

Radical Gratitude¹
October 18, 2015
Rev. Myke Johnson
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Today, interwoven throughout the service, we shared a call and response reading drawn from the Haudenosaunee people. Sometimes known as the Iroquois Confederacy, they have given this recitation to the wider world as a gift.² At the beginning of any meeting or gathering, the Haudenosaunee begin by giving thanks to all beings of the world.

Excerpt:

Today we have gathered and see the cycles of life continue. We have been given the duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things. So now, we bring our minds, hearts and bodies together as one.

Response 1: We give greetings and thanks to each other as People. Now our minds are one...

Opening Words

Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, “Just to live is holy, to be is a blessing.” We come together for a time of conscious reflection on all that we love, and open our hearts to the practice of radical gratitude.

Lesson For All Ages Wonder, Mystery and the Big Questions

Taryn Walker, with Cathy Falwell, Helen White, Katrina VanBrugh

The theme for our Religious Education program during this first six-week session is *Wonder, Mystery and the Big Questions*. Each of the three children’s groups has been enjoying different 2-week workshops, led by three different RE volunteers, exploring this theme. Our workshop leaders for this session are Katrina VanBrugh, Helen White, and Cathryn Falwell.

We are exploring our sense of wonder about the natural world and how it makes us feel inside. We have thought about our spirits and our souls, and considered our inner light. We have practiced different ways to meditate. We have discussed how different cultures believe the world was created. And we have discussed the importance of truth and what it means to us.

Our fourth Unitarian Universalist principle is “Acceptance of one another and encouragement for spiritual growth in our congregations.” The children’s version of this is: “We believe that each person must be free to search for what is true and right in life.” As UUs, we honor each other’s spiritual exploration. In our workshops, we have played a lively version of “To Tell the Truth” and a fun board game called “Many Paths.” We’ve made colorful chalices to represent the vessel that holds our inner Light. We’ve learned some creation myths and discovered that there are many points of view in our search for truth. The children have been eager to express their own ideas, too!

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² I have slightly adapted for responsive reading this translation of the Mohawk version of the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address. It was published in 1993, Six Nations Indian Museum and the Tracking Project. All rights reserved. English version: John Stokes and Kanawahienton (David Benedict, Turtle Clan/Mohawk), Mohawk version: Rokwaho (Dan Thompson, Wolf Clan/Mohawk) Original inspiration: Tekaronianekon (Jake Swamp, Wolf Clan/Mohawk). http://www.americanindian.si.edu/environment/pdf/01_02_Thanksgiving_Address.pdf

This story, which many of you know, helps us explore the many ways of “seeing” something. Ed Young’s version of the very old tale of the Blind Men and the Elephant has mice instead of men: *Seven Blind Mice*. (story shared with children)

Now we’d like each of you (Kids) to take a stone or a shell or an acorn from the basket and hold it in your hand the same way most of you did in one of your workshops. Now close your eyes. We invite everyone to join us. You can pretend to have a bit of nature in your hand.

Breathe in.....and breathe out..... Breathe in.....and breathe out. And wonder....

Centering Poem And Music

*We began our centering time with a poem by Denise Levertov, Primary Wonder.*³

(excerpt) ...Days pass when I forget the mystery.

*One more reading was Welcome Morning by Anne Sexton*⁴

(excerpt) ...So while I think of it,
let me paint a thank-you on my palm
for this God, this laughter of the morning,
lest it go unspoken...

Reflection Radical Gratitude

Rev. Myke Johnson

Most of the time, we think of gratitude as applying to the happy occasions in our life. Someone gives us a gift, and we say thank you. Or we ponder the blessings of home and work, and a feeling of gratefulness wells up in our hearts. But gratitude is a much wider and deeper resource, beyond just a feeling in response to happy occasions.

During this past week, while I was reflecting on gratitude, I came down with a bad cold. My normal response to getting a cold is to feel a bit cranky. I think about all the things I had planned to do, and what I might be missing. But if I approached this week with gratitude, I might instead notice that my partner Margy made me hot tea with honey and cooked tasty dinners. I might instead notice that I have a warm home to curl up in, and funny videos to watch on Netflix. I might instead notice that the sun is so bright when it shines through the windows, and the leaves of gold and red are stunningly beautiful on the street where we live.

Merely by being alive, we are surrounded with beauty and abundance. And yet, how easy it is to take it for granted, to notice instead what is missing, or what we wish we could have, or what others have. Gratitude helps us to shape where we focus our attention.

Gratitude opens a doorway into life’s remarkable possibilities. We cannot predict whether something that at first seems troublesome will turn out well or badly. I am reminded of the Chinese story about a farmer whose horse escaped into the hills. When his neighbors came by to sympathize with the old man over his bad luck, the farmer replied, "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?" The next day, the horse returned with a beautiful wild stallion. This time the neighbors congratulated the farmer on his good luck. His reply was, "Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?"

³ "Primary Wonder" by Denise Levertov, is from *Sands Of The Well*, (New Directions Publishing Corporation: 1994).

⁴ Anne Sexton, in *The Awful Rowing Toward God*.

Then, when the farmer's son was attempting to tame the stallion, he fell off its back and broke his leg. Everyone thought this very bad luck. But the farmer again replied, "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?" Some weeks later, the army marched into the village and conscripted every able-bodied youth they found there. When they saw the farmer's son with his broken leg, they let him off. Now was that good luck or bad luck? Who knows?

Gratitude is one possible response to a life that is bigger than we are. Of course, there are many other possible responses: we might instead feel anger or fear, confusion or despair, and so on. And it is natural to experience any of those feelings. But gratitude is more than a feeling. Gratitude is a choice to be open to our lives, to welcome all that comes with being alive. We have not created or earned life. It has come to us as a gift.

Today we have been listening and responding to the Haudenosaunee Words of Thanks. The Haudenosaunee call them the "words that must be spoken before all else." Any important meeting must begin with a recitation of these words. They bring people together with a reminder about what is most important.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist by trade, and indigenous author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, writes: You can't listen to the [Words of Thanks] without feeling wealthy. And, while expressing gratitude seems innocent enough, it is a revolutionary idea. In a consumer society, contentment is a radical proposition. Recognizing abundance rather than scarcity undermines an economy that thrives by creating unmet desires. Gratitude cultivates an ethic of fullness, but the economy needs emptiness. ... Gratitude doesn't send you out shopping to find satisfaction; it comes as a gift rather than a commodity, subverting the foundation of the whole economy. That's good medicine for land and people alike.⁵

Ecologist Joanna Macy, too, recognized the radical nature of gratitude.⁶ The work she created to help us turn from our Industrial Growth Society toward a Life Sustaining Society begins with the practice of gratitude. The Industrial Growth Society is dependent on increasing consumerism, and cultivates feelings of neediness and craving. By practicing gratitude, we begin to shape our thoughts and feelings toward the abundance of what the earth gives to us, and the amazing gift it is merely to be alive.

In a time of turmoil and danger, gratitude can steady us and ground us. I think about the long devastation that the Haudenosaunee people have experienced from the European settlement of this land. They continued their practice of giving thanks through centuries of genocide and broken treaties and theft of their land. Perhaps it was this practice that helped them to survive.

Might it also help us to change our society, so that our world can survive? Gratitude for life can be a radical counterbalance to all the blatant and subliminal messages that cultivate our sense of dissatisfaction and desire. Even resting at home this week, I was bombarded with hundreds of such messages via Netflix and Facebook and email and the daily newspaper.

What would it mean, each day to meditate on the words of thanks instead. Kimmerer says when you hear them, you are reminded "that you already have everything you need."

⁵ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p. 111.

⁶ Joanna Macy and Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life*, p. 91-93.

Of course, there are certainly injustices and inequalities in our world that mean that some people do not have what they need right now. There are people who are hungry and homeless. To be full of gratitude for life is not to discount those injustices. Rather, we come to a recognition that if life is a gift, it brings us the responsibility to care for of the common good of our fellow beings who share this gift with us. The Words of Thanks look to the shared resources that the earth offers to us, sunlight and rain, plants and animals, medicines and birds. These are what truly matters to life.

What would it mean if each time I saw an ad on television for the latest car or clothes or gadget, I said to myself, “You already have everything you need.”

What would it mean, if each time I saw a Facebook post about someone else's marvelous vacation, instead of feeling envious, I said to myself, “You already have everything you need.”

What would it mean, if each morning, as I woke up, I meditated on these words, “You already have everything you need.”

I invite you to take a few moments to reflect on these words right now.

Meditation

One more reading, An Appalachian Wedding by Thomas Berry⁷

Written For Paul Winter's Wedding

(excerpt) ...celebration everywhere
wild, riotous
immense as a monsoon
lifting an ocean of joy...

Our Closing Words were the conclusion of the Haudenosaunee Words of Thanks.

Excerpt: We have now arrived at the place where we end our words. We give thanks to the Haudenosaunee people for sharing these words of thanks with the world. May we remember each day to begin again in gratitude. Of all the things we have named, it was not our intention to leave anything out. If something was forgotten, we leave it to each individual to send such greetings and thanks in their own way.

Response 18: Greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.

⁷ http://www.thomasberry.org/Biography/An_Appalachian_Wedding.html