

Gratitude in Hard Times

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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Meditation

Times are hard for many....
Here among us... and far and wide across this land and this earth...
times are hard for many...

And so, let us turn our hearts to a place of gratitude...

That place from which we remember
that whatever may come, we are...

Grateful for those we love...
Grateful for food to eat and to share...
Grateful for the beauty of this place, this hour, this day...
for tree and flower, bird and beast, for precious earth...

Yes, times are hard for many...
Worry and even fear may plague our nights...
And even our days...

Yet we have each other...
So... with grateful hearts, may we turn to each other,
support each other, care for each other...
welcome and care for our neighbors... for all in need...

With grateful hearts, overflowing with compassion...
may we turn and do what we can for one another.

Reading

This morning's reading is from *Tuesdays with Morrie*, conversations between professor Morrie Schwartz, who was dying of ALS, and his former student, Mitch Albom. These are Morrie's words:

We've got a form of brainwashing going on in our country. Do you know how they brainwash people? They repeat something over and over. And that's what we do in this country. Owning things is good. More money is good. More property is good. More commercialism is good. *More is good. More is good.* We repeat it – and have it repeated to us – over and over until nobody bothers to even think otherwise. The average person is so fogged up by all this, he has no perspective on what's really important anymore.

Wherever I went in my life, I met people wanting to gobble up something new. Gobble up a new car... a new piece of property... the latest toy. And then they wanted to tell you about it. "Guess what I got...?"

You know how I always interpreted that? These were people so hungry for love that they were accepting substitutes. They were embracing material things and expecting a sort of hug back. But it never works. You can't substitute material things for love or for gentleness or for a sense of comradeship.

Money is not a substitute for tenderness, and power is not a substitute for tenderness. I can tell you, as I'm sitting here dying, when you most need it neither money nor power will give you the feeling you're looking for, no matter how much of them you have.

Sermon

A story is told of a Thanksgiving dinner on a hot and humid day. (It was probably not in New England!) The family had invited a number of guests to share the meal, and as they sat down the mother of the family said to her young son, "Sidney, will you please say grace before we start the meal?"

"But, Mom," said Sidney, "I don't know what to say."

"Oh, just say what you've heard me say," replied his Mom.

So everyone bowed their heads and Sidney spoke: "Oh, Lord, why did I invite these people here on a sweltering day like this?"

(adapted from *Humorous Stories about the Human Condition*, edited by Eric W. Johnson)

Well, we all have our moments! How much better if Sidney... or his mother... had stayed with the simple words of Meister Eckhart, who wrote many centuries ago that if the only prayer we ever said was "Thank you" it would be enough.

"Thank you."

Sounds easy enough, certainly is or should be easy enough in good times. But how easy in hard times?

"Thank you"... when you've just lost your job?

"Thank you"... as you watch your retirement savings or college account dwindle as the stock market swoons by the day?

Or "Thank you"... as you face illness or loss or any of the variants of "hard times" that can befall us human beings?

"Thank you?"

Yet paradoxically that often *is* one of our human responses... not *to* hard times, but in the midst of hard times. For this is not (of course not) about being grateful *for* whatever suffering has befallen us; but the hard time can remind us of those things for which we still are grateful, remind us of what we still have, remind us of the gifts still in our lives, remind us of the support and love we have to help us through the hard times. And so, remind us to give thanks.

Many years ago (we were in our twenties) a dear friend almost died from an infection resulting from a burst appendix. As we sat over a bowl of soup during her recovery, she said she had been reminded of what really matters in life and what doesn't matter so much.

We were very young and just learning about such things. But I expect all of us here this morning well know what she was talking about. I hardly need to preach it.

What doesn't matter as much as we might sometimes think? The size of our bank account or home or car. How exotic a vacation we can afford. How often we are able to go out to dinner.

What really matters? For what therefore can we be grateful even in hard times? I began the list in my meditation earlier this morning. Such things as...

Blue skies and gray. Sun and rain.

The beauty of a song or symphony.

Of course one another. Kindness. Love. Life itself.

All this is, you might say, a variation on "the glad game" from the *Pollyanna* story. "The glad game" may seem to some simplistic and naively optimistic. But there is a reason that the *Pollyanna* books were once so popular. There is basic human truth here.

What was "the glad game"? As some of you recall, Pollyanna's father taught her the glad game, and then she taught the entire town, even her stern and unforgiving aunt. The game? To find something about which to be glad (or grateful we could as easily say) in every situation. The point? So that we don't stew in the juices of the hard times, the bad thing, the sadness and tragedy.

Not that we shouldn't feel whatever we feel in reaction to hard times – anger, regrets, sadness. We will have all those feelings. But we also need to find a way to keep on in the midst of the hard times and all those feelings. Rediscovering our heart's gratitude (gladness...), our simple prayer of "thank you" can help us to keep on.

I expect that many experienced this just last week during our Remembrance Service, as we named those we have loved who have died. I expect that to begin with we each re-experienced the sadness – and maybe other feelings as well. For however many months or years since the loss, there remains an empty place in our lives.

Yet I expect that most of us, perhaps all of us, also experienced gratitude, a prayer of "thank you" that this person had been in our life and lived still in our hearts.

I know, for example, that I will always wish that my father had lived years longer, wish that he had seen his grandchildren grow, attended worship here... but I will also always be grateful for all the ways he influenced me, gifts of humor and love and wisdom that remain and will always remain part of my life. And you know, without the gratitude I don't know if I could stand the sadness.

Earlier we heard the reading from *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

Elsewhere in the book, Mitch Albom asked Morrie, stricken with ALS, if he ever felt sorry for himself.

Morrie's answer?

"Sometimes in the morning. That's when I mourn."

And then Morrie listed some of the things about the disease and his situation that caused him to mourn. He concluded:

I give myself a good cry if I need it. But then I concentrate on all the good things still in my life. On the people who are coming to see me...

Mitch, I don't allow myself any more self-pity than that. A little each morning, a few tears, and that's all

Well, for some it might be a different time of day, and sometimes more than a few tears. But we do, then, have to keep on somehow. I suspect that Morrie was able to keep on as he did because in the course of his life, as we heard in the reading, he really had learned what was important and what wasn't so important. Tenderness, not power. Love, not money.

Indeed, for a long time ago clearly he had realized that money was the least of it. Once you had enough to get along, money didn't matter much. And looking around Morrie's house, Mitch could see that the TV, appliances, rugs, car, just about everything – towels, dishes – everything but medical equipment was old and worn. But in recent months the house had nevertheless “changed so drastically”:

It had filled with love and teaching and communication. It had filled with friendship and family and honesty and tears. It had filled with colleagues and students and meditation teachers and therapists and nurses and a cappella groups. It had become, in a very real way, a wealthy home, even though Morrie's bank account was rapidly depleting.

“A wealthy home...” And it is worth reminding ourselves that the word “wealth” itself has its roots in the old word “weal” which is not by any means just about money – it is about well-being and happiness, prosperity in the deepest sense.

In this spirit is an ancient saying from the Jewish *Talmud*: “Who is rich? He who is content with his portion.”

I'd like to draw us toward a conclusion with a few words from a prayer of thanks from the Native American tradition, specifically from the Haudenosaunee people (known more commonly as the Iroquois).

(As for prayer, in what way, by the way, is “thank you” not only enough as Meister Eckhart asserted, but to begin with even a prayer? Well, if prayer in the broadest sense is communication with – however we name it – *the source and sustainer of our lives*, whether we think of this as God or as cosmos or as Great Spirit or as Mother Earth – then “thank you” is, one would think, a more than appropriate way to begin and perhaps to end the conversation.) So, back to the Iroquois prayer of thanksgiving. It begins with eloquent thanks for Mother Earth, water and air, plants and animals, sun, moon, and stars, Great Spirit. Finally it concludes evocatively with these words:

We have now arrived at the place where we end our words. 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.

A reminder that the gifts of life are so abundant as to be impossible to name with any sense of completeness. Once you start giving thanks, how could you possibly not leave something or someone out? We are so indebted. So we humbly and simply give thanks. “Thank you,” we pray.

But one last and sobering thought.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving, we remember that many of the native peoples on this continent consider Thanksgiving Day to be not a day of celebration, but a day of mourning. We can well understand why. Indeed, we all ought to feel – if we don’t already – that our Thanksgiving Day is interwoven with mourning for all that was lost over the past 400 years, for all that could have been different.

But though it is too late to change what is past and done, it is not too late to learn more deeply a practice of gratitude, the universal wisdom of giving thanks, a wisdom which is rooted in knowing that wealth is about far more than, is indeed other than money or size of portfolio, a wisdom to which we can turn in hard times and which we must not neglect in easy times, a wisdom which can turn the prayer of our hearts into the work of our hands – each act of kindness and compassion, care for one another and the earth another prayer of thanks, keeping us in balance (as much as this could be possible) with the gifts we receive each day, gifts of earth and sky, gifts of wisdom and love.

So, yes we will often have other kinds of feelings, all kinds of feelings around the Thanksgiving table – sadness, regrets, anger... maybe just exasperation and exhaustion like the mother in the opening story – our lives are complex and layered... but returning to a simple “thank you” (to one another and to the source of all) may indeed help us through... the dinner to begin with... not to mention the rest of our lives, easy times and hard.

So may it be.