

**First Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**Cultivating Gratitude**  
**Rev. Sandra Fees**  
**November 18, 2007**



Gratitude is uniquely religious. It has been celebrated in the various world religions for its ability to further human kindness and compassion. When we are grateful, we are more loving, more helpful, and more forgiving. (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003) These are all qualities religion seeks to help individuals foster in their lives and in the world.

Galen Guengerich, minister at All Souls in New York City, sees gratitude as having a special place in our religion. He says our Unitarian Universalist faith should be defined by gratitude.

Why? Gratitude reminds us that we are dependent on the world and others for our existence. When we are thankful, we experience awe and dependence and in turn express it in our sense of obligation to others and the world.

Gratitude, says Galen Guengerich, is “about knowing how much we have been given and acknowledging the scope of our dependence. It’s about saying ‘thank you’ to the people we love, to the world we enjoy, to the universe we inhabit, and to the God who holds us all in a divine embrace.” (UU World, Spring 2007, “The Heart of Our Faith: Gratitude should be the center of Unitarian Universalist theology”)

This morning in our member ceremony, we said “thank you” to the stalwart members of this congregation. For 25 or more years they have given their time and energy to ensure liberal religion in Berks County. That’s a long time. Some of our young people haven’t even been alive for 25 years.

All of us owe a great debt of gratitude to these long-time members. They ensured that when the rest of us arrived, there was a Unitarian Universalist community to join. They ensured that the work of our faith in the world continued. We are also grateful for new families who bring a vitality to our community and help ensure our future.

Together we make a religious community – children, youth, young adults, new and longtime members, and all those in between. We need each other to have a vibrant liberal religion and to build the beloved community toward which we aspire.

None of us can make this a living and breathing community on our own, nor would we want to. We depend on each other. We owe each other a debt of gratitude.

Saying “thank you” is so easy – and so important. It is also still too rare. Sometimes we get so busy we don’t stop to notice each other, or the small wonders all around us.

We may not notice the sky, the shape of the clouds, or the formations of stars. We may forget to look into people’s faces and notice that each person has a unique life and their own human story to tell.

## **Cultivating Gratitude (cont'd.)**

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Sometimes we take for granted what we are blessed with every day – with food, clothes, friends, family, spouse or partner, pets, this church community.

But there are times we don't give thanks because our life isn't going well. After a lousy day, it may not occur to us that we are blessed at all. We might be sick or fighting with friends or maybe you just got a bad grade.

A few weeks ago I got into a fender bender. It wasn't my fault and nobody was injured. But I was driving my husband Chris' car, which made me feel worse than if it had been my car. It was also my first car accident. Almost immediately after being hit, all kinds of negative things ran through my mind.

I thought about what a hassle it was going to be. I realized I wasn't going to get to a meeting on time. I realized I was going to have to take time out of my schedule to get the car fixed. Actually Chris had to do that. I guess I have been watching too much court TV and I was wondering if the other driver had insurance. I was not looking forward to telling Chris I had an accident with his car. Etc. Etc.

And then the person who hit me got out of the other car and walked toward me. And we looked at each. Both of us were simultaneously surprised and relieved. We knew each other. How lucky was I? At that moment I was thankful – and relieved. I knew he was a good person. I knew we were both okay.

Our difficulties are not always that minor. Some people have lost everything in an earthquake or war. What do they have to be grateful for?

David Steindl-Rast offers an answer. He is a Benedictine monk living in a monastery in the Finger Lakes region of New York. He co-founded a website on grateful living. It is: [Gratefulness.org](http://Gratefulness.org) for those who would like to look it up. He has written and reflected extensively on gratitude.

Rast says, "Of course, we cannot be thankful for hunger, for war, for destruction, but we can avail ourselves gratefully for the opportunity of the given moment – we quite spontaneously do so in crisis situations. Who hasn't heard of a mother performing some incredible feat of courage and strength to rescue her child from acute danger?"

No one can be satisfied when they see sickness and brokenness in the world. Rast says, "...grateful people see in this dissatisfaction an opportunity to rouse themselves and search for ways to heal the world." So rather than focusing our attention on being ungrateful for war, hunger, and other dissatisfactions, we can try to make things better.

Our opening hymn this morning reflects this idea. In the words of the hymn, "We gather together to join in the journey, confirming, committing our passage to be a true affirmation, in joy and tribulation, when bound to human care and hope – then we are free." Being grateful does not mean we manage to escape the sad parts. None of us can.

## **Cultivating Gratitude (cont'd.)**

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But through human care and hope, we can lift some of the burden. Gratitude can bring about our commitment to helping people and making the world a better place. (“FINDING MY RELIGION: With Thanksgiving approaching, Brother David Steindl-Rast reminds us that opportunities for gratefulness abound,” interview by David Ian Miller, November 2005, in San Francisco Chronicle on SFGate.com) When we accept a duty to the world and to others, we are living from a deep sense of gratitude.

There are some simple ways we can cultivate gratitude in our daily lives. It does not take any fancy equipment or props. It does not have to cost money. And it can take just a few minutes each day.

One way to do this is with a gratitude journal. There was an interesting study done with three different groups of people. The first group kept a diary of each day's events. Whatever happened, they simply wrote it down.

The second group recorded the unpleasant things, all the hassles of their day. And the third group, kept a list of the things for which they were grateful. You already know how this turns out.

Those who recorded daily gratitudes were more grateful. They reported higher levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, optimism and energy. They experienced less depression and stress, exercised more regularly, and made more progress toward personal goals. Participants in the daily gratitude exercises were also more likely to report having helped someone with a personal problem or having offered emotional support to someone else. What's more, those who felt grateful were also more likely to feel loved (<http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/labs/emmons>, “Highlights from the Research Project on Gratitude and Thankfulness”).

For those of you who like to go a bit more high tech and also like to light candles – and what Unitarian Universalist doesn't like to light candles - you can light virtual candles of gratitude. You can do this online at the site I mentioned earlier: [Gratefulness.org](http://Gratefulness.org).

I admit I wondered why I would want to light a virtual candle when I could light a real one. But online you can leave a message for the candle you light and initial it. Your candle then stays lit for 48 hours. Over 4 million candles from over 200 countries have been lit – over 2,000 in just a few days. And you can go back to the site anytime and light another candle.

Prayer is another way to cultivate gratitude. At night I say “thank you” for the special people and moments of my day. Often I name the people in my life. Sometimes there is something particular and especially moving that happened. Sometimes a flower bloomed, or lightning filled the sky, or my cat did something funny, or a friend invited me to a concert.

We can also cultivate gratitude at home in our families. I remember one year at my family's Thanksgiving, we held hands at the table, as I imagine a number of you do in your family tradition. We each shared around the circle what we were most grateful for. Mostly we named each other – our great love for parents, spouses, children, for family and friends. It is a lovely

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tradition to practice at Thanksgiving, but can also become part of a family's daily practice at mealtime.

As we approach Thanksgiving, it is a good time to cultivate gratitude in our lives and in the world. May we give thanks for each other, for friends and family, for children, for parents and grandparents, for teachers, for this church community, for those who have kept the fires of Unitarian Universalism alive, for those who have made this church strong, for the great mystery of life, for the grasshopper and the sound of music, for all the earth, for all creation, for all that is our life.

Thank you. Amen. And Happy Thanksgiving.