

Give Thanks in All Circumstances

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalist

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Community Interfaith Thanksgiving Service

Sponsored by the Hingham Hull Religious Leaders Association

Rabbi Shira Joseph is my companion in entering the ranks of the retired later on in 2022. She is unable to be here this evening with us, but she has sent some thoughts to share with all of us – so it is Shira’s message with which I will begin.

She wrote, in what she titled “Reflections on Thanksgiving, Retirement, and Gratitude”:

Every Thanksgiving I am transported back to other times. Family gathered ‘round, stories shared; mom cooking in the kitchen with her doctored up stuffing; my first Thanksgiving trying to impress my in-laws but forgot to take out the innards packed into the turkey’s cavity. There was an abundance of food but it was the moments and times of being together that I remember the best.

I am honored that even though I am unable to join you this Thanksgiving that my colleagues and especially Ken have given me an opportunity to offer a few sentiments on this Thanksgiving Eve as I prepare for my retirement in June from Sha’aray Shalom, a place for these almost two decades that I call home. And to you, our sacred community and my friends, there is no better place to serve. My parents and in-laws have passed away, and my memories have dimmed over time, but not the feelings. I will bring all of the goodness and kindness of this community with me.

I admit though that lately I have been immersed in my teenage mind, playing the Byrd’s famous cover of Pete Seeger’s “Turn, Turn, Turn” on a loop in my head. We all remember these words, “A time for every purpose under heaven.” But in my journey this year, I learned that Pete Seeger wasn’t entirely accurate in his translation of Ecclesiastes. As we listen to the words of Ecclesiastes, Kohelet in Hebrew, the words of Kohelet state...

*“A season is set for everything, a time **for every experience** under heaven”*

*Note, it does not say a time for every **purpose**.*

The pandemic has changed our lives forever. There is no grand purpose for a pandemic such as this. Together we have experienced this time in which we have felt the fragility of life. And yet this experience has also taught how precious life is and the power of our family, our friends, and our religious communities.

Thanksgiving is a time to offer gratitude for our lives. Now is our time for planting, for building, for healing, for laughing and dancing and perhaps, even embracing. This is time for love and for peace. And this is a time that will be full of change, we can count on that.

And one day, there will be a time when we will come out of this pandemic.

A mere five verses after the Kohelet's litany of a changing world, we are presented a new moment, a new experience:

And also: everything a human being does, eat, and drink, and see as good, out of all their striving — that is a gift of God.

For every experience, every tug on our heartstrings, there will be a time, a precious moment — mine and yours — that is a gift of God. Let's make every moment count. I feel so blessed that I was called to serve my synagogue community 19 years ago and to be part of our Thanksgiving service and the larger community. With an abundance of gratitude to the Almighty, I count my blessings and may we all be blessed this Thanksgiving and well into the future. Amen

Many thanks to Shira – for these words, and for her service to and leadership of our community over her 19 years with us – a little more about that later. And many thanks to all our colleagues for offering me the privilege of preaching this evening as I look toward the completion of my ministry at Old Ship and here among you all. It means a great deal to me.

First, a reflection on those words from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, in which he encouraged those folks to be “thankful in all circumstances” – you might say, to echo Ecclesiastes, thankful in the midst of all experiences.

This sounds absurd at first, doesn't it. In *all* circumstances, in all experiences?

Absurd, nuts – until we notice that Paul did *not* say to be thankful *for* all circumstances or *for* all experiences. Rather, he was telling the people of that little early Christian community – who perhaps weren't doing so well in the gratitude department, and who indeed no doubt were suffering in the midst of many trials and tribulations – to be grateful *in the midst of* all circumstances.

After all, bad things do happen – can't deny that! – and we are allowed to be upset or angry.

And sad things happen, and we are allowed (of course!) to be sad.

We can't and shouldn't expect every experience or circumstance to be joyful or wonderful or happy. And we surely don't need to be grateful *for* the things that aren't going well.

Yet... though gratitude may not be at all easy to come by in the midst of some circumstances, I think we've all experienced that it often does arise.

I fell and broke my elbow a few years ago during a run – no fun at all – *and* I was grateful right away for the kind soul who pulled over and drove me home. Then, in the midst of all the discomfort and pain as time went on – no fun – I was at the same time grateful for the amazing medical care putting my arm back together again and the physical therapy bringing me back to full functioning.

And I sure wasn't grateful for my mother's Alzheimer's Disease, but I was grateful for all the care she received and for all the time I was able to spend with her during her last years.

And am I grateful for the divisive, even hateful and sometimes violent character of our political landscape these days? Surely not. But I am grateful for those who raise their voices to name it all for what it is and to speak for understanding and healing and love.

Am I grateful for the climate crisis and for the lack of adequate response on a national and global level? Surely not. But just as surely I'm grateful for all those who are doing the good work, the critical work of climate justice.

You get my drift.

Further, as Shira said, during the pandemic we have experienced the fragility of life – and I would add the heartbreak that life can bring. “And yet,” she wrote, “this experience has also taught how precious life is and the power of our family, our friends, and our religious communities.” For which, of course, we can be very grateful indeed.

Goodness, if we can't be grateful for such blessings, even or especially in the midst of hardship and pain, maybe we aren't paying enough attention. Not that it's easy! But our lives sort of depend on it... on gratitude – which, as Brother David Steindl-Rast once wrote, is an expression of mutual belonging, indeed, he wrote, of universal belonging, which is a core truth of our lives.

Further: Gratitude is a sort of fuel for the heart, isn't it. More important heart-fuel than ever in the midst of circumstances or experiences of trial and suffering or challenge. Since gratitude reminds us that we are indeed part of a universal belonging that holds us all – circles of belonging that begin with our circles of family and friends, communities and congregations (as Shira said), and expands to include nations and the world, the very Earth we share... and the belonging to the mystery beyond names, the ever-present God of all.

All of this, heart-fuel, helping us to carry on.

Well... Shira and I have served this wider community we share and that you all represent for nineteen and almost thirty-five years respectively.

I won't speak for her at this point, but I expect she and I would agree that one of the blessings, for which to be grateful, of being part of this community wider than our individual congregations, this belonging, has been the many ways in which we have helped one another and helped our Hingham Hull community in times of challenge. Too many examples from these decades to list them all:

Our Service of Remembrance just a few weeks ago, shared with Norwell VNA and Hospice... as all of us there held each other (metaphorically of course these days) in healing embrace.

The vigils or services we've held after anti-Semitic or other hateful incidents in our communities... more than once, not at all incidentally, led by Rabbi Shira... helping us all to go on – heart-fuel.

The forums and discussion groups we've held on one or another pressing social issue or theological exploration, giving our community a chance to learn and grow together across the usual boundaries of faith differences... all in service of growing our understanding and compassion... the better to help and heal in this world we share...

Or simply the many ways you all in our various congregations don't see that we in our Hingham Hull Religious Leaders Association support one another in our work and in our lives –

flowers or cards to a member of our Association who is ill or who has experienced a terrible loss, words of support when one of our congregations or colleagues is moving through a challenging situation of one sort or another – my appreciation, for example, is beyond words for the support I received from these sitting here with us this evening, my dear colleagues, when my mother died or these days during my brother’s serious cancer.

This is all about our mutual belonging, isn’t it, belonging which transcends our outward differences of ritual, forms, beliefs, and so on.

Look at us here this evening – me and my colleagues here: Wearing different vestments or robes, representing various faiths and communities. But we are here together as one, as an ever-changing “we” has actually been doing for well over a hundred years here (there’s a legacy for you!) – because we know that more important than our differences is that we are committed together to caring and to serving... to serving the call of love – maybe represented pretty well through the offering this evening to Wellspring, an offering we’ve shared for I think most or all of the years I’ve been part of this service, an offering to help those at the brink of losing heat, of losing their home, of losing their dignity.

Maybe simple as this – together, we serve the call of Love: universal belonging.

Well, it’s time to conclude my remarks and soon to let you all continue your household preparations for Thanksgiving, whatever they may be.

But before I do I want to say clearly what has been implicit in all I’ve been saying this evening, which is how deeply I have valued and appreciated serving with my colleagues here, and colleagues no longer among us, together serving you, serving our wider community of love.

My goodness, what a privilege it has been, through our Religious Leaders Association, to be part of helping and healing our community, together to speak up and out against hate, to bring more love to our community and the wider world.

I could go on – I’ve already gone on.... But I won’t go on any further.

So: Just this:

I wish you all a Thanksgiving filled with blessings for you and your dear ones, filled with the spirit of gratitude that reminds us that we belong to one another, belong to life, belong to Love, God’s other name.

Amen. Blessed be. So may it be.