

Mindful Gratitude by Aneta Wierzynska

We take this month to revisit the spiritual practice of gratitude. And, as in previous years, I find gratitude is easier said, than authentically done. Gratitude is often conflated with enjoyment, and it is often practiced rote, rather than experienced to the core. So today, I've put together a few thoughts to help us touch, and be present with gratitude. And, through gratitude, to become more present.

Professor Robert A. Emmons, is a psychologist and expert on gratitude. Dr. Emmons offers the following insight:

The practice of gratitude releases a positive energy that has physical, psychological and social benefits. People practicing gratitude have stronger immune systems, practice healthier living like better sleep and exercise, and feel less pain. They are more alert, experience more joy, and experience less stress, jealousy, loneliness, and anger. Socially, grateful people are more helpful, generous and compassionate. They are more capable of forgiveness. They have healthier relationships.

But what exactly is Gratitude? Emmons tells us that for him, gratitude has two components. First, it's an affirmation of goodness. When we are grateful for something, we affirm its positive value, and that, on balance, there is much goodness in the world.

The second component is the recognition that the sources of this goodness are outside of ourselves. He says, "we can appreciate positive traits in ourselves, but I think true gratitude involves a humble dependence on others: We acknowledge that other people—or even higher powers, if you're of a spiritual mindset—gave us many gifts, big and small, to help us achieve the goodness in our lives."

With gratitude comes the realization that we get more than we deserve. This goes against a message we get a lot in our contemporary culture: that we deserve the good fortune that comes our way, that we're entitled to it. If you deserve everything, if you're entitled to everything, it makes it a lot harder to be grateful for anything. Gratitude also goes against our need to feel in control of our environment. Sometimes with gratitude you just have to accept life as it is and be grateful for what you have.

Which brings me to the challenge of adopting a grateful attitude for the hardships in our lives. This was the focus of the sermon at the European Unitarian Universalist retreat three weeks ago in Oberwesel Germany, and I'd like to share the essence of the message with you too. I know that many gathered in this room have been through the deepest of suffering, and having been there too, I now assume everyone has scars and open wounds, even if they are quietly tucked away. At the retreat, Reverend Rosemary Bray McNatt suggested that it is not just the bright moments of our lives that we should be thankful for, but also for the darkest ones. It is there that we can experience gratitude to its fullest.

It is in our moments of greatest weakness, deepest fear, darkest despair, that we see most clearly what is most valuable and its true value. And for that, we must be grateful.

It is when we suffer, that we truly understand the suffering of our neighbour, such that in these moments our empathy grows by leaps and bounds. And for that, we must be grateful.

We mature through suffering, we become more compassionate, we become more human and more divine.

As I imagine many of you spent some time in the US or Canada, I'd like to recount the Thanksgiving story, which is one of epic gratitude in the context of equally epic suffering.

Unitarian Universalist Scott Alexander put together this view of Thanksgiving: As you may remember, in 1621 the Pilgrims fled England because they wanted to be free from the official/hierarchical Church of England. They left Europe to attain local autonomy of faith and governance which Unitarian Universalists value to this day. In fact, the Pilgrims' original church, the First Parish in Plymouth, later became a Unitarian church, and remains a UU congregation today.

The Pilgrims were nearly wiped out their first winter on the new land. Almost everyone fell sick, and they died sometimes 2 or 3 a day. By spring, no family was left unmarred by the ravages of disease, despair and death. Imagine living in cold, dirty hovels watching half the people you know and love perish. It is in this context of deepest grief that the survivors decided to give thanks, and to give back to the Native Americans, who are credited with their survival.

It is a miracle of the heart that those pilgrims could even think of giving thanks, or celebrating life's bounty with their Indian neighbors. No one could have really blamed them if, at the first anniversary of their arrival in America, they decided to hold a service of mourning for the dead and withdrawn into their own sadness in the gathering the autumn darkness.

What makes that first American harvest festival so instructive is the profound depths of misery which formed the foundation of the Pilgrim's decision to celebrate and share.

Somehow they were able to choose gratitude over bitterness, generosity over greed, thanksgiving over self-pity.

Gratitude should not be just an extra amenity, expressed by the occasional saying of grace; gratitude is the very essence of a spiritual outlook. Spiritual gratitude is the fundamental appreciation of our time on this earth. It is an appreciation that goes beyond our successes, beyond our bountifulness. It is an appreciation that no longer allows us to take our life for granted. In effect, gratitude allows us to participate more deeply in every moment of our life.

Gratitude therefore begins with an attitude of awareness – a focusing upon our experiences, a slowing down, a more reflective pace. Spiritual gratitude begins with appreciation of the living fundamentals of life – like breathing.

So, let's join together in a short meditation (or prayer of thanks). We will take 5 breaths together, saying "Every breath", then inhaling, and then saying "is a miracle", and exhaling. And take a few minutes of silence before our short discussion.