

**“A Few Words on Gratitude”**  
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**November 22, 2009**  
**Rev. Bruce A. Bode & Jim Scott**

**Lighting the Chalice** (spoken in unison)

We are ever bound in community:  
We build on foundations we did not lay.  
We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.  
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.  
We drink from wells we did not dig.  
We profit from persons we did not know.  
We light this chalice in thanksgiving  
For those who have passed their light to us.

(Freely adapted from Deuteronomy 6:10-12)

**Opening Words**

This is, indeed, a beautiful day that has been given to us.  
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.  
And let us count our many, many blessings:  
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,  
And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.  
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.  
And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together, giving  
dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

**Responsive Reading**

Our responsive reading this morning is from poet, Gary Snyder, who grew up in the Pacific Northwest. His strongest spiritual connections are with Buddhism and Native American religion. This “Prayer for the Great Family” is found in this Pulitzer Prize-winning book, Turtle Island. Let’s read this prayer by alternating sides, first the left side, then the right side, and all together on the final stanza.

Gratitude to Mother Earth, sailing through night and day –  
and to her soil: rich, rare, and sweet  
*in our minds so be it.*

Gratitude to Plants, the sun-facing light-changing leaf  
and fine root-hairs; standing still through wind  
and rain; their dance is in the flowing spiral grain  
*in our minds so be it.*

Gratitude to Air, bearing the soaring Swift and the silent  
Owl at dawn. Breath of our song  
clear spirit breeze

*in our minds so be it.*

Gratitude to Wild Beings, our brothers, teaching secrets,  
freedoms and ways; who share with us their milk;  
self-complete, brave, and aware

*in our minds so be it.*

Gratitude to Water: clouds, lakes, rivers, glaciers;  
holding or releasing; streaming through all  
our bodies salty seas

*in our minds so be it.*

Gratitude to the Sun: blinding pulsing light through  
trunks of trees, through mists, warming caves where  
bears and snakes sleep – he who wakes us –

*in our minds so be it.*

Gratitude to the Great Sky  
who holds billions of stars – and goes yet beyond that –  
beyond all powers, and thoughts  
and yet is within us –  
Grandfather Space.  
The Mind is his Wife

*so be it.*

(Gary Snyder, "Prayer for the Great Family," after a Mohawk prayer)

## **"A FEW WORDS ON GRATITUDE"**

### **Introduction**

The last two Sundays I've been speaking about forgiveness, a subject at the heart of religion, relating, as it does, to our overall attitude and approach to life. Forgiveness is a matter with which we are never finished. It's always a work in progress, or, as William Blake put it, "And throughout all eternity, I forgive you, you forgive me."

Following last Sunday's service, I received an e-mail message from a member of our congregation suggesting that, since forgiveness is a subject worthy of being raised to consciousness again and again, I consider making it an annual theme.

This got to thinking what it would be like to have an annual time of the year dedicated to forgiveness. What rituals might gather around such a theme? Judaism, for example, begins its new year in September with "Ten Days of Repentance." These ten days begin on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and conclude on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the

holiest day of the year in Judaism.

### **A day dedicated to gratitude**

As a nation we don't have a national day dedicated to forgiveness, but we do dedicate a day to thanksgiving, which is also certainly another subject at the heart of religion. Each year on the fourth Thursday of November we set aside a day to count our blessings and to raise to our consciousness the quality of gratitude in our lives. We, thereby, recognize that gratitude is fundamental to the life of the spirit.

Gratitude is a posture in which one becomes awake to *what is* rather than to *what is not*. In gratitude one is pleased with what one has and with the world *as it is right now* – not as it might be, or could be, or should be, or is yet to be, but *as it is* in this time and place and under these present circumstances and conditions.

### **The connection of loss and gratitude**

We wish it didn't take the threat of loss to awaken us to gratitude, but that seems to be the way it is so much of the time. Something we have is threatened, or actually taken from us, and suddenly we awaken to what we have or have had.

Just yesterday I finished writing my monthly ministerial column for our December newsletter on a sense of sadness related to leaving this sanctuary, as we are planning to do as early as the end of this coming January. And, as you see, the exit sign for leaving this sanctuary is now in place. (Don't try using that space for an exit quite yet, however; the doors will shortly be arriving.)

But even in anticipating moving on to something that I have been looking forward to and giving a lot of time to, a sense of loss comes in for what one has had. And gratitude as well – gratitude for this sacred space in which so much loving, caring, and sharing has taken place.

So this is an example of how loss and gratitude are finely woven into a single fabric.

There's a short poem I carry in my mental card file related to this connection between loss and gratitude. It's a poem written by David Ignatow in his old age as he is approaching death. The poem is titled, "Above Everything."

I wished for death often  
but now that I am at its door  
I have changed my mind about the world.  
It should go on; it is beautiful,  
even as a dream, filled with water and seed,  
plants and animals, others like myself,  
ships and buildings and messages  
filling the air – a beauty,  
if ever I have seen one.  
In the next world, should I remember

this one, I will praise it  
above everything.

(David Ignatow, "Above Everything," Whisper to the Earth: New Poems)

### **Gratitude in older age**

Persons in older age, as David Ignatow was when he wrote that poem, often find their gratitude increasing as they come closer to the end of their lives. Not only have they have experienced how fragile this world is, how easily things break, and how quickly things can be pulled from them; but they also know that they only have so many days left in which to see and hear and taste and touch and feel and know.

And so less and less do they concentrate on future perfection and on what might or could or should be, and more and more do they become aware of the value of our present imperfect reality. What is here and now, though not everything that one has sought or wished for, is, nevertheless, profoundly marvelous and beautiful – and how utterly strange and wild it is that anything should be at all!

### **Gratitude in song**

No doubt, gratitude's most natural expression is in song. And that's what we will be about in the rest of our service – expressing our gratitude for life and being through song.

We are very fortunate to have with us on this Thanksgiving Sunday, musician Jim Scott. We begin with the choir singing one of Jim's pieces, "Season of the Grateful Heart."

### **Spoken Benediction**

For the sun and the dawn  
Which we did not create;

For the moon and the evening  
Which we did not make;

For food which we plant  
But cannot grow;...

We lift up our hearts in thanks this day. (Richard M. Fewkes)

### **Extinguishing the Chalice**

We extinguish this flame,  
But not the light of truth,  
The warmth of community,  
Or the fire of commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts  
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the homily given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on “Thanksgiving Sunday,” November 22, 2009. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)