

“Praise It” *A Sermon Towards Gratitude*

Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

November 24, 2019

Beacon UU Congregation

In her poem, entitled “Otherwise,” the poet Jane Kenyon reflects on her blessings. She writes:

“I got out of bed on two strong legs. It might have been otherwise.

I ate cereal, sweet milk, and ripe, flawless peach. It might have been otherwise.

I took the dog uphill to the birch wood. All morning I did the work I love.

At noon I lay down with my mate. It might have been otherwise.

We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks. It might have been otherwise.

I slept in a bed in a room with paintings on the walls, and planned another day just like this day.

But one day, I know, it will be otherwise.”

Kenyon wrote this poem in 1993, upon hearing her husband, Donald Hall’s cancer diagnosis. Ironically, it was Kenyon, not Hall, who died a year later from a fierce and swift onslaught of leukemia. “Otherwise,” came unexpectedly, with the sunrise one day, with no regard for the silver candlesticks, the paintings, the Birchwood, the flawless peach.

Even so, Jane Kenyon continued to pen grateful verses. Life became “otherwise,” yet, the poet rested in the grace of her days, as surely as she rested in the arms of her husband at midday.

In a poem written during her decline, entitled “Twilight: After Haying,” Kenyon reflects that:

“Yes, long shadows go out
From the bales; and yes, the soul
Must part from the body:
What else could it do?

These things happen . . .the soul's bliss
And suffering are bound together
Like the grasses . . .

The last, sweet exhalations
Of timothy and vetch
Go out with the song of the bird;
the ravaged field
Grows wet with dew.”

I'm awestruck and humbled by the attitude of gratitude expressed in Kenyon's reverie. I'll call it "Otherwise-wisdom," or "other-wisdom" for short. In her, I recognize a strain of what my colleague, Gary Smith, calls "thankfulness, absolutely."

That's what I'm selling this morning from my pulpit shop—"thankfulness, absolutely." It's a variety of praise that exists beyond entitlement, beyond judgment, beyond "Why ME?" A challenge to be sure, in that, we're asked to embrace praise as ideology and life practice, rather than as a response to individual life events...good, bad, or otherwise.

Given the savagely competitive society we've created and in which we live, many of us are lured, quite seductively, into the attitude of gratitude by comparison. We imagine life could be better or that we are entitled to have more than we do. If we are abused, living without basic needs, oppressed, or unfulfilled in destructive ways, then I would agree that life could and should be better, or "otherwise."

For the most part, though, we live mostly middle class lives. We've got lots of "stuff." We are primarily a middle class religion. And, despite the liberalism we typically espouse as Unitarian Universalists, I fret that our consumerist society has brainwashed us, too, into thinking we can acquire happiness or virtues like gratitude with our "Capital One" Platinum cards. What's in your wallet?

This equation employs a suspect thanksgiving theology, distinctly anti-Universalist, which we encounter, chapter-and-verse, throughout Scripture. It makes us good *doobies* for "thanking we all our God," because He, (She or It) anoints us deservedly with plenty, while inexplicably, allowing so many others to waste away in genuine famine, economic injustice, or oppression.

Before we know it, entitlement becomes embedded like a splinter in the soft tissue of our privileged lives. More than a few analysts have connected the dots, for example, between US aggression in the world and our seemingly endless consumption.

My colleague Peter Fleck explains thanksgiving by comparison this way. He says it's a kind of "food chain" praise which points out that at least the person in the next hospital bed is sicker than I am. It's the kind of thanks that, when we read about that missing 11-year-old, we run and hug our child.

The type of gratefulness, that when we read the police blotter, we're relieved that our name has stayed out of it for another week. This is the moment when we utter the prayer, "There but for the grace of God go I."

Is this so bad? After all, I look out on a congregation touched by grief and by grace; illness, death, despair, frustration, malaise, as well as good health, success, vitality, new possibilities. Shouldn't we be thankful that life hasn't gone horribly "otherwise" on us?

I'd argue that "other-wisdom" is truly wise when the comparison remains within the Universe of one's own life. It isn't "I'm better off than so-and-so," but rather

acknowledging down to the bone that “it might be otherwise” and, in response, praising rather than judging, and cultivating “thankfulness, absolutely” in each moment.

It’s not: “Sally down the street got out of bed on two legs stronger than mine, and I resent that;” Or, “Jim across the hall is more fulfilled in his work than I and it’s just not fair.” (Even if these observations hold some measure of truth) We spend far too much time resenting what’s missing, clinging to our entitlement and notions of cosmic fairness.

To meet a person who embodies “pure” gratitude is rare, isn’t it? Many folks don’t truly appreciate what they have until it is gone. For some, having lost the opportunity to praise, they simply find another reason to be judgmental.

With “other-wisdom” you’re better able to develop and maintain perspective; as in, “my life offers me some blessings, flawed as it is. At least for today, I have a ripe peach for my cereal, OR perhaps two strong legs, OR work that fulfills me,” OR some combination of these blessings. Other-wisdom” preaches that although things are not perfect in my own life, I am still grateful for what I have, what I can do. This is the psalmist’s faithful praise triumphing over his mournful lament.

“Other-wisdom” practice can right-size your ambitions down to human scale. Tom Owen-Towle tells of a youngster who explained to him that “the seven wonders of the world are to touch and to taste and to see and to hear...and then to run and to laugh and to love.” Tom writes: “Now there’s a girl already awash with life’s palpable joy and splendor.”

To help us grown-ups recover this simple gratitude, Greg Krech, a Zen Buddhist teacher, asks us to pursue a praise practice in three parts: Notice, Reflect, and Express. He observes, “The more I think I’ve earned something or deserve something, the less likely I am to feel grateful for it.”

“As long as I think I’m entitled to something I won’t consider it a gift. But when I am humbled by my own mistakes or limitations, I am more likely to receive what I am given with gratitude and a true sense of appreciation for the giver as well as the gift.” Krech explains that, “To experience a sense of heartfelt gratitude, you must develop a practice. Without practice, there is no development of skill - only an idea. You cannot become a grateful person just by thinking that you want to be grateful.

Rather, you can develop a new habit of attention – to notice the concrete ways in which the world supports you each day. Then, we can embody a new habit of praise—expressing our gratitude to others. According to research, an added benefit of praising, by the way, is better health, better relationships, and a higher degree of life satisfaction. So, will you start your practice today to Notice, Reflect, and Express? Will you praise it?

Of course, I want life to be blessed for each and every one of us gathered here in this Sanctuary, but I have no way of knowing what that might look like in real time, and neither do you. In an *Arlo and Janis* comic strip, Arlo admits: “I’m not thankful the azalea died...I’m not thankful for the interest we pay on our credit card. For everything

else, I'm thankful!" "That was a strange sort of blessing," says Janis. To which Arlo responds, "Well, I figured it'd be a heck of a lot faster that way!"

Is it realistic to expect Arlo to feel grateful for his dead azaleas? Of course not. Yet, he's got it partially right. This human, finite existence is a package deal. The challenge resides in cultivating "other-wisdom," thankfulness absolutely, and perspective, come what may. So, will you praise it?

Meg Barnhouse gives us a glimpse of this, too, in her amusing reflection that we heard earlier. I love her ideas for fortune cookies such as "Don't try to improve yourself today" and "Seven people love you madly," and "They appreciate what you did," and "You will see three beautiful things tomorrow," and "You will figure something out two days from now." Oh, and my personal favorite: "The next two years are just for fun!"

I join in the chorus of her invitation that "together we can whisper peachy little perspective shifters into one another's days. And I share her anticipation of the twinkle that might light up your eye as a result of elevating praise over judgment. So, will you praise it?

Have I mentioned yet how exceptionally hard it is to accomplish this Zen-like gratefulness? Oh, well let me do that right now. It's tough! Very tough. To be clear, I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't desire any adaptations in our lives. No suffering martyrs need apply.

What concerns me is when the script goes haywire and our lives veer off in unscripted directions, and we cry foul. Azaleas die on us. People die on us, too. *Us!* Characters we hadn't anticipated enter stage left, while scenery from some zombie movie drops down behind us.

Being a good person is no guarantee. Just look around you. We are good people touched by triumphs and tragedies. Circumstances could certainly be "otherwise" in many of our lives, and we needn't relish everything that happens to us. That would be impossible, and would require living entirely without ego, emotion, desire, or attachment to others.

In response, we can endeavor to Notice, Reflect and Express, mindful that the spiritual practice of praise is quietly pro-active, beyond either whining or boasting. As we witness and experience life as co-creators on the planet, we are called again and again to acknowledge the amazing mix of pain and joy. The personal becomes the universal, and we perceive ourselves as part of a bigger picture beyond our own disappointments.

We might awaken to the connection between the despair in our individual lives and the larger suffering in the world in places like the Syria or Hong Kong or the border, or in the next pew, or just a mile or so away in one of our more disadvantaged neighborhoods. This recognition alone may blunt judgment and foster deeper gratitude. So, will you praise it?

Sometimes all we need is the right question to shift our perspective. My colleague Tom Disrud recounts a story about the writer Sue Bender and her husband. In their early

60s, they decided they needed to get their financial affairs in order and write a will and establish a living trust for their sons. They meet with a lawyer one bright November morning, and he asks them, "What would you like to do in case there's an exploding turkey?"

"Exploding turkey?" Bender asks. The lawyer continues: "What if the whole family was together at Thanksgiving and the turkey exploded? If the four of you were killed at that moment, who would you want to have your worldly goods?"

"At first, the question was a little unsettling and surreal for her. Perhaps it was the image of the bird blowing up in their dining room. But it later turned out to be quite fruitful. She writes that it made her think about what was most precious to her. She writes that now, when she has a particularly difficult day, she makes what she calls a gratitude list.

She writes down all those things she has been thankful for that day." Naturally, I don't wish for any of us to experience exploding turkeys two Thursdays hence, but I do hope we encounter surprises. A life of praise comes with intentionality and awareness." So, will you praise it?

Shakespeare put these words in the mouth of Henry IV: "O Lord, that lends me life, lend me a heart replete with thankfulness." Shakespeare's God is a Universal, life-giving God, who equates thankfulness with simply being alive.

For all that is *your* life, will you unwrap a fortune cookie of "thankfulness, absolutely?" Fully aware that "it might be otherwise," will you paint a thank you note on your palm -- for the Cannon towels, the two strong legs, the respite at noontime, for the kettle boiling over, the chapel of eggs, the ravaged field grown wet with dew, this beloved community, the air-drying wishbone on Thanksgiving Eve?

"You will see three beautiful things tomorrow," Meg Barnhouse tells us. Remember to notice, reflect, and express, and then utter that one all-purpose prayer from the depths of a grateful, hungering heart: "Thank you, thank you, thank you, for lending me this life... good, bad, or otherwise."

So, will you praise it and say "Amen?"

© 2019 The Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. All rights reserved. May be quoted with proper attribution to author and sources.