



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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### “A Culture of Gratitude” a sermon given by Julie Lombard on October 27, 2013

As October comes to an end, let us embrace the coming change of season that brings us to the American tradition we call Thanksgiving. Why must we celebrate this for only one day? I suggest we think bigger and we celebrate for an entire month!

The weather is surely changing, the leaves have fallen fast from their spring and summer perches. The gardens have ceased to produce and now it is time we lay the winter stores. It's time to celebrate the success of our harvest, it is time to give thanks for all that is our life.

It's time for pulling out our sweaters and raking away those fallen leaves. Soon we'll be altering our clocks and the days will be shorter. These symbolic actions remind us that all too soon it will be that time when we all move a little slower. Some of us dream of running off to warmer destinations, others prefer to hunker down right where they are and attempt a semi-state of hibernation where we spend much of our time indoors. Then there are a few nuts, like me, who revel in celebrating the return of winter weather head on with their skis, their building of snowmen, and drinking hot chocolate topped with whipped cream. I know I disgust many of you.

These habits are just that, they are habits reflecting how we deal with this change. Yet a thermometer is not the only way to measure what's going on, calculating the temperature inside and out. There's also an internal gage that I hope you'll check this time of year- it's our internal gratitude gage. Did you know you had one? Let me explain, this gage isn't found in a particular place like a thermometer hanging outside a window. Some might say you could find it by listening to your heart, but I think it's more of an inner-awareness that you learn to listen to. I won't fool you, checking your internal gratitude gage is work and I believe it isn't something that we ought to do once a year like hosting a church stewardship drive or doing an oil change in your car... Yes, that's right, we ought to tend to this business throughout the year- it's an ongoing practice this checking of our gratitude.

So, is that true here? Is the “culture of gratitude” an ongoing practice here at this church? Is it with you- the individual sitting in the pew, the person teaching religious education, or the one singing in the choir? It may sound like I am preaching to the choir, but really I am preaching to anyone with a heartbeat. It doesn't matter what your theological grounding is to participate in a culture of gratitude, or does it?

Actually, there's a study that says otherwise. I know this because I am taking at class called “Show Me the Money”. It's a class where the President of the seminary, Nick Carter, teaches

about the contemporary approaches to fundraising & stewardship in religious and non-profit organizations. In this class, the students establish theological perspectives on money and giving, then we examine the major approaches to funding-raising, as well as the centrality of giving for the sustainability of churches. The goal of the class is to foster a working knowledge of contemporary leadership approaches to funds development and stewardship within religious settings. Much of what I have just told you is right out off the syllabus under the listing of the description and stated goals. Pres. Carter has a long list of experiences working at doing this vital work. Before being the president of ANTS, he was once the leader of the First Baptist Church of Beverly, MA. If you are thinking when you hear that, “so what”- then I urge you to hop online sometime and see what that place has been up to. They are the NASA of churches, launching social programs left and right and stretching beyond the average church as they reach out into their community that they serve.

So, getting back to the study that says otherwise, the one that has shown the generosity of various churches... it doesn't paint a pretty picture for us UUs. Top of the list for faiths that are the most generous givers- Mormons and the Assembly of God Churches. That's right, the more conservative theologically are the loosest with their purse when it comes to sharing their common wealth.

Where did UUs fall in that list? We fell hard, securely at the bottom under a handful of other of liberal faiths. Ouch! Are we really that stingy? Why is it that we are the Scrooge's of the churches? Why is it that we are rock bottom with our generosity, could it be that we have an unhealthy culture of gratitude? I think it is- it's not just this house of worship, it's throughout our system of being. We are consumed with comfort and it leads us only to continue the status quo. We struggle to give thanks- is that because we don't know who to thank? In a faith where God is optional, what's the purpose of offering our thanks to her?

As you can see this is not a simple box I have opened up, I've opened Pandora's box. Yes, I thought it time you knew the real me... the one who walks around with a long stick that I like to stick into beehives. If there's a bee in your bonnet, chances are I've been busy metaphorically with my stick again. This problem is not only the problem of this congregation, this is a denominational-wide issue. We might not reflect the denominational norm here, or do we? How do we give thanks and to whom do we give it to and who benefits from our culture of gratitude?

How dare I talk about money when I promised you a sermon about gratitude... don't I know it's impolite to talk about money, politics, or religion? Uh oh, it's my job to talk about religion; therefore I am bound to stick my foot in my mouth from time to time. Here's the thing, you may not be comforted by my words each time I fill your pulpit, that's right- sometimes I will be here to challenge you. However, one thing you must know that trumps all other duties while I stand here, it's the only thing that trumps comfort and challenge... I am here to love you. And I take that job very seriously.

Dr. Gordon Livingston in his 2012 book titled “The Thing You Think You Cannot Do” dedicated chapter nine to the concept of habit. A few weeks ago I told you about his book, it was then that I honestly I claimed that I hadn't read the book front to back, but instead I have read choice chapters- last time I shared with you the wisdom from the chapter called “The quest for courage

is a journey within.” The book is about fear and courage. Chapter nine is titled “Courage is not a feeling; it is a habit.” In this chapter he begins by stating that fear is a disorienting emotion and that it can freeze us or impel us towards frantic, irrational action.

It’s the basic fight or flight idea that he says fear unleashes, but that’s not the whole truth... it can cause us to freeze like a chipmunk who thinks “if I don’t move, that big gigantic human won’t see me”. Maybe a hawk won’t see them and flies on. Freezing is an adaptation strategy for the chipmunk to live in its environment with its inability to overpower its larger predators. We adapted also to survive in our own environment. UUs have found comfort in freezing. When is the last time you upped your stewardship pledge from the previous year?

Do you tend to avoid things you don’t like to do-let’s say, like talking about money? It’s a natural response. Dr. Livingston hated heights and all was well because he seldom had the occasion to challenge his fear of heights, but the Army changed all that. As a soldier he was required to jump out of airplanes as part of his training. He managed to overcome his fear and was gratified to realize three important things;

- 1.) The parachute opened as planned.
- 2.) The landing he had practiced didn’t result in injury,
- 3.) The view on the way down was spectacular.

The second time Livingston jumped he was still feeling afraid, but less so. By his tenth jump, he enjoyed the experience and by the twentieth jump, he was seeking out opportunities to jump and he had started teaching others to do it. What happened? As he faced his fear, the fear diminished. He claims the larger lesson is implied in the decision to confront our fears: Livingston asks-“What does it mean to live a small life as opposed to an expansive one- a life that benefits others?” I think he really knows how to talk about how to take a leap of faith. He was successful at changing his culture of habit by facing his fears.

What I gained from his wisdom is that the more we confront the topics we’d rather avoid, the less we fear them. I might add that we may even come to enjoy them. So, it is possible to change our culture of habit? Can we increase our culture of gratitude? I believe we can, and we can influence our fellow denominational partners by urging them to change the greater culture of gratitude.

Look into your heart as I search my own heart, let us be as giving with our talents, time, and treasures as we are with our love for one another. Let us radiate our love and gratitude for all that is our life into the wider world so we too can be as generous as the Mormons or as the Assembly of God faith traditions. Spirit of Life and love, give us the strength to elevate us from the bottom of that list of generous givers to the top so that as we give, we deeply gain.

Lastly, I know this to be true because I have experienced it. I have been tricked into being more generous. That’s right! I was one of those folks who gave handsomely to my church year after year with little change to my gift, but after the weekly plate ceased to go to the operating budget and began being given away to local social programs in the community; for example- to starting gardens for the poor, supporting low cost childcare, building a habitat for humanity house for a family, or raising money for an eldercare car service program, I proved I could give more. That wasn’t all, after I headed off to seminary and began working in other churches- each one received

from my treasures. Even this church has received my gifts. I am far more generous than I intended to be, I was tricked into giving more. See, I can't help it and nor do I want to stop because the more I give the more I enjoy it. If you looked at my internal gratitude gage over the years you would find that it has increased greatly. I'm not saying you ought to give me a Nobel peace prize... I already have received all the kudos I need for my gratitude and generosity. These concepts are inherently linked and the one who is served greatest by my giving is... moi! I am happier, check my internal gratitude gage.

Could this be called the economics of happiness? "The Economics of Happiness" happens to be the title of a 2011 documentary that challenges us to restore our faith in humanity, challenges us to believe that it is possible to build a better world. The film describes a world moving simultaneously in two opposing directions. On the one hand, an unholy alliance of governments and big business continues to promote globalization and the consolidation of corporate power. At the same time, people all over the world are resisting those policies, demanding a re-regulation of trade and finance—and, far from the old institutions of power, they're starting to forge a very different future. Communities are coming together to re-build more human scale, ecological economies based on a new paradigm – an economics of localization. I like to think that what we're doing here in this church, in this city.

Spiritual Siblings, I invite you to come together and be the leaders as we re-build a more human scale of localization under this church's roof. Let us question our culture of gratitude until we feel we are giving to the point of ultimate happiness. Let us be a model within our own denomination. As churches around us close their doors and close forever, let us open ours widely for all who need a sanctuary, let us connect with our truest giving potential today and every day, let our rewards be reflected best in our interior gratitude gage and may our leap of faith show that we too can become ongoing grateful givers.

So may it be. Amen.