

WITH A GRATEFUL HEART

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

My mother taught me to say thank you and excuse me. She really drilled it into me. When I was five years old and the lady in the bakery gave me a free cookie, my mother nudged me and said, “tell the lady, thank you” and I did. When we got on a crowded bus on Clark street, and I needed to squeeze by the big adults to find a seat in the back of the bus, my mother nudged me and said, “say excuse me”...and I did.

When we went to church and the usher gave me the program, my mother nudged me and said...”say thank you” and I did. When my brother and I were playing ball in the alley and our ball went over the neighbors’ fence...and she sometimes, but not always, gave the ball back, and often with a nasty glare, my mother said, “still, you have to say “thank you” and I did.

Somewhere along the way, when I was in my early 20’s I realized that I was saying “thank you” too often. I was excusing myself too often. I decided that I would stop saying thank you all the time in every situation, to every person I met.

It didn’t feel good or true to say thank you – just out of habit. I didn’t want to say thank you to people, who really weren’t being all that nice to me anyway. So I decided to stop offering quick and frequent “thank yous”.

It wasn’t easy to break the habit...but I tried.

There was a feeling in me that I didn’t want to take gratitude lightly or make it an obligation. There was a feeling in me that I wanted to live from a grateful heart...and I wasn’t quite sure how to do that yet.

Spiritual wisdom from all religious traditions, encourages giving thanks. Religion encourages us to appreciate the beauty and the bounty of life. To appreciate life itself...and each precious day. This is a lesson we learn again and again.

Sometimes its hard to know what to be thankful for...we have so much. With all of our blessings and good fortune, we could find ourselves saying thank you, thank you , thank you , a good bit of the time.

This morning a light bulb went off for me...I had an insight. I realized that maybe my mother was trying to teach me something important, something more than just saying thank you.

Maybe she was teaching me that each person I meet has something to offer me, something to teach me, something of value to pass on.

The lady in the bakery wasn't just giving me a cookie...she was teaching me generosity. The people on the bus weren't just letting me pass, they were showing me that there will always be a place for me. Maybe I really should say thank you to everyone all of the time...even when I don't know just what they are offering me....even when it's only a potential gift.

Just behind ordinary acts of kindness, great lessons are being shared. Stopping to say thank you acknowledges that something important has passed between people. We don't always know what it is, we don't always take the time to think it through, to feel it deeply....but as we say thank you, we are entering a moment of potential...a moment of learning and spiritual growth.

Every person we meet has something to teach us. Life gets so busy and full, that we don't stop and figure out what the learning is...sometimes we just stop long enough to say "thank you".

To live with a grateful heart, we need to stay longer in the moment. To figure out the lesson...to say thank you for....something specific.

Often we learn our spiritual lessons from children. This summer I was lucky enough to be at the beach with a two year....a child who loved to swim, who loved the water...who loved life.

Every day when he stood on the shore...he would extend his arms and shout to the sea..."Happy Ocean!"

He was being very specific with his thank you.

To live with a grateful heart doesn't mean that we are happy and joyful all of the time. For life offers each one of us difficult challenges.

When we share joys and sorrows in our worship service, we offer both the blessings and the challenges of our lives. Each of us here this morning is bearing a difficulty, there is something before us that is hard, for some very, very, hard.

And yet, our faith, our worship makes space for joy, makes space for gratitude, makes space for speaking our truth, makes space for helping one another through those very, very hard times.

I am continually grateful for this liberal faith we share. A faith that believes that people are born in blessing rather than in sin...a faith that honors questions more than answers and assumes that we are all learning from one another, not just from a religious authority or one sacred text.

I am grateful for this congregation of amazing people who are teaching one another, giving to one another, learning from one another all of the time.

I am grateful that this morning we will dedicate a peace pole...where else in our lives could we join in such an act of meaning and hope...this morning we will sing together...Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me....where else could I join my voice in such a prayer.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith believes that every person and every circumstance has some good in it...some creative hope in it. Ours is a faith that trusts the human spirit, accepts each of us whatever our strengths or limitations, recognizes that we all do the best we can...and encourages us to say thank you and stay in the moment to learn the next lesson.

I sometimes feel like shouting with my two year old grandson...
"Happy Ocean! Happy Water Ceremony! Happy Children! Happy
Congregation! Happy Day!

Whatever difficulties we might face, there is always some small or large things to be grateful for. Let your gratitude overflow. Don't hold back the thank yous...stay with them a bit longer and figure out what lesson you have been given.

And then try to be specific in your thank yous.

Sometimes our gratitude overflows because of good relationships, because someone has really seen and heard us...and affirmed us as a person...because someone has really seen our worth and dignity...our goodness as a human being.

When my mother told me to say thank you to the woman who sometimes kept our ball when it went over her fence...I couldn't understand why I should...she was a pretty mean lady...she didn't seem to like kids at all.

But thinking back, maybe I was learning to be kind, even when others weren't...maybe I was learning that this lady had worth and dignity too, maybe I was giving a small gift to a lonely person, maybe the lady appreciated that, even though we bothered her with our noisy ballgames, maybe she was grateful that we almost always remembered to say "thank you"...when she gave us back our ball.

May you live each day with a grateful heart...knowing that you are blessed and loved.

May you see each person you meet as a teacher...and know that you are also a teacher to others.

As we share our gifts and our thank yous in this religious community, may we know that we are being strengthened for the journey, growing our spirits and living our faith.

And may we take these lessons into our work in the world, offering what we can for peace and for justice and for love.

Let us live with grateful hearts trusting in the new day before us.

So May it Be/Amen

