

## Whole-Hearted Gratitude

Amanda Udis-Kessler, copyright 2017

In a 2007 UU World article (“The Heart of Our Faith”), Galen Genguerich claimed that the defining discipline of Unitarian Universalists should be gratitude. Shortly after reading his article I began to keep a gratitude journal and then to post “gratitudes” on FaceBook nightly. Such a once-a-day practice can be rich and rewarding, but why not infuse our entire lives with gratitude practices? If gratitude should be our defining discipline, why not become disciples of gratitude?

Here are some ways to practice what I call “whole-hearted gratitude.”

Give thanks at set times of day: The five-times-a-day prayer of Muslims washes their days in mindfulness and devotion. We can develop such a practice around gratitude. We might create words of gratitude to offer upon getting up in the morning and upon going to sleep at night. We can bless one or more daily meals with words of thankfulness. We could consider other routines that afford opportunities for thanksgiving. It doesn’t matter whether we use the same words of gratitude every morning and night or give thanks for the specifics of a given day as long as we stop long enough to really engage with our gratitude. As to the object of our gratitude, it might be the universe, the holy as we understand the holy, or simply whatever we understand to be greater than us.

Give thanks spontaneously: The above gratitude activities are “practices” in the sense that we are invited to practice them in a regular, disciplined way. But our lives always have room for the gratitude that emerges, full-blown, without our necessarily willing it. In those moments we may have no choice but to be overcome with thankfulness, or we may sense a call to be quiet and let the thankfulness emerge out of silence. The longer I have practiced intentional gratitude, the more I have found spontaneous gratitude emerging in the most unexpected times and places; others report similar experiences.

Give thanks in relation to specific activities: When we leave our homes, we can give thanks for our shelter and perhaps for those with whom we share it while passing through the doorway. We might offer similar words of gratitude upon returning home. We could give thanks upon arriving at our jobs and again at the end of the workday. (Many of us already give thanks for the end of the workweek!) We might give thanks before and after church services. And we could express our gratitude when beginning and ending an activity of any sort that we enjoy, from cooking to gardening to watching TV.

Give thanks in response to moving experiences: If we love art, music, writing, dance, or theater, we probably seek to fill our lives with these forms of creativity whether as a creative person or as someone experiencing another person’s artistry. When we do so, we can offer up our gratitude for getting to experience the beauty and power of art in all its forms. And we certainly might be thankful for inspired moments of creativity, however those are made manifest. If a sunrise or sunset, an ocean or mountain, flowers in summer, turning leaves in fall or snow in winter touches something in us, we can give thanks for nature and for our living, pulsing planet. We might

consider other experiences that bring us wonder, joy, or awe, as they always provide an opportunity for gratitude.

Give thanks for important people: Maybe we already feel grateful for the people we like or love. Maybe we already express that gratitude to them regularly. But if not, we might try giving thanks for them, silently or aloud, when we see them or when we say goodbye to them after a visit. My spouse and I try to keep up a practice of saying how grateful we are for each other before we start reading in bed at night; when we do this it feels a lot like saying “I love you” in a different way. A morning gratitude practice along the same lines would mark the beginning and end of our days and lift up the blessings of our relationship regardless of whatever else the day may hold.

Give thanks for any other important life aspects: We might ponder what else provides our lives with meaning and delight. Some of us are dog or cat lovers. Some of us look at our book collections and feel a sense of peace. Some of us look forward to a weekly meal out at a favorite restaurant. Some of us volunteer for an organization and find that we get back as much as we give. The very process of creating a list of everything that gives our life purpose is likely to evoke gratitude, and once that list is in place, developing thankfulness practices around those activities and relationships can be deeply rewarding.

Give thanks for being alive in the first place: Gratitude practices are not about denying life’s difficulties or pain, our daily struggles or our very real fears about the state of society and the planet. But however else we may face the world, we always have the option of being grateful that we are here at all, that we have at least some capacity for joy and thankfulness, and that because we are here we are able to join with others to work toward healing for the world and for our own hearts when they are broken. Our lives are a gift even when they are hard. We can always, at a bare minimum, be grateful for this.

We may not, as 1 Thessalonians 5:18 suggests, give thanks in all circumstances. But we always have the opportunity to enrich our lives of thanksgiving so that we move, one day at a time, toward being disciples of gratitude.