

Still Grateful
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
November 20, 2016

Reading

Perhaps I should have said it just between
The wine and grace, the wishing and the blessing.
That was a time for words, when the scene
Had just begun, before we passed the dressing.
Before the knife cut deep into the breast,
I might have paused, looked up and all around
Into the eyes of each of them.
A jest came easier, wit tossed into the sound
And lost. Between the stuffing and the pie,
Was yet another quiet moment when
I could have told them all. Instead, I sighed
and let it pass. Just once before the end
I should have cried, "listen, before you go.
I love you. I just wanted you to know."

- Peter Laforge

Sermon

It turns out, as you may recall from Rev. Chris Beukman's sermon last year here at the Community Thanksgiving Service, that the Thanksgiving hymn "We Gather Together" was a sort of protest song.

The words were written at a time when the Dutch were struggling against the Catholic King Phillip of Spain, ruler of the Dutch at the time – and under whose rule Protestants were forbidden to gather for worship.

So the words "we gather together" were, as we might put it today, fighting words... even dangerous words.

The version we've just sung from our own hymnbook, "We Sing Now Together," is lovely, but does not have much of an edge to it.

By contrast, keeping in mind the historical context, the original words have an edge indeed. Listen to a few of the words:

We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing,
Who chastens and hastens his will to make known;
The wicked oppressing (*that would be King Phillip*)
now cease from distressing...
So from the beginning the fight we were winning;
Thou, Lord, wast at our side, all glory be thine.
...Let thy congregation escape tribulation...
...O Lord, make us free.

We could say it was a sort of civil rights song for the oppressed Dutch Protestants.

Well, sung four hundred years after it was first written, we might not usually think much about any of this.

But as I think about it this Thanksgiving, I am hearing the old words as a very contemporary hymn of solidarity, a hymn naming the power and importance of community.

The theology of a chastening Father God is not my theology, but the theology that names the power of loving community, God by whatever name we know God, God of and in our hearts, God of and within our interdependent, interwoven lives, God of “beloved community,” as Martin Luther King, Jr., frequently put it... that theology, that sentiment, that affirmation most surely is mine

Most Americans will be “gathered together” around Thanksgiving tables in a few days – families, friends, homes, church halls, shelters.

And many Americans will gather around tables of the like-minded, dare I say red tables or blue tables; but others... maybe not so like-minded, maybe awkward, challenging tables to be around.

How to navigate those “not so like-minded” tables?

Ground rules? “No politics!”? Not a bad idea – I have certainly appreciated occasions of “no politics” lately.

But another approach occurred to me this week, as I listened to an old interview on Krista Tippet’s “On Being” program, an interview with the late civil rights leader Vincent Harding. Among much else, Harding talked about the importance of stories as a place where we can find common ground.

So another way to navigate treacherous Thanksgiving table territory – and plenty of other times too – might be to focus more on stories than opinions: stories of our lives right now, our lives during the past year or decade, stories of any kind. For it is, after all, through the stories we tell much more than through the opinions we hold that we discover not what divides us, but what we hold in common: our humanity, our struggles, our sorrows, our joys.

Plenty of time for opinions and political engagement in weeks and months and years to come. All good, in fact essential to our democracy, at the right time and place.

But for now, sharing and listening to one another’s stories – whether personally around our own Thanksgiving table, or around the national table: listening to stories of immigrants and refugees, stories of Native American lives (many of whom recognize “Thanksgiving” as a Day of Mourning); stories of black and brown and white lives; stories of coal miners and auto workers; stories of bankers and doctors and lawyers; stories of carpenters, electricians, teachers, artists; stories of mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters...

Stories which, each and all, are part of the larger American story, of a still emerging multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-colored people... a veritable cornucopia of human richness.

Stories which, as we well know when we tell our own stories, often evoke the deeply healing response of gratitude, making open-hearted mutual sharing all the more possible.

Well, I titled this sermon well before the election, titled it “Still Grateful.” And I am still... “still grateful”.

Though distressed by much that is going on in our divided nation, distressed as I ponder the fates of the most vulnerable among us (and “most vulnerable” it must be said knows no political party), and deeply worried about the fate of the planet... I am still grateful for a great deal: grateful for my family, grateful for this community, grateful for the beauty of this earth we share, grateful for our democracy, though deeply flawed, still a work in progress, yet also still reason for hope.

Still grateful.

And for me, noticing even *one* thing or *one* person for which or for whom I am grateful, opens or softens my heart, makes room in my heart for much else. Which is so, so very important.

Take a moment, and bring to mind one thing or one person or one value that evokes gratitude for you...

What does that feel like? *Was* there a feeling of opening or softening?

So much, it seems to me, does grow from a grateful heart:

Deeper understanding, compassion, kindness, sympathy, love, generosity.

To illustrate the power of stories to evoke gratitude, here's one of mine from a long time ago – a small thing in a way, though it wasn't to me at the time. It is a story that has nothing to do with politics or religion or opinions – but it does end with gratitude, which to my mind, as I'm suggesting, has everything to do with everything.

Anyway, I hadn't thought about this for years, but for some reason it came rushing back to me this week.

When I was ten or so years old I started pestering my parents for a dog of my own: “I want a puppy!” (How annoying that must have been I only realized once I became a parent!)

And after all we did already have a dog; but Lance was not *my* dog, and he became increasingly curmudgeonly with age (to put it kindly).

Well, my parents finally relented – on the condition that we get a dog of the same breed as Lance, a Shetland sheepdog. So of course we called my little female Sheltie, companion to Lance, Lady Guinevere – which became Lady Guin or Lady G for short.

Oh how I loved my sweet, smart, Frisbee-catching Lady G.

Well, one day she ran off – scared by a vacuum cleaner.

Days went by. We searched everywhere, drove for miles. My parents put a lost dog notice in the newspaper. I expect they had after a few days given up hope, but I didn't. And they didn't show it, if they did.

Well, about five days after she had run off, the phone rang. A woman had found Lady Guin foraging in the gutter in a busy shopping district in the next town, about five miles away. The woman looked in the paper, found the notice describing a dog that looked like this one, called – and within an hour Lady G was home. Smelling to high heaven (we doused her with after-shave that night – took her to the groomer the next morning). But so happy to be back home, to greet me as I greeted her. I can still picture her running out of the car – tears welling up with the memory.

And still – all these years, decades, later – still I am grateful: Grateful for the companionship of that sweet dog at a time in my growing up when I really needed it; grateful for my parents getting the dog for me, and for sticking with the search for her when she was lost; grateful for her return home.

Well, nothing political in that story, right? Nothing about opinions on one or another issue.

Just (just!) about gratitude: gratitude, to put it in general terms, for loyalty and love... gratitude which – to extend my earlier point – for me opens the heart to more generous and compassionate living.

So all this brings me back to that poem we heard earlier by Peter Laforge – which, really, also has gratitude at its heart.

We all, I expect, have had that experience of not quite being able say what we deeply feel, to express love or other fragile, intimate feelings around a table or in a family or community. We fear perhaps being misunderstood, or fear being thought, I don't know, soft in some way.

But the fact that this poem brings tears to many an eye, suggests we have an enduring need to speak our love and open our hearts... which, like our stories, transcends our opinions.

We need this, I expect, more than ever.

For so much does begin in this place of the heart, doesn't it?

Our lives renewed – or at least given a little more energy to carry on – because when we speak our love, we have named that we are not alone; renewed as we are reminded of and name our gratitude for the bonds of affection that link us together; renewed as the circle of our concern and compassion begins to grow well beyond our Thanksgiving table to embrace our neighbors, our larger communities, our nation, our world.

Some of you appreciated as Susan and I did the journalist Gwen Ifill, co-anchor of the PBS News Hour, who died at the age of 61 this past week. I was particularly struck by one of the tributes for her. A friend of hers noted that as she moved “up” (as some might put it) in the world of journalism, she never left old friends or colleagues behind. Her circle only grew. Indeed, her annual New Year's open house parties, friends gathered together, just got bigger and bigger with each passing year, as big as that radiant smile of hers.

So must it be with us. Wherever we go in our lives, up or down or around, may we leave no one behind, in our lives or in our heart's circle of concern – not the immigrant, not the Muslim, not the coal worker or auto worker, not those in wheelchairs, not the rich and surely not the poor, not anyone – indeed not any creature, including our sweet animal companions.

That would be a truly Happy Thanksgiving, wouldn't it: gathered together not in protest (which does have its time and place), but in love, gathered in spirit with everyone around the table of life.

So may it be.