

Theoretically Thankful

A Sermon Delivered on November 22, 2009
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

“Gratitude is a debt which usually goes on accumulating like blackmail; the more you pay, the more is exacted.”
-- Mark Twain

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Meditation: by the Unitarian Universalist minister Richard Fewkes

We lift up our hearts in thanks
For the sun and the dawn which we did not create;
For the moon and the evening which we did not make
For food which we plant but cannot grow;
For friends and loved ones we have not earned and cannot buy;
For this gathered company which welcomes us as we are, from wherever we have come;
... For all things which come to us as gifts of being from sources beyond ourselves;
Gifts of life and love and friendship
We lift up our hearts in thanks this day.

Reading: by Robert Emmons from *Thanks! - How the new science of gratitude can make you happier* (p. 1)

In 1999, the renowned writer Stephen King was the victim of a serious automobile accident. While King was walking on a country road not far from his summer home in rural Maine, the driver of a van, distracted by his rottweiler, veered off the road and struck King, throwing him over the van's windshield and into a ditch. He just missed falling against a rocky ledge. King was hospitalized with multiple fractures to his right leg and hip, a collapsed lung, broken ribs, and a scalp laceration. When later asked what he was thinking when he could have died, his one-word answer: "Gratitude." An avowedly nonreligious individual in his personal life, he nonetheless on this occasion perceived the goodness of divine influence in the outcome. In discussing the issue of culpability for the accidents, King said, "It's God's grace that he [the driver of the van] isn't responsible for my death."

Reading: by the Senegalese author Adama Doumbia (& Naomi Doumbia) from *The Way of the Elders* a book on West African spiritual and tradition (p. 3)

Everywhere there is sky, there is Spirit. Spirit has many names, but there is only one Spirit. Spirit is both near and far, as immanent as the earth and as transcendent as the sky. We recognize the strength and power of the Almighty through a thunderous storm; we feel the reliability and comfort of the Eternal with the rising sun; we observe grace and beauty of the Creator in a dancing stream. In all of our surroundings, we experience the essence of the Divine. We celebrate Spirit's many qualities apparent or hidden in every form. Each plant, rock, animal, and person tells the story of creation and serves to nurture, teach, and guide us on our life journeys. Our belief that we are all a part of one Spirit affects our relations with one another; the action of one member of the community is felt by every one of us.

Reading: by Mary Oliver a poem entitled “The Place I Want To Get Back To”

is where

in the pinewoods
in the moments between
the darkness

and first light

two deer
came walking down the hill
and when they saw me

they said to each other, okay,

this one is okay,
let's see who she is
and why she is sitting

on the ground like that,

so quiet, as if
asleep, or in a dream,
but, anyway, harmless;

and so they came

on their slender legs
and gazed upon me
not unlike the way

I go out to the dunes and look

and look and look
into the faces of the flowers;
and then one of them leaned forward

and nuzzled my hand, and what can my life

bring to me that could exceed
that brief moment?
For twenty years

I have gone every day to the same woods,

not waiting, exactly, just lingering.
Such gifts, bestowed,
can't be repeated.

If you want to talk about this

come to visit. I live in the house
near the corner, which I have named
Gratitude.

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With the economy in the shape it's in, millions of people will not be in the mood to give thanks next week. The national unemployment and underemployment rate recently rose to 17.5 percent. That's more than one out of every six workers un- or underemployed, the highest level since the Great Depression.

The current debate in the senate is a source of worry both for those of us who are hoping for healthcare reform, and for those who are afraid any innovations introduced in Washington will only make the sorry state of healthcare sorer yet.

We are teetering at the edge of increased military involvement in Afghanistan, and some commentators see parallels with the position America was in, just before deciding to dramatically increase the number of troops sent to Vietnam, thus increasing the scope of a hopeless war.

I am sure each of us could create our own list of more personal worries, whether how the national scene affects our family finances and job security, or how our health and happiness, as well that of family and friends, seem dangerously fragile.

It would be easy to reach the conclusion that there truly isn't much this year for which we can be grateful. But this is not the only conclusion we could reach.

There are others who would say, that no matter what our situation, there is always much for which we can be grateful. After all, it could always be worse. If life hands you lemons, make lemonade.

* * *

The journalist Barbara Ehrenreich falls within the camp of those who are skeptical of the American habit to always look at the positive side of everything life offers us. Her most recent book is entitled *Bright-sided - How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*.

As she sees it, America has been infested with a culture of glib cheerfulness, an obligatory optimism that, rather than lifting our spirits, breeds its own kind of oppression.

Her perspective is shaped her experiences during the years she battled breast cancer. From her first visit in a hospital waiting room, where she found herself "choking on pink ribbons and other bits of cuteness and sentimentality," whether sweet little teddy bears, goofy top-ten lists, or cheesy poetry adorned with pink roses. Being upbeat was the only acceptable attitude in support groups. Her fellow survivors were fond of inspirational words, like the quote from Lance Armstrong, who said "cancer was the best thing that

ever happened to me.” Another cancer patient described the disease as her “connection to the divine.”

But Ehrenreich was in no mood for that kind of uplift. She wanted to express her anger, complain about the side-effects of chemotherapy, and the head aches she had dealing with insurance companies. When she tried to do so her fellow patients took her to task for her “bad attitude,” and warned that her negative attitude was harmful.

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Ehrenreich traces American positive thinking back to the 19th century. By the 20th century it had gone mainstream, merging with the ideologies of nationalism and capitalism. The conceit that America is the greatest nation on earth, and that Americans are God’s chosen people seemed to gain even more momentum with the fall of Communism and America’s emergence as the world’s sole remaining superpower.

By the turn of the 21st century, Ehrenreich writes,

“American optimism seemed to reach a manic crescendo. In his final State of Union address in 2000, Bill Clinton struck a triumphal note, proclaiming that “never before has our nation enjoyed, at once, so much prosperity and social progress with so little internal crisis and so few external threats.” But compared with his successor, Clinton seemed almost morose. If [George W. Bush] repeatedly laid claim to a single adjective, it was “optimistic.” On the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, he told reporters he was “optimistic” about a variety of foreign policy challenges, offering as an overview, “I’m optimistic that all problems will be solved...” Then things began to go wrong.”

Ehrenreich sees our current economic crisis as a direct consequence of too many people stubbornly looking only at the positive side, ignoring troubling signs that all was not well. That is a big part what happened on Wall Street. She points to the information our intelligence agencies provided in the weeks leading up to September 11, 2001, warning that a serious terrorist act was in the making. And yet this information was ignored. She mentions the fact that this country launched into a war with Iraq convinced it would be a “cake walk.” She highlights the reports by scientists and engineers, who were very clear in public statements and warnings that a category 4 or 5 hurricane would surely destroy New Orleans’ inadequate levees. And yet these dire warnings were dismissed by leaders who chose to maintain a more optimistic outlook.

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Now, most psychologists agree that positive feelings like gratitude, contentment, and self-confidence can actually lengthen our lives and improve our health. This simple scientific insight would seem to offer sufficient justification for the upbeat, can-do attitude for which America is famous.

But upon closer inspection, even in prosperous times, Americans are actually not as positive as we may think.

A recent study of self-reported happiness worldwide found Americans rank only twenty-third. According to this study the Dutch and the Danes, the Malaysians and the Austrians, and even the Finns are happier than we are. And even so, Americans account for two-thirds of the global market for antidepressants, which also happen to be the most commonly prescribed drugs in the United States.

When economists attempt to rank the world's nations in more objective terms of "well-being," measuring factors such as health, environmental sustainability, and upward mobility, the United States does even worse. The so-called "Happy Planet Index," for instance ranks us at 150th among the world's nations.

Ehrenreich wonders how we can have a self-image of being so very positive and happy, while the realities of our lives and well-being paint such a different picture. The answer, in her mind, is that our positivity is neither an attitude or an emotion, but rather an ideology. The generic content of the "positive thinking" ideology is this: "Things are pretty good right now, at least if you are willing to see silver linings, make lemonade out of lemons, etc., and things are going to get a whole lot better."

Gratitude can be part of this "positive thinking" ideology. If we respond to every challenging or troubling experience with a with a glib admonition to be grateful, gratitude becomes just one more effort to gloss over all that is painful in life. Then gratitude becomes one more effort to deny and dismiss all things difficult.

This is not the kind of gratitude Stephen King expressed after he was the victim of a car-driver's carelessness, and suffered incredible physical injury and pain, and almost lost his very life.

* * *

What is gratitude? Initially it may seem to be a fairly obvious emotional response to the experience of receiving a gift, and beyond that, an attitude we can choose to cultivate.

Gratitude, however, is more than that. Gratitude can also be a moral virtue, a motivating force, a personality trait, or even a way of life. And gratitude can arise even in circumstances in which we would least expect.

According to Robert Emmons, gratitude, at its best, doesn't blind us to life's most difficult moments, but rather it helps us look closely both at them, and beyond them. Gratitude, at its best, doesn't seek to distract us from the harsh realities of life, it helps us pay attention to everything. The bad, but also the good. Gratitude asks us to feel life's pain, but also its pleasure.

Emmons thinks of gratitude in terms of two stages. “First,” he says, “gratitude is the *acknowledgment* of goodness in one’s life. In gratitude we say yes to life. We affirm that all things taken together, life is good and has elements that make it worth living.... Second, gratitude is *recognizing* that the source [or sources] of life’s goodness lie at least partially outside [ourselves]. The object of gratitude is other-directed; one can be grateful to other people, to God, to animals, but never to oneself.” This is one significant way in which gratitude differs from other emotions and feelings.

We can be angry with ourselves, pleased or proud about something we have accomplished, we can feel guilty about something we have done wrong. But it would be bizarre to say that you feel grateful to yourself. Even if you just treated yourself to a lavish dinner, or bought yourself a small gift to reward yourself for something or other, it would be strange to say you thank yourself for that fine meal, or for that thoughtful present.

When we say “thank you” we are always saying it to someone else.

Unlike the myriad of feelings and emotions that shape our sense of well-being, and which are experienced exclusively within ourselves, gratitude takes us outside ourselves. Gratitude is inevitably relational. It arises out of the interplay between ourselves and our friends, and family and neighbors.

Gratitude reminds us that we cannot live in isolation. It reminds us of the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. It reminds us that we are all part of one Spirit.

As Adama Doumbia writes, Spirit is both near and far, as immanent as the earth and as transcendent as the sky. It moves within the thunderous storm and the rising sun. In all of our surroundings, we experience the essence of the Divine.

According to Doumbia’s tradition, the fact that we are all a part of one Spirit affects our relations with one another. The action of one member of the community is felt by every one of us.

The relationship of each to all, and to Spirit, is not merely a statement of belief. It is an understanding that is consciously cultivated through religious practice and ritual acts. Mindful of the countless blessings we receive every day, in Doumbia’s tradition, offerings and sacrifices are made as expressions of gratitude.

Doumbia writes,

“Offerings and sacrifice serve as our communication, prayers, and gifts to the spirits. They can be something we make in a time of crisis or something we perform daily to ensure harmony and peace within our families and communities...

When we make an offering or sacrifice, we give up something that has significance in our daily lives. These honorable acts teach us the value of what we have and what we are able to share. We learn from our offerings and sacrifice the

true meaning of our blessings. This cultivates our humility and gratitude, which invites more blessings our way.”(p. 19)

Speaking from within the Jewish tradition, Abraham Heschel writes, “To sacrifice is not to abandon what has been granted to us, to throw away the gifts of life. It is, on the contrary, giving back to God what we have been received from [God] by employing it in [God’s] service. Such giving is a form of thanksgiving.” (*Man Is Not Alone*, p. 292)

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Real gratitude is much more than an attitude. Real gratitude is not merely an emotion, but a commitment to action. That’s why we call it thanks *giving*.

When we are truly grateful, we are not content with a warm and fuzzy sense of well-being. When we are truly grateful, we realize that our own life is unthinkable without the lives of countless people - parents and teachers, friends and strangers - people who have raised us, taught us, fed and clothed us, and we are compelled to give something back. Some small token of our appreciation, some small token of our understanding that we did not arrive at this day through our own efforts alone.

For the sun and the dawn which we did not create;
For the moon and the evening which we did not make;...
For all things which come to us as gifts of being from sources beyond ourselves;
Gifts of life and love and friendship
May we offer heartfelt and tangible thanks.

Amen.