

**Gratitude and Gravy**  
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**Reading**

from *Gratefulness the Heart of Prayer*, by Brother David Steindl-Rast:

On a superficial level, the giving of thanks is merely a social convention. Its forms vary greatly. In some societies the absence of all verbal expressions of thanks indicates not a lack of gratitude, but rather a deeper awareness of mutual belonging than our society has. To the people in question, an expression like “thank you” would seem as inappropriate as tipping a family member would seem to us. The more we lose the sense of all belonging to one big family, the more we must explicitly express that belonging when it is actualized in some give-and-take. To give thanks means to give expression to mutual belonging. Genuine thanksgiving comes from the heart where we are rooted in universal belonging.

**Sermon**

One of my jobs for a year or so not long after college was working as an orderly – technically a “patient care assistant” or PCA – on the psychiatric ward of a general hospital on Long Island. PCAs often spent more time with the patients than the nurses and doctors did, since we were out on the floor pretty much all of the time. And many of the same patients cycled in and out of this ward, so we got to know some of them well.

Well, the time came when I decided to move on, and my last day arrived. I hadn’t told any of the patients I was leaving until my last shift one evening, when I mentioned it to a fellow named Tony, who I’d had plenty of conversations with over many months. I can’t recall what he said, but whatever it was made it quite clear to me that I’d made a big mistake. It hadn’t occurred to me that it might matter to some of the men and women I’d gotten to know that I’d be leaving, hadn’t occurred to me that maybe our relationship such as it was meant something to them, hadn’t occurred to me that maybe I meant something to them.

And the message I’d sent by not telling anyone, and only telling Tony at the last minute, was that they didn’t matter much to me.

I felt terrible. But I learned something about honoring relationships, honoring the inherent worth and dignity of every person, as our UU Principles put it.

So... I don’t think I’m making the same mistake these almost fifty years later.

We will have not just a “final shift” here at First Parish Old Ship Unitarian Universalist... rather, we will have eight months to say our farewells – not that I’ll be disappearing from the planet altogether; but as most of you know by now, I will no longer be your minister after July 31 of 2022. I won’t be preaching each week or even attending worship, won’t be leading classes, won’t be officiating at your rites of passages. You will have another minister: first an interim minister, then your 21<sup>st</sup> called minister. We can still chat when we meet on the street, but pastoral care and all the other things a minister does will be for someone else to do.

And believe me: Though it is clear to me personally that it is time to retire... I will miss being your minister, will miss sharing worship with you, leading classes, conversations of all kinds... I will miss *you*.

So I'm telling you *now* instead of during the final shift because you matter a great deal to me, each one of you. And I am grateful, grateful beyond words, to have been your minister for the past over 34 years and to be your minister still for the next more than eight months.

Gratitude. What would life be without gratitude? Brother David Steindl-Rast in that reading named so beautifully that gratitude, giving thanks "...means to give expression to mutual belonging." He goes further, saying that "Genuine thanksgiving comes from the heart where we are rooted in universal belonging."

Universal belonging. Of course.

Now, I titled this sermon "Gratitude and Gravy." What could I mean by that? (First, since I'm a vegetarian I need to note that in some American dialects "gravy" includes things like tomato sauce, not just a meat sauce of some sort.)

But that's beside the point. The point? Whether gravy or sauce, it may seem to be, appear to be, look like... an add-on, something extra – maybe not necessary, whether to the turkey or to the pasta. After all, you can have turkey without gravy – some people might actually like that better. And you can certainly have pasta without "gravy" or sauce. In fact, I sometimes do exactly that.

But here's the thing:

For me anyway (and now I'll stick to the pasta, vegetarian that I am) pasta *always* without sauce would be... boring – and actually not quite as nutritious.

In other words, gravy/sauce is not really a dispensable extra, not if you want a completely fulfilling meal, a more enjoyable meal, a more nutritious meal.

Same goes for gratitude.

After all, what David Steindl-Rast was saying is that giving thanks, feeling and expressing gratitude, is far from a frill or extra, only something nice that smooths relationships. Instead, gratitude is an expression of an utterly essential part of who we are as human beings, indeed as living beings, sharing our earth home not just with seven billion other humans, but with all life. *Universal* belonging.

As we know, there are prayers of thanksgiving from the indigenous peoples of this land that express thanks for just about all manner of blessings and beings. We could do worse than to recite such a prayer at our Thanksgiving tables this week.

Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* shares a traditional "Thanksgiving Address" from the Onondaga people. It is long, as it ought to be, and it includes, in great and beautiful detail, thanks for all people, for our Mother the Earth, for all the animals, for all the birds, for the Four Winds, for Brother Sun, for Grandmother Moon, for all the stars, for caring Teachers, for the Creator: the Great Spirit.

Finally, just to be sure, comes this at the end of the Thanksgiving Address:

Of all the things we have named, it is 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. And now our minds are one.

All of which brings me back to you and to the ministry we have shared since 1987.

When I complete my part of this shared ministry next July 31, my heart will be overflowing with all sorts of emotions I'm sure, including the emotions of grief and sadness. But isn't grief itself often overflowing not only with tears but with gratitude?

Of course it does. After all, as I've already said and will say again during the coming months, though I'm sad to be leaving you as your minister, I will be ever grateful for the privilege of having been your minister, serving our parish and serving our Unitarian Universalist faith.

Grateful for innumerable conversations about things that matter (my mantra for all these years):

Whether in a class or group, when the conversation leads in directions none of us could have imagined, rich, illuminating, sometimes healing or transformative ideas as if our minds are indeed one.

Or in a meeting to get something done, when everyone pitches in, and when strategies arise that had occurred to no one of us before we sat down together.

Or at a potluck dinner or coffee hour, when seemingly random talk catches fire into something deeper.

Or when counseling with one of you or your family in the midst of crisis or grief, or sitting at bedside near the end of a life, when sometimes words cease and we just sit – another sort of conversation... which might just matter more than any of the others.

Yet whatever the form or purpose of the conversation, it is my hope that over the years such conversations have helped us each and all of us to grow (I include myself), have helped us to shape our lives into lives that matter ... have, in short, helped us to grow more love as we seek to care for one another and to help heal our world.

Further, not incidentally, I'm also grateful for the plain fun and pleasure we all take in one another's company – sometimes nothing weighty or deep. Just a delight to be in community – belonging – with people who care about each another.

And, also not incidentally, I am grateful you have supported and stuck with me even when I've made mis-steps, said or done the wrong thing or failed to say or do the right thing.

Thank you for it all.

But I've not left yet! We have eight more months together.

Let's savor these months as we continue to build for the future in the midst of challenges here that offer great opportunities: In regard to religious education, our Parish House, a range of social justice issues which we strive together to address.

And you bring so much to this time and to time to come and to this shared work of ministry. First of all, the gifts each of you bring in your unique presence. Along with your shared commitment to our shared ministries and values and principles.

It is all good work. Paraphrasing Mary Oliver, what else would we choose to do with our wild and precious lives?

So may it be.