

Thanksgiving Service November 22, 2009

The ability to feel gratitude and to express gratitude when times are good, does not exactly constitute a spiritual practice. It's just a little too easy. Gratitude in a time of bounty almost feels like an after-thought. Oh yeah, thanks for all this good stuff. Thanksgiving has often felt like a courtesy call one makes to an uncle after receiving a splendid gift. There's the perfunctory thank you and then perhaps you do something nice in return so people don't think you're obnoxious.

But attitudes are different these days as exemplified by Wall Street bankers where at Goldman Sachs, for example, good fortune serves as a license for further entitlement and a heaping increase of even a larger bounty. Abundance is, of course, a relative term, but for some in these unusual times, abundance has no ceiling and the surplus is not shared in ways the Pilgrims and Native Americans shared in that first Thanksgiving in 1621. In fact, that first harvest would be viewed today as bordering on socialism. The Indians gave richly to the new immigrants, a tradition we have long forsaken.

I remember how my mother was notorious for worrying about the tenderness of the Thanksgiving turkey. The family was never particularly critical of my mother's cooking, although they could have been. All that really mattered was that we were all together, and the times, as best we judged, were good: Everyone was employed, the children were in school, and doctors made house calls. It's very different now. The turkey may be good, but the times are tough, and the world has a different feel to it. **How do we offer thanks in recessionary times?** How do we express gratitude when friends and neighbors or ourselves are unemployed, or have homes repossessed, or have medical needs with no insurance?

It's all a little confusing. I read the following headline in the New York Times twice and still couldn't make sense of it. It said: "Despite Recession Sales of Shoes Are Soaring."

What is one to make of that kind of news? Like groceries, diapers, and medicine, Americans just can't get along without buying shoes. As the economy struggles, the article says, boots, booties, sneakers and pumps have all been selling well. Dresses, handbags, and cuff links are down, but apparently people feel less guilty buying shoes. One New York woman justified her \$300 shoe purchase with the argument: "In New York, shoes are my car."

We all rationalize things, but I know that come this Thursday, when confronted with this holiday of giving thanks, most of us will be wondering just exactly how one gives thanks in difficult times. How you celebrate in an economic meltdown, except maybe by buying shoes.

I would like to return to the original Thanksgiving for a moment, not to offer another account of Plymouth in 1621, but I want to grasp a metaphor that I believe

has eluded our American culture despite the fact that we regard the Thanksgiving table as a secular altar upon which we worship our Pilgrim fathers and mothers and their tenacity in surviving horrible adversity.

Thanksgiving was always, even before Plymouth Rock, been a Harvest Festival. In the spring you plant seeds and in the fall you harvest what you have planted. We have lost, I think, the basic metaphor of the harvest festival, that essentially, as the Apostle Paul warned in his letter to the Galatians: "We reap exactly what we sow." Thanksgiving is about harvesting what you planted.

So what did the Pilgrims plant? After arriving at Plymouth in December of 1620 where they then proceeded to lose 55 people out of the original 102 during the first winter, what did they plant the next spring? We can be literal and say beans and squash. We can also respect the metaphor of the planting and harvesting cycle and maintain that the Pilgrims planted seeds of hope rather than despair. The Pilgrims planted a mindset of cooperation. They planted courage in the face of adversity. A colleague of mine cracked me up when he said the pilgrims originated the sound bite for the Obama campaign: "Yes we can."

You reap what you sow. I don't think we find this admonition in the Bible simply as an auxiliary to the Burpee Seed catalogue where we expect to harvest lemon cucumbers if we plant lemon cucumbers; harvest English cucumbers if we plant English cucumbers; harvest seedless cucumbers if we plant seedless cucumbers. It's means more than that. Let me read the brief passage in Galatians in its entirety: Don't delude yourself. Where a man sows, there he reaps. If he sows in the field of self-indulgence, he will get a harvest of corruption out of it; if he sows in the field of the Spirit, he will get from it a harvest of eternal life. We must never get tired of doing good because if we don't give up the struggle we shall get the harvest at the proper time. While we have the chance we must do good to all..."

Placing that into more contemporary jargon, "we are the sum total of our actions." This caveat extends to nations as well as to individuals. What we are today is due to what we planted yesterday. It's very karmic. Sowing and harvesting plays out in the fields of nature, in the fields of self-indulgence, in the fields of the spirit. And it all starts with the forewarning: Don't delude yourselves.

There's a Chinese proverb that comes into play here:
Plant a thought, reap an action.
Plant an action, reap a habit.
Plant a habit, reap a character.
Plant a character, reap a fate.

So when you go through the whole cycle, and you begin by planting seeds entirely for your own personal gain...you reap actions of self-indulgence. You plant seeds of your own self-indulgence - you reap a habit of consumerism without regard for other people or the natural world. You plant that habit of consumerism and self-gain

why you reap a character of indulgent conspicuous consumerism. And when you plant that character, why the fate you reap is obvious, and precisely where we find ourselves today. The community is broken, the economy is wrecked, lives are wrecked, the planet as a whole is wrecked. (I think these Chinese proverbs are on to something). **We are the sum total of our actions. Do not be deluded.**

The passage in Galatians, the metaphorical harvest festival is about planting seeds of goodness. We must never get tired of doing good, the apostle Paul calls to us as though he knows we will. And we have. We have grown tired of doing good. Even to our neighbors.

Greed is at odds with the welfare and harmony of community. Always has been; always will. If you plant greed, the harvest will exclude the interests of others...nothing ever trickles down.

As a minister, I probably have more translations from different bibles than most people, at least most Unitarians. It's one of the hazards of the trade. In a different translation of the passage from Galatians, there's the phrase: "Now is the time for planting."

I contemplated that for a long time. Now is the time does not suggest that the year 125 in the Common Era was a good time to fit that story. The time for planting is always nigh. Now is the time for planting, 2009. Put another way, two concepts come immediately to mind: What we are today is due to what we did yesterday; and What we are tomorrow will be due to what we do today. The cycle of planting and harvest never ceases.

If we look at what we are today we will painfully realize the seeds we planted yesterday were not seeds of compassion and good will. For the past 14 years, the Department of Agriculture measures what it calls "food insecurity." The number of Americans who lived in households that lacked consistent access to adequate food has now soared to a record 49 million. 506,000 households have children who do not have enough to eat.

In the 1980's when officials of the Reagan administration denied there was hunger in America, the Food Research and Action Center, a research and advocacy group, undertook a survey that concluded otherwise. Over time, Congress instructed the Agriculture Department to oversee the annual surveys. They were only allowed to use the term " food insecurity" until this year when President Obama finally began to address the problem as "hunger in America."

Hunger in America? What kind of seeds did we plant? What did we plant yesterday that has led to these difficult times today? What did we plant that led the bank and insurance industries and the SEC to choke the American spirit of cooperation and send unemployment to over 10%, underemployment to 15%, wipe out retirement accounts, and simply meltdown the economy throughout the world?

What we are tomorrow will be due to what we do today? Today – we have sprinkled the seeds of compassionate healthcare reform upon thorn bushes. In the Gospel of Mark we read: “Other seeds fell among thorns and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.”

We have sprinkled the seeds meant to reduce our carbon footprint, meant to support alternative energy, meant to reduce global warming upon thorn bushes. The truth about the environment, the truth about hunger in America, remains too inconvenient for us to plant our seeds for the spirit rather than for self-indulgence.

We have sprinkled the seeds of peace upon thorns bushes. Do not be deluded we are told by our own cultural sacred text. Do not be deluded: What we are tomorrow will be due to what we do today.

This is a tough Thanksgiving. Do I bring word of hope? Of course I do; I must. If the pilgrims could be hopeful after almost half of them died following their persecution and ultimate voyage across the Atlantic, then this harvest festival of today calls for hope as well.

First an important distinction: When the Pilgrims celebrated and feasted and showed gratitude to God for the bounty that lay before them, it was not praising God for excess and luxury; that they had somehow made it to Easy Street and all would be good. Their understanding of bounty was what we would call “sufficient.” They had sufficient food that would hopefully see them through the next winter.

The word “sufficient” is not even in our lexicon. Isn’t that a tremendous failing of our character? How would anyone here measure “that which is sufficient?” Well, those of us who have no income currently might make a pretty good stab at it. What the term sufficient suggests is that we get in touch with our deepest values in order to understand and differentiate between what we really need and what is excessive.

And the good news is that when times are tough, we appreciate family and friends more deeply. When times are tough we learn as the Pilgrims did, that getting along with other cultures could be life saving. We learn to appreciate the basics in life that keep us going; we are made humble by the power, the spiritual power that gives miracle to the wonder of plantings leading to harvests.

And the agenda is not to be all smiley-face when providing a meal for the downtrodden - for a day, or giving to the food bank - for a day, but to finally understand the meaning that what we plant today will be harvested tomorrow, and our plantings must be of the spirit rather than the flesh.

Do not be deluded. What ye plant so shall ye reap. While sitting at the thanksgiving table this year, enjoy the blessings of the companions that surround you; show gratitude for the delicious food you are privileged to enjoy, but also think ahead to the next planting. What will you plant? The time for planting is now.