

Giving Thanks, Again

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Giving thanks, on a regular and continuing basis, can be a challenge for anyone. I actually know several people who strive to do exactly that, and I have to admit, I'm impressed. I'm impressed by their discipline. Some of these people happen to be UUs; others come from different faith traditions. It seems that one's creeds, or lack thereof, are not the issue.

At the heart of the matter, I suppose, is one's relationship with the Universe. I don't think that it matters whether one subscribes to a personal deity or to a transcendent process. How does one approach that relationship though? Is it based on a sense of loving awe, or perhaps out of fear? Think about that for a moment with me. I believe that awe and fear are the 2 most basic spiritual responses that will guide one's spiritual path. There are still many today who cling to a faith where fear is a dominant factor - the fear of hell, the fear of annihilation, the fear that god will take away your most prized possessions. Mind you, you can be an atheist and accept the notion of annihilation, and still love the universe for what it is. I believe that a faith that is founded on fear - however devout that faith may be - provides a meager diet. If I read the religious prose and poetry of the world rightly, most of the major authors would agree, whether we look towards the east, the middle east or the west for inspiration.

For example, about 1600 years ago, a then obscure Christian bishop by the name of Augustine of Hippo, sat down to write his thoughts about god. He began his so called "Confessions" with these words: *magnus es, domine, et laudabilis valde*. "Great are you, O Lord, and greatly to be praised." This work, would in time, become revered as a classic of Christian theology. At its very inception, though, this was the work of one mind, struggling with both the scope and the gravity of his faith. Central to that faith was the notion that humankind's principle response to the divine, by whatever name you care to give it, had to be praise. In particular, we were called to offer thanksgiving. Why?

At the heart of religious faith, at its best, there is a sense there is something wonderfully transcendent, yet imminent, and ever mysterious. It's been called the *mysterium tremendum*. We can reason that we did not spring from existence from nothing. We can say, perhaps, that we are the last generation of a string that arches all the way back to the beginning of time. But could one peer back, across space and time, what would we discover there, at the very beginning?

Would we discover matter or something divine? Either matter itself is eternal or has eternal processes, or something pre-existed that matter, and it called matter into being, or perhaps manipulated matter, which was co-eternal. Regardless of which view you subscribe to, we are left with the fact that there is much in the universe that defies our ability to understand it. Given such obstacles, we must ask ourselves, which ought to come first - faith or understanding?

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And this is, as I've mentioned before, one of the chief differences between religious liberals and religious conservatives. It's a debate that has spanned centuries. There are many who will assert that they must believe first in something as a frame of reference through which they filter their understanding of themselves and the Divine. For such people, the authority of tradition is more important than their own conscience and intuition. Today, these people are found on the conservative orthodox end of the spectrum. At the other end are those who advocate the use of reason (intuition) and conscience; for these people, it is important first to understand, as best they may, themselves and the Divine – in short, from the roots of conscience and rational understanding, their faith grows.

Regardless of which path one chooses (or perhaps, it is more accurate to say, which path chooses us), we are left with the basic question, what should be the proper recipient of our thanks, though? Naturally, here too, there are different responses. Some subscribe to the view expressed by Albert Einstein, who remarked that the more he understood things, the more he was inclined to believe that there was a creator. I'm less convinced than he was. I do not believe that it is necessary to believe in a creator, and yet, I am inclined to still want to express appreciation. Sometimes I find myself in a situation akin to where Margaret Fuller found herself. Margaret Fuller is famous for exclaiming at one point, "I accept the universe." She accepted it, she explained, even though she could not comprehend it. She was signaling, therefore, that she accepted her place in that universe.

It begs the question: what exactly was her place? What is our place? Ought we, like the ancients, engage in archaic forms of thanksgiving? Or have we evolved beyond that? I must admit that I myself do engage in some archaic behavior. An example: I talk to my car! Not on a regular basis; usually when it's cold out and I'm trying to nudge the car to start. But I would draw the distinction between this form of petition, which is much more like a superstitious charm, the genuine expressions.

When I bask in the glory of a beautiful sunset, or when I've heard news that someone I love has begun to heal, I'll blurt out a simple thank you. I don't preface it to anyone or anything in particular; I just say "Thank you!" For me, it's a method of creating a positive relationship between myself, with both within myself and my relationship to the universe at large.

Allow me to share a story I heard some years ago. This comes from the Sufi tradition.

There was a man. He was a peasant, who by virtue of his wisdom, came to the attention of a local prince. This man was elevated by that prince, and he became a trusted advisor. Others in the court became jealous of that peasant's influence. Several rivals emerged and they hired spies. They sought ways to disgrace that man.

Eventually the spies reported that this peasant, who had led an exemplary public life, had one curious habit. Once a day, for several hours, he would lock himself

inside a private room. They tried to pry from him what he did there, but he refused to give a satisfactory account of his time. “Aha!” said his rivals. They postulated that he must be some sort of wizard, and that he went there to create enchantments, to snare the prince.

And so the rivals denounced that man, and he was brought before the prince. When the prince interviewed his advisor, the man led him to the place where he went to and he unlocked the door. What did they find? It was a small, barren room that was completely vacant, except for a set of tattered clothes. The advisor explained that everyday, he would lock himself in that room and dress himself as he once had been, to remember his humble origins. He hoped that by so doing, he could hide, or at least guard against arrogance. He would go there to remember his former humiliation and humility, his humble origins, and he would offer a prayer of simple thanksgiving. As the story goes, the prince was deeply impressed. The man was freed. The rivals were executed.

Aside from the gory ending, I like that story. Sure, some people like pay back to their enemies, but the point to the story is that it illustrates how and why one ought to be grateful. More often than not, we measure our thankfulness in terms of the suffering we have known. If we did not suffer, I doubt that anyone would think to set aside time to offer thanks. But suffering is a tough taskmaster. Those who are caught in the throes of suffering are hardly likely to be inspired to express gratitude at that time, whether it's to god or to the universe. Even Job, if you remember that story, had his moments.

One might well ask: What would we be grateful for if we did not have to endure pain and loss? I've read various writers and philosophers, and they've suggested that thanksgiving is only possible because of the pain that must have come before. If you read or listened to the lyrics of the 2 songs that we played, you'll notice that both, in fact, contained a bittersweet thread through out. I think that that's an apt metaphor for Thanksgiving. It *is* a bittersweet occasion. Recognizing that it is so, I think is important towards one's religious maturity.

As we approach our national day of Thanksgiving, may we be grateful, not for a life free from pain, but rather for the courage to meet that pain. Let us not be thankful for trite or selfish reasons. Instead, may we be thankful for the connections that we forge with others and the universe. May we, like Dag Hammarskjöld, be able to explain, “For what has been, thank you! For what shall be, yes!” Thus, may we further the blessings of creation.