

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
Annual Thanksgiving Service

“Becoming Bread”

Rev. Jeanne Lloyd & Rev. Terry Sweetser

November 22, 2020

Reflection

Becoming Bread

Rev. Jeanne

When I was growing up, my family always said grace at the table. Each night, the opportunity to say those words was rotated among the three of us seated there. It was my father’s practice (I don’t know where he learned it from), that after the “Amen,” each of us would bend to the right and kiss the hand of the person seated next to us. They would then, in turn, do the same until it came back to the one who started the ritual.

Usually, with guests, we would give them the opportunity to participate if they wanted. Usually they were game to try, and then there would laughter and amusement as the newcomer would watch and get confused about which hand got which kiss as they passed their kiss around the table. It was a moment of human connection.

My father’s sister, Aunt Jeanne, who died some years ago and lived in Georgia, did a similar version of this practice at every meal. Except for her, there was usually about 20 people (children, grandchildren, great grandchildren) around the table. So it took a while longer to complete this process. And, then, when you got to the last person, they reversed the process so that every person received love in both directions! There was laughter again, as inevitably, someone got distracted and forgot their place in the process. But, it was all good natured, and it was in those moments of the day, perhaps only a few seconds (if the circle is small), where, as a family, we stopped what we were doing to say and do the one thing that matters in this world. We may take such moments for granted, but such moments, make life worth living.

We are here today in gratitude. In gratitude for each other, for the blessing of our lives, for the blessing of our loves. We take this time, as a spiritual practice, to formally name our gratitude. For many it is not a routine practice. And, if that is the case, then, that is our loss.

Many of you have kindly responded this week to the simple question I ask you every Thanksgiving. *“In light of all that has happened this year, I am grateful for . . .”* Never before, in my life, has this question resonated so deeply as this year.

Take note that this question is rooted in the joy and sorrow of life. It does not assume that it’s been a great year, an easy year, or that you won the lottery. It doesn’t assume that you have a large family, a big house, or a dog. In actuality, it assumes that you’ve had your share of struggle this year, that there have been ups and downs (maybe more downs than ups), and that there have been hard times to face.

That is the nature of life isn't it? It's not a bowl of cherries. Life's quality, its brilliance, its sustaining force and our resilience, is in large part dependent on our perspective, on how we view life, and, especially on whether we take note of those things, those people and creatures, those moments, those events, those places, those jobs, those hobbies, the air, our water, and food . . . take note of all those things for which we are grateful.

Together, we say "yes" to life, to its ups and downs, its blessings and its inequities. You see, we don't get to say "yes" only to the good things in life. If we are to live life fully with purpose and meaning, if we are to rise again, when beaten down, we have to say "yes" to those moments of life that are difficult. It is all part of one package. We don't get to pick and choose.

It's a lot like the process of making bread. I know of no sustaining bread that is made up of all sugar and sweetness, nor one that is made of only yeast, or only salt, or flour, or water. The way that life is made, is not as a pretty cake set up on pedestal, iced with precious flowers. The way that it is made is by mixing, and stretching, punching down and rising, punching down and rising . . . again.

Even that is not the total story of how bread is made. Because after all that pulling and stretching, it's not done yet. To be done, to complete its life story, it must go through fire, sitting in a hot oven for longer than any of us can bear. When it comes out, it is too hot to touch. We are burned if we try. It needs to cool . . . taking time to solidify its structural integrity . . . time to live into its new way of being. It has, after all, never been this bread before.

Our lives are not so dissimilar from the process of making bread. Experiences of all kinds feed us like yeast, limit us as salt limits dough, sweetens us, feeds us, waters us to the best point of pliability, of stretchiness, of resilience and joy in life.

PAUSE

And, what of gratitude? Gratitude cannot exist without these experiences that challenge us. We need the contrast of knowing how things could otherwise be, or otherwise were, or was for someone else, to get *a glimmer* of what it means to be grateful.

To be grateful, is to experience in ourselves that moment of knowing, of perspective, that this moment, this place, this person, even this challenging circumstance is better than some other moment or circumstance. We need that capacity to reflect and compare, in order to express gratitude. We might think a beautiful summer day, with velvet breezes, is better than a cold winter day, with pelting snow. But, then again, in winter, we might appreciate a fresh snow fall more than a gray rain. Or, we might appreciate heat, after losing electricity in a blizzard; or food, after being stuck in the house too long, unable to restock the cupboards.

In our gratitude, we experience humility, knowing that the blessing of self-sufficiency is fleeting. That we must share what food and resources we have, in order to balance the contrast between those who have and those who have not. In our humility, in our knowing that none of us deserves the bread of life more than the next person, we are humbled and called to share what we have.

And for this opportunity to share, and to do so together, we are grateful. For it is in the practice of taking note of what *we do not deserve but nonetheless receive*, and, sharing what we have with another, that we ground ourselves in that which is holy. In those moments, of reverence and grace, we become the humans we are meant to be.

So may it be. Amen.

Prayer of Petition & Thanksgiving

Revs. Jeanne & Terry

Rev. Jeanne

Let us pray.

Spirit of Life, made of darkness and light, sorrow and joy, that dwells with us and between us, we petition you to help our spirits find new perspective. New perspectives such that we become aware of that which we do not know, see ourselves in another's eyes, are transformed by a fire of new shape and new vision . . . such that . . . we open ourselves to the needs of others, sharing with others, what we have and petitioning those with great power, to serve those with less power.

We pray to ourselves and others to look past superficial differences that fracture our humanity, and instead to fight for the human rights that all deserve.

We pray that we may find ways to share and love and be with others, stretching ourselves beyond our understanding, learning how to look at life differently.

We pray for grace to sustain us, keeping the needs of others ever present in our hearts and minds.

So, too, we offer these prayers of thanksgiving to that Spirit that sustains.

What follows are the answers you sent me this week to the question, "In light of all that has happened this year, I am grateful for . . ."

See if you recognize yourself in each other's answers.

Rev. Jeanne

We are grateful for many things, from the most basic breath of life to life itself.

The Basic Necessities . . .

One member says, "I am grateful for my beating heart, not just for keeping me alive, but also for encouraging me to be kind to others each day."

One says, "I'm grateful for a roof over my head, food in my belly, warmth, love in my life and the ability to celebrate Thanksgiving and Yule this year."

Another says, "I'm grateful for my family and my beautiful new in-law apartment."

Still others are grateful for food on the table, that their basic needs are met, and that they have lots of projects!

And, another says, "I am reminded of the words of Joseph Conrad: 'Opportunities to find deeper powers within ourselves come when life seems most challenging.'" [She says,] "This year I've had some pretty big loses and was forced to navigate them by doing things that were way outside of my comfort zone. But my world expanded in too many ways to mention, as did my sense of safety in it. So I find myself, oddly, grateful to 2020, this stinky little devil of a year."

Rev. Terry: Friends & Family

Several of you have said, "We are grateful for our loving family who, so far, has stayed safe and healthy through these times. We are grateful for our ability, so far, to stay positive and remain each other's best friends even while being under one roof for so long."

Others have likewise said, they are grateful for friends, family, sweet children and grandchildren who keep us buoyed. One person in particular says, "I am grateful for a renewed awareness of the importance of friendship, how we humans are interconnected and interdependent. It isn't just about enjoying each other's company but about our very survival."

And . . . one of our families says "we are grateful we have each other to do puzzles with, in front of the fire. ;-)"

Rev. Jeanne: Nature

Many of you have a renewed appreciation for nature and these beautiful shoreline towns for walking on the beach or in the woods.

One of you says, "I'm . . . grateful for the great outdoors in which I have been able to walk with friends, meet a bunch of new people and dogs at dog parks with my new dog, and breathe freely without a mask.

One of our couples offers, "[that when traveling to Central America just before the lock-down, they were grateful that they were able to return to the states, even though the trip was cut

short. The nature they saw on that brief trip inspired them to take walks with a greater awareness of the pleasures that nature gives us.]

Rev. Terry: Internet/Connections

More than one of you said that you are grateful for the Internet, and two of you said you were even grateful for Zoom! Some of you called it a “technological miracle” that enabled some of you and your children to continue to work from home. Hours of commuting were saved and redirected to walking and enjoying family. Some of you have been able to transfer from one profession to another and continue working while aging and protecting your health.

Many of you say, that zoom and technology has deepened your connections to friends and family. One in particular says, “It has kept my family and community connected, made it possible to ‘go to church’ every Sunday, even when recovering from surgery or living in another state, and it has given me the chance to learn tai chi and to teach my granddaughter Latin!”

PAUSE

And, yet for all that technology, the best connections are still live. One of you is grateful that her friends and family have remained employed and one of our teachers says, “I am grateful for being able to return to working at school LIVE with my second grade students.”

Rev. Jeanne: Justice

At a societal level, this past year has reminded us better than most that we still live in a society where inequity prevails, dividing the “haves” from the “have nots.”

One of us confesses, “I am grateful for my privilege, I cannot lie. I can walk in clean air and appreciate the beauty around me. I can leave my home and with only a little effort stay six feet away from others. This has heightened my awareness of and responsibility for others who are not as fortunate.”

Another says, “I am grateful that we are being awakened to the justice issues that still pervade our country. I hope that it has started on a path toward a more truthful and just society.”

Rev. Terry: SUUS/Values & Character/God/Life

And, above all, greater than any one of us, and greater than we can understand: there is the religious community, character, courage, G*d, and life itself.

We have new members who say that they are “grateful for the caring community at SUUS and all the talent and teaching it provides us each week. We are especially grateful for Rev. Jeanne’s ministry. Thank you for you!”

For those of us who place our faith in humankind, another member says, "I am grateful for determination and courage, despite seemingly endless uncertainty and bad news. That determination and courage that is reflected in the support I receive from those around me.

Another joins in this sentiment saying, I am grateful for "my continuing faith in the goodness of people."

And, yet, another member says, "I am grateful for the opportunities to serve what I choose to call God every day. I am grateful for my awareness that my efforts, large and small, do combine with those of others to help make this world a better place. I am also grateful that when my attitude changes and I am depressed I know it will not last for long and I just need to keep going, or rest, until the sense of hope returns. And, I am grateful for the opportunity to express my gratitude here."

And, finally, one says, and indeed, I think we all say, we are grateful for . . . "Life."

And, so may it be.