



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“The Spiritual Practice of Gratitude,”  
a sermon given by Joanna Fortna  
on August 3, 2014

How grateful am I on this day, in this moment, in this place we make sacred by our being here? I feel an ever deepening gratitude. As I stand here this morning speaking as a member of this church and as a member of our worship team, and to start, I have a long list of gratefuls: I am grateful my beloved church community, the Haverhill UU church, for the worship committee and for the privilege of planning the service and writing this sermon, and the Green Sanctuary committee for its work on helping us tie our mission into the environmental issues. I thank my parents and my grandfather, all ordained ministers who have been powerful role models for me. I am grateful for the loving support of my immediate family, for my husband Hal, my daughter Melissa and my son Jared. I am grateful for the beauty of this sanctuary and this entire church building. And beyond that I am grateful for the land that holds this building, the very earth that lies beneath the floorboards and the timbers that hold us securely in this sacred space. My list could go on and on and on. How about your list? What are you grateful for this morning? .....

Is it possible to be too grateful? After all, our list of things we are grateful for in this present moment could go on and on. But maybe it should. Ishin Yoshimoto, a devout Buddhist and the founder of the Japanese reflective practice Naikan (Japanese word meaning “to look inside”) believes in a daily practice of taking inventory, like a bank statement of what we owe the world and what the world owes us, to reconcile our “life balance.” His method is based on three questions: “What have I received? What have I given? What troubles and difficulties have I caused?”

To prepare for this sermon I made such an inventory myself, listing specific answers to his three basic questions for a 24 hour period. What I discovered was that the list of what I had received far outweighed what I had given. The third question, “what troubles and difficulties have I caused?” was the hardest but most intriguing for me to answer. It forced me to be aware of how many of my actions, well intended or not, could have a negative effect on others or my surroundings. In particular my tendencies to procrastinate, to be wasteful, or to become self-absorbed have caused difficulty or trouble. By contemplating this question I was humbly reminded that I am not above it all, rather, I am in it. I began to recognize the things I take for granted, that I am not entitled to all that I receive and upon reflection, I can be moved to express my gratitude and to give back. These questions helped me return to myself and my connection to my community and the larger world. Indeed I am a member of a global community along with all of you, on this fragile beautiful planet earth.

After pondering these three questions you might expect a fourth question: How have others caused troubles and difficulties in me? My guess is my list of specific complaints in a 24 hour period could also be quite long. Because of course, the cat woke me at 4 am wanting to go outside and some rude driver cut me off on my way home from the store, my briefcase is full of essays to grade because my students actually wrote what I assigned them, some of my students had too many excuses for handing in late papers, the rain showers messed up my plans for a walk, my computer at work crashed, my coffee was too hot to drink and then was too cold and on and on. Some of things on the list are silly when you look at it, but I have to admit that not only did I have no trouble coming up with this list, but it was cathartic and downright fun to create. I resisted the temptation to continue the list because I am reminded that the practice of Naikan intentionally excludes this question. We are already skilled practitioners in answering a question that would inventory our list of troubles and difficulties. Instead we are encouraged to focus our spiritual practice on the other three questions. What have we received? What have we given? What troubles and difficulties have we caused?

So does the world owe us or do we owe the world? On some days when things are not going well, I might not be sure, but when I pause and think, even for a moment, I can acknowledge my ever deepening gratitude.

Early this summer my sister recommended that I read a book called, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmer, a biologist, a professor and a Native American. A big thanks to my sister, of course, for suggesting such a great summer read! In her chapter titled, "Allegiance to Gratitude" she describes how the Haudenosaunee Tribe in upstate New York has a tradition of starting the school day or public meetings with a recitation of the Thanksgiving Address. The grade school children recite each day words like: "We are thankful to our Mother the Earth, for she gives us everything that we need for life. She supports our feet as we walk about upon her. It gives us joy that she continues to care for us, just as has from the beginning of time. To our Mother, we send thanksgiving, love and respect. Now our minds are one." She suggests that it serves as an invocation of gratitude. And it goes on to address gratefulness for all aspects of the natural world before it comes to a conclusion. Later in her chapter she states, that you can't listen to this address without feeling wealthy and that its heart, "it is a revolutionary idea." "Gratitude doesn't send you out shopping to find satisfaction; it comes as a gift rather than a commodity. That a good idea for land and people alike."

What if we were more a culture of gratitude? Could our capitalistic/consumer society keep rolling? It's a healthy question to be asking.

In many Christian households the practice of saying grace before a meal is another way of expressing gratitude. I grew up in a household where this was practiced at the beginning of every meal except breakfast, yet it has been years since I have said grace with my own family except for special occasions or upon returning home to visit with extended family.

I remember making a conscious choice that I would no longer say a grace with my young family because I felt the prayers I had repeated by rote as a child felt in my 20's to be an empty gesture. The practice for me had become mindless and the language of the prayers had lost their

meaning. I figured that simply knowing that I was grateful without expressing it was good enough. Now I wonder. As I have reflected upon my own disconnect from the natural world and what appears to be a profound cultural disconnect from the blessings of abundance I am thinking I want to reconsider this ritual of a thankfulness at the beginning meals not because I am required to but because expressing gratitude before a meal acknowledges the sustenance of food and the richness of sharing it with others. It reminds me not to take the abundant gifts of nature for granted.

This brings me to reflect upon the work that happens in this church building daily, the food pantry and the drop-in center for the homeless. It brings me to reflect upon the community meals that we serve twice a month to those who are hungry and in need. I am proud of our contributions to those less fortunate and hope that we continue these practices. For these ways that we have given I feel an ever deepening gratitude.

I also reflect upon the work of the Green Sanctuary movement of the UU church and the local group here in Haverhill. For it was in my second viewing of the movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, an event sponsored by the green sanctuary group, that I could not avoid reflecting upon the consequences of taking so much for granted. My personal inventory and those of our culture of what we have received and what we have given to this earth appears to be entirely out of balance. And to answer the third question, what have we done to cause troubles and difficulties? is graphically illustrated in this movie. We have lived for too long in such abundance without giving back. We've been taking for granted the vital elements, air, water, soil and the fossil fuel energy that lights our furnaces and our beloved gas-powered vehicles.

Take a moment and think about how you would answer the question: what have I received from this earth just today? For myself I am grateful for the food I ate for breakfast, the fair trade coffee, the fans in my home and this sanctuary, the clean water that flowed easily from my faucet, the gasoline that fueled my car to drive here, and the list could continue down this page. For these abundant gifts I feel an ever deepening gratitude.

Likewise How would you answer the question: What have I given to the earth today? (pause) For myself I cleaned several containers and save them to be recycled, I plan to put the Sunday Globe in the recycling bin when we finish reading it, I threw a bag of clothing in the back of my car to contribute to Goodwill; I participate in the local food movement by paying a local farmer for my CSA share. I know I could think of other things, but I know that the list needs to be longer if there is to be a life balance and some kind of healing for this planet.

Now, how would you answer the third question: what have I done today that caused troubles and difficulties to the earth? (pause) Well, that is the hardest because so much of the American lifestyle of which I am a part of brings me to participate daily in actions that cause troubles and difficulties. I admit that this question is almost too overwhelming for me as an individual to process without being stirred too easily to guilt and despair. When I think of what our self-absorbed culture has done to cause troubles and difficulties and how I am a participant I am reminded of an excerpt of a poem titled "Our Bread" by Cesar Vallejo,

I want to knock on every door  
and beg forgiveness of I don't know whom,  
and bake bits of fresh bread for him  
here, in the oven of my heart.

The impulse to fix what we have done may seem overwhelming, but for those of you who have viewed the movie, *An Inconvenient Truth* may recall, the ending does not leave the viewer without options. One of the final graphs demonstrates how specific changes in emissions of our vehicles and other actions could begin to reverse the effects on global warming. The movie ends with a series of concrete suggestions that individuals and groups can do to make a difference.

Perhaps it would behoove us to listen more carefully to what is underneath us, this good earth. A beloved member of this church who is an avid gardener let me borrow a book titled *The Earth Knows My Name: Food, Culture and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic Americans*, which relates the extraordinary stories of ethnic Americans and their relationships to the land as revealed by their gardens and gardening practices. What I learned in reading these stories of gardens, some on patches of land smaller than my own fifth of an acre, that "ethnic gardeners keep alive a wisdom about our place in nature that is all but lost to mainstream American culture." They offer us "viable alternatives to the habits of mind that have brought us to our current ecological crisis." The author Patricia Klindienst, interviewed gardeners across the United States to find out more about the connection to land, the preserving of seeds, the sacredness of food and the philosophy of sustainability. One such garden featured is the Khmer Growers in Amherst Massachusetts. The garden, planted on four acres of public conservation land is produced by Cambodian Americans who fled the Khmer rouge. In the garden they have created an extraordinary patch of land to grow some of the plants that were grown in Cambodia, producing food for the small community of Cambodians and producing the remembrance of the land and culture they left behind. Many other gardens are featured in the book, but as with the Khmer Growers, the emphasis remains on a profound connection to land and what it can provide for us.

I am reminded that in our own church community we have some gifted gardeners who have a similar level of connection to the land here in New England. Perhaps we need to be learning more from the gardeners among us about sustainability in our backyards. I also reminded of our own Cornucopia Project, when we have planted and harvested corn that members of our church have picked and then distributed to the food pantries in this city. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to walk the rows of corn and learn how to recognize the ripe ears, pick and count the ears and help with this worthy church project. This summer we have a small plot of vegetables in the community gardens at a local Catholic church, and the produce is sent to the local food pantry. I am also reminded our plant sale in the spring, using perennial plants contributed by the gardeners of our church to help raise money for the mission of this church. Quite a sustainable project when you think about it. For these ways my local church has given, I feel an ever deepening gratitude.

So does the world owe me or do I owe the world? Does the world owe us or do we owe the world? If I am in my angry mode, lost in a list of troubles and difficulties that have been imposed upon me, I can falsely become entitled and think the world owes me. but if I reflect upon what I

have received and what I have given, if I ponder what troubles and difficulties I may have caused, I know that I owe far more to this world than I can ever give back.

Gregg Krech in his book *Naikan, Gratitude, Grace, and the Japanese Art of Reflection* reminds us "To live a life of gratitude is to open our eyes to the countless ways in which we are supported by the world around us. Such a life provides less space for our suffering because our attention is more balanced. We are more often occupied with noticing what we are given, thanking those who have helped us and repaying the world in some concrete way for what we are receiving and have received in the past. Our minds are absorbed by noticing and reflecting, our bodies are kept busy expressing and repaying."

Yes, I owe the world and so do we. I owe this community a debt for what it has done for me and I owe you gratitude for listening.

Thank you and blessed be.