

**“Begin in Gratitude”
Sermon of September 8, 2013
Rev. Tracey Robinson-Harris
First Unitarian Church of Worcester**

First reading:

Come the year 1322 Christian mystic and theologian, Meister Eckhart was the most famous preacher of his era. His sermons are described as being “laced with fresh imagery from the vernacular style of chivalrous courtly love-talk,” and “rich with an extremely sublime, lofty mysticism often featuring riveting aphorisms that jolted one into (some degree of) spiritual awakening.” He was a prolific writer and preacher. I have chosen one sentence to share this morning.

“If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.”

Second reading: by the Rev. Steve Eddington

This excerpt from the Rev. Steve Eddington’s sermon “That Would Suffice” begins with a quote from another Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. Raymond Baughn. “Giving thanks has nothing to do with who or what produced the gift. It is rather a way of perceiving our life. Even in the midst of hurt and disappointment, when we see ourselves in a universe that gives us life and touches us with love, we praise.” Steve continues. That sure works for me. My prayer of thanksgiving is not one directed to a deity, but rather it is my way of perceiving life—even when life hurts, wounds, disappoints, frustrates, or angers me. Such a prayer is more of an attempt to cultivate an ongoing attitude of gratitude than it is words addressed to a Supreme Being. Such thankfulness is a way of seeing ourselves in a universe that gives us life, and in which we find love and care and inspiration. It is cultivating this kind of awareness— which, being human, is an awareness I fall in and out of—that constitutes my cosmic thank you. . . . To say “thank you” . . . is not to approve of all that comes your way or that gets visited upon you. Rather it is to face and take all that life gives us and then—using the will, the resources, and the power of the human spirit—to become agents of transformation for ourselves, for those with whom we are in community here, and for a world that stands in need of our care.

Sermon:

When asked that simple and often rhetorical question “how are you?” my friend Monica always offers this same reply “I am grateful.” The first time we had this exchange it caught me so off guard I gasped. There is nothing naïve, nothing at all Pollyanna-ish about Monica. She is a minister, a woman of color, with deep personal experience of the struggles and pain in this world. To be sure, her gratitude is **not** an approval of all that has come her way. She has taken all that life has given her and used the will, the resources, and the power of the human spirit to become an agent of transformation for herself, for her community, and for a world that stands in need of our care. I know this to be true.

And I know all too well this falling in and out of an attitude of gratitude. More and more I find myself falling into it. Today is such a day. I am all in and grateful for the faith that brings us together. It could have been otherwise for me.

You see, I'm an accidental Unitarian Universalist. I was not looking for a religious community nor was I unchurched when I found this faith. I was raised Southern Baptist and active in my church – part of Sunbeams, in the choir, perfect attendance pin. Still I was curious about other faiths. As a high school junior I took a class in which I could learn about world religions. For extra credit, I could visit various congregations and then write a paper comparing and contrasting those religions to my own. My best friend and I visited a Catholic church, a Christian Science congregation, and others. When a friend in our class invited us to visit her church, we agreed. I'd never heard of Unitarian Universalism. Little did I know how grateful I'd be for the invitation.

Now imagine this if you can: a Southern Baptist, 17 years old in the late 1960's who looked like no one so much as Janis Joplin. (Does anyone here remember Janis?) I was a typically rebellious teenager, except for one thing. I loved my church, and my Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Hughes. She cared about me and taught me to see some truth for my own life in the life and teachings of Jesus. I faithfully read my Sunday School lesson and the accompanying Bible verses on Saturday night to be ready for Sunday morning class. (I have my Bible with the gold stars to prove it!) And I had questions about some of the things my church taught.

One Sunday my best friend and I visited the First Unitarian Church in my hometown, Lynchburg, VA. My Janis – looking self walked in – so shy, curious, eager to learn, wondering about this faith I'd never heard of before. When I crossed the threshold, something unexpected, something I didn't even know I needed, happened. They welcomed me in, my whole self. No one cast a sideways glance. No one joked about my appearance. There were no disparaging comments about my faith. They welcomed me just as I was. I felt "at home" enough on that first Sunday to continue to visit. Imagine being BOTH Southern Baptist and Unitarian Universalist! Imagine being grateful to be both! Who knew that "extra credit" could lead to this?

Months passed. Early on an Easter Sunday morning my maternal grandmother died. At that moment, the question was called. Who was I? Which faith could hold me in my sorrow and help me through to the other side? Where could I turn to find solace and a saving word?

On that Easter morning Unitarian Universalism became my chosen faith. Imagine my deep gratitude as that faith helped me take what life had given me, use the will, the resources, and the power of the human spirit to cross through to the other side and, in time, experience transformation.

There is, of course, more to the story of that congregation. Some seventy years before I showed up, a small group of religious liberals gathered and decided to form a Unitarian congregation in Lynchburg. Within living memory of the Civil War and Reconstruction, during the time of Jim Crow; they felt a need for religious community grounded in respect and justice for all, a community that honored many religious paths and many religious truths, where

reason and spirit could be nurtured; where all people were welcome regardless of race. Every time I crossed the threshold of that small stone church, I was a beneficiary of their inheritance.

As we start this new year together, it is well and good to remind ourselves in this time, in this place we are the ones holding a precious inheritance given into our care.

We have been given a faith shaped by many sources - wisdom from the world's religions, teachings of Judaism and Christianity, prophetic words and deeds of people around the world, Humanist teachings, insights from the sciences and the inspiration of the arts, decades and lifetimes of human experience.

We have been given a faith and a congregation shaped by many hands. Some of our ancestors were born into this faith and some came into it. Some were long time members of this congregation. Some newcomers. Others passing through. Some came knowing their religious path and others came searching.

We have been given a congregation shaped by this place and history. This land was once home to people the English referred to as Nipmuc, and was once refuge to Metacom also known as Philip, chief of the Wampanoag, son of Massasoit, who fought to defend Native peoples and lands from encroaching English settlers with harm to all sides. This congregation was born in the aftermath of a home grown revolution – in a time of political change in a newly forming nation, a time of religious debate within communities and among neighbors and friends. This congregation was shaped by and helped give shape to the life of this city, benefitting from its prosperity, counting among its members leaders in business, politics, education and the arts, surviving many of the challenges and transitions of urban life, as well as disasters brought by hurricane and fire.

There is, as there has always been, a tension that comes with inheritance. On the one hand, this faith is ours to live, to grow and grow with, to change and change with as life requires of us. On the other hand, this faith is not our possession. We do not own it. It is not ours to keep; not ours to insist it must always or only be this way and never that. It is our inheritance. It is also our legacy. Even as we hold it, I imagine the motion of our hands. . . .moving as if to pass it on.

I am grateful to be serving with you in this interim time as you prepare to call your next settled minister. I am grateful for your generous welcome. I even have anticipatory gratitude for the prologue we'll write for the next chapter in the story of First Unitarian Church. Before our writing begins in earnest, imagine. What difference would it make if this congregation did not exist? What do we want for generations to come when it comes to faith and a faith community? What might be needed from a Unitarian Universalist congregation in the heart of Worcester 25 or 50 years from now? What role will each of us play in the ongoing creation and re-creation of beloved community where all souls are welcome as blessings and the human family lives whole and reconciled?

Imagine.

This faith is ours to live, to shape, to make strong and vibrant. This place is ours to make welcoming and hospitable to member, friend and guest. One day other hands will hold a precious inheritance that bears the imprint of our lives. May our gift be received with the words of that one sufficient prayer.

Thank you.