

LUCKY TO BE HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE!

Thanksgiving is one of the greatest of all our American holidays because it honors not military prowess but spiritual freedom. It celebrates kinship with the earth rather than victory over a human foe. It's simply more spiritual than patriotic. In fact, it's more spiritual than anything else, for religion is truly born and lives in a state of thankfulness.

In a Pogo episode Churchy LaFemme sits wailing in the back of the rowboat after seeing a newspaper headline: "Sun Will Burn Out in Three Billion Years, Killing All Life!" Churchy cries, "Woe is me, I'm too young to die." Porky reprimands him, saying, "Shut up, you're lucky to be here in the first place!"

And so we are. Lucky to be here in the first place! You know, the mathematical odds of our being born are incredible—something like one in 700 trillion. No two snowflakes are alike; no two humans are the same either. Even identical twins differ. It's truly a marvel that each of us, irrepeatables, walks the earth at this very moment in time.

In *Cat's Cradle*, a fanciful science-fiction novel, Kurt Vonnegut (whose family by the way was raised in our Indianapolis Unitarian Church) conveys this same attitude through the Bokonist Death ritual. The Bokonists, you see, serve God by lying down on the floor, raising their legs, and massaging each other's feet, sole to sole, while communing with God. When one of the old Bokonists is about to die, she recites the prayer, "God made mud. I was some of the mud that got to suit up and look around. What memories for mud to have! I loved everything I saw! Lucky me, lucky mud!"

If we're bold enough to wear this attitude all the way until our death, then like the Bokonists, when the time comes to release our consciousness back to the greater planetary pool, we can shout: "How blessed I was to live—lucky me, lucky mud!"

None of us asks to be born. There's no special merit involved with our arrivals. Never forget, we didn't earn the privilege of life. We were lucky. Whether we look at existence scientifically or religiously, it's an unspeakable miracle, a wonder, a gift of grace. Every morning I get up, I try to take a deep breath and shout forth: "Wow, it's good to be alive. I'm downright lucky to be here. I'm taking nothing for granted. I'm going full-bore today!"

Well, to be honest, at my age I don't always spring out of bed upon waking. I sometimes crawl or stumble out, usually straightway to the bathroom—but, nonetheless thankful for the gift of yet another unearned 24 hours.

Let me tell you the story of how gratitude and I first joined forces. It was a clumsy start. My parents were worried about me as a toddler, because I didn't seem willing or able to muster detectable words until about five or so. Fortunately, I was suffering from no psycho-social malaise of any consequence; I was just extraordinarily withdrawn. Perhaps like the biblical Mary, I was pondering things in my heart. Who knows? Yet once I started to talk, albeit late, I emerged in sentences—and look at me now, words are my trade.

Well, when I first started to talk, I remember my Mom pulling me aside and saying, "Tommy, we're not quite sure how many words you're going to be able to produce in the days ahead. So, before you get going, I've a few tips to offer. Son, there exist words that heal and words that hurt; and I want you to major in the first kind, the healing ones."

"Secondly, my sweetheart, there are five phrases, special to me, that, I feel, should be liberally sprinkled throughout the course of your life. They aren't complicated or fancy. They don't belong to scholars or gurus. They belong to everyone. They're words, son, that mend, that

soothe, that give life! So, I pass them on for your safe keeping and caring use. And, whenever you're not sure what to say, then either be quiet or offer one of the following simple phrases: "Thank you. I love you. How are you? I'm sorry. Tell me more."

Mom went on: "Now, of course, there are going to be inappropriate times to use any of these words. But almost universally, Tommy, these five phrases express gratitude, respect and love-the most important freight that any language can ever carry.

But of all five phrases Mom passed on to me, her clear favorite was "thank you!" which, she quickly added, came with two conditions. First, "if you never share your gratitude, son, it'll never reach its destination. Plus, if you don't offer thanks precisely when you feel it, you won't get around to doing it later. The moment will pass. So, gratitude is ground-floor, son. It's life's spiritual engine; all the big virtues are motored by gratitude. Indeed, everything of worth flows from a thankful heart."

That was the main mini-lecture of my entire growing up. And I've spent the rest of my years trying to live up to it.

So, my newly-evolving friends and spiritual kin at San Dieguito, while it's sitting full on my heart, I want to thank you for our beautiful and challenging journey thus far, whatever else remains for us. You didn't really plan on my coming to dinner and staying awhile, neither did I. It's a startling coincidence, a late-life marvel that we landed in one another's laps. But we did, and it's proven to be an unspeakable blessing for me. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

But folks, the truth is that human gratitude is a mature human emotion, and not easy to come by, and the real story of Thanksgiving Day is filled with mixed motives and results, just like our lives. We tend to romanticize our holy-days. We idealize the setting, the characters, and the virtues of the first Thanksgiving because, among other reasons, we're fearful of sullyng our American image if we confronted the muddied facts. On the contrary, I find that I'm more

inspired when acknowledging that the Pilgrims were roughly as brave and beastly as humans of most eras.

Take a good look at the Pilgrims. They were a motley handful of families who defied all good sense in seeking to settle a wilderness in winter and to plant seeds of democracy in the new world. The Pilgrims came to build a way of life and community that would furnish, as John Winthrop said, “a light unto the nations.”

It was tougher than anyone could have imagined. In that first winter at Plymouth, over half of them died of starvation and exposure, including many children. They had to wonder whether the trek was really worth it after such difficulties and devastation. Yet, William Bradford wrote in his simple journal, “they knew they were pilgrims, and they summoned answerable courages!” What a marvelous phrasing of the central religious response to life: “They knew they were pilgrims, and they summoned answerable courages!”

We too are pilgrims, even if most of our journeys require not passage across actual oceans but the spanning of interior or relational gulfs. In these 21st century times of hardship and uncertainty, you and I are constantly pressed into summoning “answerable courages” for the living of our days.

“Answerable” means possible, it denotes responsibility (the ability to *respond*), it refers to the fact that the Pilgrims simply did what they had to do to survive the winter and settle the new land. I pay close attention to *that* kind of courage, because it’s basically the same kind you and I are asked as Unitarian Universalists to summon for our daily adventures as freethinking mystics with hands.

I mean, have you gazed recently at some of the forgotten twists and turns of the first Thanksgiving?

The first notable irony is that the Pilgrims came to America not really because of gratitude but due to ingratitude. They were dissatisfied with the conditions of life in their homeland. They were gravely discontented, and discontent marks the human spirit breaking out of the prison houses of the past. It's the human spirit doing what the spirit was made for: namely, bursting forth with new and unfettered energy.

So, let's never underestimate the role of ingratitude in human change. For if the Pilgrims had only been a lot of thankful sentimentalists, they would never have left home in the first place. Three cheers, let's hear it for discontent, dissent, even disgust—for without these motivators transformation rarely occurs. In fact, let's face it, we stay stuck.

Here's another piece of Thanksgiving ambiguity. The Pilgrims intended a new start in the moral history of the world. Yet their intentions were both noble *and* ignoble. They pursued religious freedom all right, but they came to America to worship in their own way, and to make other people do the same!

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm glad the Pilgrims landed. I'm pleased that their land has become my land. But that same landing of the pilgrims also marks stealing territory from the Native Americans—the destruction of their religion and way of life, centuries of agony and poverty, and loss and death for the natives already dwelling here. So our gladness on this day must always be tempered by a disturbing sadness.

A while back I read about a classroom of children—it was about this time of year—who were assigned to write an essay about Thanksgiving. It was different than most classrooms in America, however, in that the school stood on a reservation and all of the children were members of the Chippewa tribe, a tribe found in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The assignment for the theme was written on the blackboard. Can you guess what it was? The words on the blackboard were: “Why we're all happy the Pilgrims landed!” Internalized oppression is a subtle, profoundly insidious, reality, isn't it?

Friends, not only was the winter hard and harsh for our early immigrants, but their entering this land was hard and harsh—devastating—upon the native peoples. There’s a cartoon showing the Pilgrims landing in this country, and it reads, “At long last—an end to our religious persecution! Now where are those rotten heathen Indians?”

Yes, the first Thanksgiving was a tainted one. But it’s not much different today. Our Thanksgiving celebrations are just as checkered. Last Thursday was indeed a day filled with food and famine, family and loneliness, compassion and bigotry, greed and gratitude, all in ample measure, sometimes intermingled under the same roof. Our contemporary Thanksgivings aren’t any more romantic than those of our Pilgrim forebears, when we dare to scrutinize them.

Twisted and tormented as our lives may be during this season and on through Hanukkah, Christmas, and Kwanzaa, we can and must dare to shape lives of thanksgiving. As a life-affirming religion, Unitarian Universalism claims that in spite of our brokenness and cowardice, we still possess the capacity to demonstrate thankfulness for our lives and, therewith, to share the bounty of earth with fellow-travelers.

For, in the final analysis, Thanksgiving isn’t really a holiday or even a season, a fair or foul weather response; rather it’s a permanent way of being in the universe. A way of starting the day, a way of ending the day, and a way of living all the moments in-between.

Zen Buddhist roshis remind us to make little bows of gratitude throughout the course of the day to the wondrous world in which we’re blessed to live. It’s a noble and necessary practice to bow to the day, to bow to the creation, to bow to the events and people of one’s journey. To bow in deep gratitude for the unmerited gift of yet another day of living and loving, come what may!

And you know what? Gratitude can actually be improved with practice, but where does one start? Well, the obvious starting point for me is surprise. I find that I grow seeds of

thankfulness in my soul just by making room for the unexpected, by heeding Alice Walker's advice: "Expect nothing. Live frugally on surprise."

For once we stop taking things for granted, our own bodies become some of the most surprising things of all. It never ceases to amaze me that my body both produces and destroys 15 million red blood cells every second. Fifteen million! That's nearly twice the census figure for New York City. And if the blood vessels in my body lined up end to end, they would reach around the world. Yet my heart needs only one minute to pump my blood through this filigree network and back again.

It's been doing so, minute by minute, day by day, for the past 66 years and still keeps pumping away at 100,000 heartbeats every 24 hours. Obviously, this is a matter of life and death for me, yet even though I have no idea how it works, I'm brimming with curiosity, surprise, and gratitude. Thank you, body, thank you!

Oh, the marvels that life delivers, marvels we humans can neither fathom nor earn, marvels we can only soak in, being still and wordless.

You see, whether we feel lousy or great at any given moment doesn't affect the bedrock "attitude of gratitude." Our thankful spirit is a response that transcends states of feeling. Remember Job's prayerful words: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Now, there's the spirit of perpetual thankfulness. A sentiment that brings us back to the Pilgrims.

Everybody always assumes that the Pilgrims were thankful for having survived. It seems to me that they were able to survive because they were thankful! After all, why should the Pilgrims have given thanks? After so much grief and loss, suffering and death? And why give thanks after a hard winter's endurance by dint of their own human effort? If anything, they probably should have had a gathering of shared commiseration for what they had been through

and mutual self-congratulation for what they had accomplished. That would have been more logical, more fitting.

But no, they were thankful because they believed that survival isn't possible and life isn't really livable, let alone robust and beautiful, without being grateful. Through living our thankfulness, moment by moment, we claim our true humanity and bless the Creation from whence we came and to which we will ultimately return. That, my friends, is what religion is all about.

Now, before I close, I hope it's abundantly clear that there exist times to be ungrateful, times to moan and lament loud and long. Remember that's how the Pilgrims arrived in America, driven by complaint. But such complaints, while necessary outbursts, ought never undermine our bone-deep gratitude.

Whether arguing or rejoicing, the thankful person remains thankful. Whether celebrating beauty or protesting injustice, the thankful person remains thankful. Whether laughing or crying, fearful or in pain, the thankful person remains thankful. Thanksgiving isn't a passing state or an annual feast. It's a perpetual condition of the religious pilgrim.

We're lucky to be here in the first place. Lucky me, lucky mud!

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