that you are alive."**

**Being grateful can relieve us of some anxious grasping, if we understand that whatever we are thankful for is not guaranteed to be a permanent feature in our lives. We can honor and celebrate what is fleeting, especially. We can inhabit any given moment in its fullness without fear of forgetting that. Even in the midst of profound loss, people can still remember the gifts they received from relationships they now grieve. A posture of gratitude takes care to commemorate the good that has already occurred, and thereby counters our negativity bias with the power of positive recall.**

**"Gradually, I've come to experience the freedom of gratitude," Dr Emmons reports, because "with gratitude comes the realization that**

right now, in this moment, we are enough, we have enough.” Gratitude can open our eyes to an alternate worldview and stake a countercultural claim of abundance. We do not always need to scan for threat or scarcity of deprivation as nervously as we do. We can cultivate a different mental habit; we can reorient around another reality. While the scientific rationale for gratitude appears sound, gratitude cannot be a solely intellectual exercise on our part. We must register the emotional resonance of it, as well.

This weekend, visiting my in-laws, I saw *The Wall Street Journal* ran a feature-length article on how fostering an attitude of gratitude was solid corporate strategy, improving both team morale and the bottom line of the business. The magazine *Forbes* published a similar article this week, as did the Washington trade paper *The Hill*. Suddenly, the skepticism of those old philosophers did not seem quite so cynical. Gratitude is a virtue worthy of reverence; it should not be treated as a technique to gain competitive advantage. The past few years have - rather unfortunately - seen a major commodification of gratitude, with a proliferation of self-help books, gratitude journals, and even internet-based subscription services. If we act only grateful to get better results, we lose the true genius of the concept - its giftedness - and corrupt it with an exchange model.

We should not be grateful because we are doing great, nor should we ever suggest that people who face significant struggles are suffering from a failed attitude adjustment. Ultimately, our gratitude should take us out of ourselves by reminding us the larger conspiracy of goodness in the world, a wider beneficence that we can glimpse with the eyes to see it.

**American Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau proclaimed: “My Thanksgiving is perpetual...O how I laugh when I think of my vague indefinite riches... for my wealth is not possession but enjoyment.” While our Thanksgiving may not be continuous, it certainly cannot be confined to a formal observance on the fourth Thursday in November. Here at UU Wellesley Hills, we want to be sure our entire holiday season this year is a time devoted to communal thanksgiving. Inside your order of service is a star-shaped Post-it. This Sunday and every other Sunday in the coming weeks, we will be inviting people to recognize and acknowledge the gifts they have received from this faith community by writing something about this place or these people that inspires your gratitude. During each Fellowship Hour, we will affix those marked stars around that crescent moon from our Time for Ages. The good news we will print. Together, we will spell out our own special edition.**

**“Grateful people sense that they are not separate from others,” Dr. Emmons observes, and the “recognition itself brings a deep sense of gratefulness” which any communal context only magnifies. “Where one finds religion, one finds gratitude,” he concludes. This is true of all the monotheistic faiths as well as the Eastern traditions. Although his research into the psychology of gratitude was meant to liberate the subject from what he called “the dual biases of of sentimentality and sermonization”, he discovered that his findings were often consistent with established spiritual teachings. A grateful heart does much to quiet a restless mind.**

**While philosophical and psychological perspectives can make us**

**aware of ways we might become both more thoughtful about thankful for our lives, only dedicated practice will allow us to embody and express our fullest gratitude for them. The controversy that should most concern us now is how best to express and embody that. Here the customs of Thanksgiving can serve us well year round. In our gathering, we can cultivate a belief in abundance. Our aim is to grow the good, but it begins with our first proclaiming it. We should give thanks a lot! We do not want to count our blessings so much as share them. We may be surprised by how quickly they multiply.**

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