

Moving Forward (Thanksgiving)

Take a moment now to settle into your chair and either focus on a point in front of you or close your eyes and review the past few days. Just breathe slowly and deeply, contemplating where you have been and what you have experienced. Just take a moment to absorb what this holiday celebration has been like, and then search for those three, five, or ten things you experienced during Thanksgiving, or the days after, or simply today, for which you are grateful. Roll them around a little . . . absorb what they mean to you . . . and then slowly return to the service. You may open your eyes and move a little to return to community.

Thanksgiving has typically had some anxiety attached to it. My clients and friends usually start talking about how Thanksgiving will happen in September. Anxiety that a political firestorm would break out over the turkey and stuffing is often feared by people who anticipate that their core values could be attacked. This year seems worse than usual. My daughter-in-law visited a good friend after the election whose rude husband asked her if she was the kind of feminist who advocated killing babies. She gave him the withering side-eye. Yesterday, on Next Door, the online neighborhood web site where anyone can post a concern, someone posted this notice about their restaurant visit on Thanksgiving:

As we entered the restaurant, we spied this typed note taped to the wall: Absolutely . . . Positively . . . NO POLITICAL TALKING. PLEASE TAKE IT SOMEWHERE ELSE!" followed by the owner's name. I understand the concern some have expressed about the possibility of political arguments spoiling holiday get togethers this year, but surely there are more polite, civilized ways to express that concern . . . (Next Door, 11/29/24)

This kind of thing is merely the latest expression of a form of hostility that political scientists are calling "partyism:"

Since at least 2000, the research suggests, people's positive feelings about their own party have stayed roughly constant; the big drop, which has intensified since 2016, is in positive feelings toward the *other* side. In an era when few Americans are still bothered by interracial marriage, recent surveys find that a large

percentage of people who identify as Democrats or Republicans want their children to marry within the party. (Kwame Anthony Appiah, “My Mom Voted for Trump. Can We Let It Go?” Sunday New York Times Magazine, 12/1/24, pg. 16)

However, I have no interest in merely cataloguing our troubles. I will examine how Thanksgiving--as a celebration of the harvest--guides us in several spiritual practices, community, and dialogue that can take us beyond the current level of strife. I will examine how we can tolerate difficulties and thrive.

First, Gratitude. Thanksgiving proposes that gratitude is a valuable experience. Twelve-step and spiritual growth programs often suggest taking a gratitude inventory every day, which means, for most people, that they make a mental or pen-and-paper list every morning of the three, five, or ten things inspiring gratitude. Gratitude inventories have been around for many years as part of informal spiritual practices and for centuries as part of formal spirituality in several major religious traditions. A fine idea, especially when it is concerned with today, not just looking backward, but celebrating that right here and now you are doing OK and there are good things in your life. As Sarita’s orthopedic surgeon said to her recently, “If you concentrate only on the pain you won’t do anything.” That goes for emotional pain as well.

Second, Be Present. Harvest celebrations like Thanksgiving are for feeling fulfilled, full of the goodness that life can offer. Daniel Jones, in his article “Seven Ways to Love Better,” wrote that we should:

Be present, especially with your loved ones. [he wrote] My son is 26, but when he was a little boy, I used to read to him every night, the two of us curled up in a big chair . . . I wish I could go back to that time. The paradox of early parenthood is that it can be as stressful as it is joyful, and you often need to push yourself to relax into those precious moments.

(He went on)

[one father] writes about having a similar routine with his son, with the twist that every night they also share their best and worst moments of the day. One night, preoccupied with his litany of worries, the father realizes that something is missing, and says, “We forgot to do best and worst moments. What was your best moment of the day?”

“This is, Daddy,” his son says, nudging his chin into his father’s shoulder, “This is.” (Daniel Jones, “Seven Ways to Love Better,” “The New York Times,” 10/20/2024, Style Section, pg.2)

That is emotionally right on target. Be present for the goodness in life.

Third, Prayer. In addition to meditation, we can pray. Unitarian Universalists are not known for prayerfulness, but prayer doesn’t require a religious setting and often just bubbles up during stress as a way to know what we need, or simply what we need said—if only to ourselves. It can be a request, as if asking God, or the gods, or the Supreme Being that represents the ethically Supreme Way To Be for guidance. Or, as the old joke goes, when a Unitarian is asked what he or she prays to, it is “Whomever it May Concern.” Or to reiterate my previous suggestion, it can be a prayer of gratitude and need not even be in words, but in an attitude of wonder, receptivity during a walk in the woods, or remembering a beloved grandparent’s love. Prayer is more about attitude than words or gestures inside or outside of a religious setting, it is about a sense that we matter in a tough world, and we will somehow bear witness to our truth. The Roman Catholic mystic Thomas Merton had a vision of divine loveliness on a slum-afflicted corner in Louisville, KY decades ago, a vision of how God infused even that poverty and neglect-ridden atmosphere with potential. I have been to that street corner; decades later it was still pretty crummy, but Merton was skilled at seeing spirit where most of us might miss it. It’s about a receptive, generous attitude.

Fourth, Autonomy. We can respect our autonomy. It is not selfish or self-indulgent to carve out space anywhere you are and at any time to simply calm down, be present in the here and now, and feel yourself at peace. Regardless of the occasional snarky comment online or socially, we can simply respect who we are and what we deeply value. We may wish to respond—or not—to a provocation, but we are certainly not obligated to react in like terms to unkind words. Whatever is said, we do not need to engage in like manner and may find it useful to respond in a very different, more loving way. We can consciously make choices—because we have a self-guided motivation—regardless of others’ treatment of their political opinions as existential crises and free spirits as enemies. Know what you feel, sure, but know your feelings will change soon—

maybe better, maybe worse—but follow the changes as simply informative, as simply telling you something you may need to know.

Fifth, Listen with Humility. Any number of people have told me that, since the past election, they have reduced their news consumption by 90%. They have become very selective about what they read or hear. But I suggest that it is not just selectivity about what you hear and read that matters, but paying attention to the reasoning supporting the opinions you read or hear. Part of our news consumption is the news that others tell us, and I suggest that we be curious about how people arrive at their opinions. What is their source, so you can be better informed. What are the implications of each other's opinions that we find attractive or unattractive? This is a spiritual practice of humble receptivity to others. Listen, really listen deeply, beyond the opinion to what guides others' choices. Listen to how they feel about their opinion, to understand if it comes from fear, hope, or a combination.

On an allied note, I got an email yesterday from a colleague that conveyed a partisan message from an article in the Washington Post entitled:

“Don't doomscroll about Trump. Do these five things instead.

They added this note: Check out #2—Join a UU Congregation.”

As glad as I am that someone, for any reason, wants people to join Unitarian Universalism, I object to that characterization. Our focus must be on an accepting spirituality whereby all reasonably expressed and politely framed political beliefs can be respected. We must not exclude people who wish to explore their spirituality, whatever their political party might be.

Further, UU congregations flourished in the 1960's. A former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association in the 1970's recently complained to me, with regret and resentment, that many people joined Unitarian Universalist for political reasons and then left when the political landscape changed. Recently, many Evangelical Christian churches became politically supportive of Trump, but it was a mistake. Those Evangelical Christian churches have seen a third of their congregants leave because they do not feel their church is a spiritual home. We

could suffer a similar fate if we were politically partisan according to party affiliation.

And, since I know that a lot of you want to resist when you feel oppressed or see oppression of others, Sarita and I are reviving a method of lobbying the very honorable John Murray used here. John would show up on a Sunday morning with pre-printed letters to elected representatives and addressed, pre-stamped envelopes. All one had to do was sign it, maybe add a P.S. in one's own words, and put it in the envelope. Sarita and I hereby pledge to show up occasionally with such letters about issues like immigration, climate policy, or health care. Nobody is required to sign a letter, and we will mail the sealed letters for you. The first letter will be about the bill that passed the House to give the President the right to label a nonprofit 501(c)3 agency as a terrorist organization and no longer eligible for nonprofit status. That could very well imperil Neighbor's Link, or even FUSW. It must be resisted if we are to stand up for our values. Anyone can do the same thing, as I am told that letters are an effective means of lobbying Congress. The letters need to be about issues, not political candidates, as John Murray so ably represented.

And while it is important to know what you value, hold it lightly in a world that is complicated. As Barack Obama said to young activists after leaving office,

This idea of purity and you're never compromised, and you're always politically woke and all that stuff—you should get over that quickly. [he continued] The world is messy. There are ambiguities. People who do really good stuff have flaws. ("The Morning: Obama's Big Lesson," Yahoo Mail, 11/28/24, page 3)

You hear a lot of opinions about values from this pulpit, but what is important is not so much what the values are, but HOW we hold them. Can we hold them gently, so as not to hurt ourselves with self-blame and harsh self-criticism for not living them fully every day? Can we hold them softly, so as not to hurt others with their sharp edges? Can we hold them carefully, so that others do not become alarmed and run away or over-react with their own anxiety? Can we hold them with humility, so we might flexibly change our way of life? Hold your values as you would hold the most precious child, one with great potential but needing limits as

well as nurture and encouragement. Hold your values like you would nurture a growing, fragile being that can be demanding but is so precious as to elicit our undying love. Because this is about love, loving so deeply but also carefully that it informs and suffuses our very lives.