

**Words of Inspiration**  
**“Don’t Ignore the Good in Favor of the Perfect”**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration**  
**November 20, 2011**  
**Rev. Kathryn Ellis**

Henry David Thoreau, “I am grateful for what I am and have. Thanksgiving is perpetual. It is surprising how contented one can be with nothing definite – only a sense of existence.”<sup>1</sup> Gratitude is the bedrock spiritual practice. It’s an attitude, an approach to life that is freeing, that leads to joy. Spiritual teacher, Roger Walsh, says that cultivating gratitude opens the heart to present love and removes barriers both to receiving love and giving love.

The Hebrew term for gratitude is *hikarat hatov*, which means, literally, "recognizing the good." Practicing gratitude means recognizing the good that is already yours. Much gratitude practice is simply paying attention to blessings and giving less energy to our desires and dissatisfactions.

That’s not always easy! Last week, I attended a ministerial study group in the lodge at Cacapon State Park in West Virginia. I was happy to see old friends and to spend time with colleagues. The woods were beautiful and the atmosphere relaxed. We were near Berkeley Springs, a little resort town since George Washington’s time because of its hot springs. My friend Kate has made a tradition for herself each time that she goes to this retreat. She goes for a soak at the hot springs, followed by a massage. Kate asked if I’d like to go along. So, I did. I had a lovely private hot soak in the old tiled bath and then was called to the massage. The massage therapist said she did Swedish massage, and I thought that was good as that’s what my regular massage therapist calls her work.

I told her that I liked deep pressure and she started to work. Her touch was quite gentle and soft. I started thinking, “Oh, no, not a wimpy massage! What’s the point of a wimpy massage!” I thought maybe she was just starting light and would get stronger, but it didn’t change. After a while, I asked if she would be getting deeper and she replied, “No. This is what we do here.” So, I was grumbling and complaining in my head. I was thinking that I shouldn’t have come. I had work to do. This wasn’t all that great etc. etc. Boy, was I ungrateful! It wasn’t pretty. Meanwhile, I was warm, comfortable and getting a massage! Luckily, I was able to observe myself and change my thoughts, my feelings. I remembered the sermon title for today, “Don’t ignore the good in favor of the perfect.” It would be better to live that not just preach it.

I was in a very fortunate place! I had to talk to myself, to remind myself of all that was good and to be thankful for it. I began to say the loving-kindness meditation in my head, focusing especially on this woman who seemed hard-working and tired. I remembered my gratitude for my friend. Kate really wanted to share an experience that she valued with me. It was a good afternoon, and I was glad to have been able to stop myself and be grateful. The massage was relaxing.

My regular massage therapist isn't perfect, but she knows me. We have an ongoing relationship, and she works deeply. I am more aware of how much I value her and more aware of my gratitude to her. But I didn't need to be grumpy and ungrateful for the good in order to appreciate what I like better.

Brother David Steindl-Rast has a website, [gratefulness.org](http://gratefulness.org) and the network for grateful living. "Our international nonprofit organization provides resources for living in the gentle power of gratefulness, which restores courage, reconciles relationships, and heals our Earth."

Steindl-Rast wrote:

Right this moment, as I remember spiritual giants I have been privileged to meet - Mother Teresa, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, His Holiness the Dalai Lama - I can still feel the life energy they radiated.

But how did they come by this vitality? There is no lack of surprises in this world, but such radiant aliveness is rare. What I observed was that these people were all profoundly grateful, and then I understood the secret.

A surprise does not make us automatically alive. Aliveness is a matter of give-and-take, of response. If we allow surprise to merely baffle us, it will stun us and stunt our growth. Instead, every surprise is a challenge to trust in life and so to grow. Surprise is a seed. Gratefulness sprouts when we rise to the challenge of surprise. The great ones in the realm of Spirit are so intensely alive because they are so deeply grateful.

He advises us, "To wake up to gratitude, ask yourself several times a day, "Isn't this surprising?"<sup>ii</sup>

At [gratefulness.org](http://gratefulness.org), they declared today, November 20<sup>th</sup>, to be Meister Eckhart Remembrance Day. Eckhart was a 13<sup>th</sup> century German mystic and theologian who was condemned as a heretic. He said, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough."

We are after all fortunate to be alive. Life is an unasked for, undeserved gift! Last week I quoted Rev. Forrest Church's mantra: *Do what you can. Want what you have. Be who you are.*

Psychologist Timothy Miller wrote *How to Want What You Have*. He calls us to pay attention and be grateful for the ordinary. He says:

The battered old chair in which I am sitting. I have owned this chair for more than twenty years, ever since I found it abandoned in an alley. I was a college student so poor that I could not afford to buy a chair at a secondhand store. Perhaps seventy years ago a talented person sat down at a drafting table and worked hard to create its durable, elegant design. That person's effort and talent lives on in this chair, long after he or she has died. This chair has supported me through the writing of a senior thesis, a master's thesis, a doctoral dissertation and three versions of this book, not to mention hundreds of professional reports. It has supported me while I've read countless books and magazines, I have sat comfortably in it while I laughed, cried, and rocked my babies to sleep.<sup>iii</sup>

I have a rocking chair like that. I bought the old oak wooden rocker with wide arms at an auction for fifty cents when I was a college student. It's been painted and then stripped of paint. It's had several different fabrics on its seat. It's moved with me from apartment to house to house. That rocking chair is still in our living room. I rocked my baby in it, and it was a great chair for reading to toddlers. That chair probably has no great monetary value, but it has great value for me and for my family. I am grateful for its steady comfort, grateful for those who crafted it and grateful for those who cared for it before it came to me. Indeed as I think back, I am grateful to the sturdy oak tree from which its wood came. What ordinary, unremarkable object in your household might evoke gratitude?

One Zen gratitude practice is to stop ten times a day wherever you are and bow in gratitude.<sup>iv</sup> It is paying attention, asking as Steindl-Rast suggests, "Isn't this surprising?" We can then be aware of inner abundance. Buddhist teacher, Jack Kornfield tells us, "Our inner abundance radiates a sense of worth, value and ease, of having something to give to the world and enjoying doing so."<sup>v</sup>

Some of us find it easier to focus on what is wrong, on what is dissatisfying or different from what it used to be or just not quite what we wish it would be. This isn't entirely wrong; it helps us to be aware of what we desire. It helps us not to be complacent and motivates us to work for change. But if that is all we do – it is unbalanced and we will be fearful, anxious and unhappy. We will be critical of ourselves, our families and our communities. And we will not experience our inner abundance.

I am challenging all of us, at least for this week, to practice gratitude not only by recognizing the good and asking several times a day, “Isn’t this surprising?” But also, this week, whenever you notice yourself irritated with someone (and we know this is especially likely as we gather with extended family and friends at Thanksgiving), whenever you notice that annoyance, bless that person, think of what you are grateful for about them and wish them well.

Whenever you find yourself focusing on something that is wrong, stop and think about what you can be grateful for. Think about what is good in the situation. And whenever you can – express your thanks. If this feels awkward or faked, don’t worry – just keep practicing. You will be practicing attention, learning what you appreciate as you practice gratitude.

UU minister and theologian Tom Owen-Towle tells of a lesson he learned from his mother:

“If you never share your gratitude, son, it’ll never reach its destination. Plus, if you don’t offer thanks precisely when you feel it, you won’t get around to doing it later. The moment will pass. So, gratitude is ground floor, Tommy. It’s life’s spiritual engine; all the big virtues are motored by gratitude. Everything of worth flows from a grateful heart.”<sup>vi</sup>

So, I say thank you to all of you – thank you for being here, thank you for worshipping with me, thank you for listening to me, thank you for being you. May we give thanks for this precious day and for all gathered here! May you live in gratitude and blessing.

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted in Tom Owen-Towle. *Theology Ablaze: Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year of Unitarian Universalism*. San Diego, CA: Flaming Chalice Press, 2011, p. 27.

<sup>ii</sup> Steindl-Rast, David @ <http://www.gratefulness.org/>

<sup>iii</sup> Miller, Timothy. *How to Want What you Have: Discovering the Magic and Grandeur of Ordinary Existence*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996.

<sup>iv</sup> Kornfield, Jack. *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology*. New York: Bantam Books, 2008, p. 200

<sup>v</sup> Kornfield, Jack. *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology*. New York: Bantam Books, 2008, p. 199

<sup>vi</sup> Owen-Towle, Tom. *Theology Ablaze: Celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year of Unitarian Universalism*. San Diego, CA: Flaming Chalice Press, 2011, p. 31