

Thanksgiving Service 2010  
Singing Praises

Whenever the media wants an opinion about atheists or Secular Humanists they dial my number. I ask them – every time – Do you think we're a godless church? This is met with an embarrassed silence. They have essentially just labeled a minister of this community as Godless. I sense their wanting to hang up and call someone else. But they're stuck with me, and I'm stuck with them and then there's a stammer: "But everyone I know who's Unitarian claims to be an atheist."

"So why do you think all these atheists go to church?" I ask. (I really want to find out for myself). Now they really want to hang up. I break the silence: "Perhaps they refer to themselves as atheists because they don't believe in an actual physical being in the sky somewhere, a cop who judges their actions and determines their sentence after death. Maybe that's their idea of atheism...it is mine...but religion is also about things other than defining God...isn't it?"

I had three interviews just this last week. Kristen Molten from the Tribune was absolutely lovely. We've talked frequently in the past and so I think she dons a coat of armor before calling me. Anticipating my rejection of a narrow view of God, she asked with all sincerity: If there is no traditional God as worshipped in other churches, then to whom do Unitarians give thanks?

I asked: Does gratitude always need an object ... someone to whom we offer thanks... or can gratitude just be...an emotion in the heart that lifts the spirit. Atheists and Secular Humanists are actually capable of "feeling a spirit move within them; we can feel gratitude without thanking a bearded individual who purportedly birthed the cosmos."

"Tell me more," she said. We had a good conversation. I like her very much.

Thanksgiving without a God...what would the Pilgrims say? And yet those 90 Indians who showed up unexpectedly at the historically questionable First Thanksgiving in Plymouth, 1621, didn't know much about the Christian God, but they did understand two huge principles about gratitude: Thankfulness for abundance is worthy of celebration, and secondly, in gratitude, our bounty must be extended to others, shared with others in a generous way. Quite simply, there is a human imperative that dictates our hearts to share with those whose larder is bare. Real gratitude ignites generosity.

I came across a four-line poem which captures the premise that gratitude needs no God as its object:

It is good to give thanks.  
Why? Does God need our praise?

No.  
We do.

The creator of all that is majestic and mysterious...  
The creator who figured out that seeds give birth to pumpkins and squash...  
The creator who gave us turkeys and pheasants and friends and families and love...

Does this creator need **us** to praise HIM, HER, IT, THE FORCE, THE POWER, The GREAT UNKOWABLE?

No! We praise because we need to do so for our own soul.

In traditional Judaism, the devout are required to render a hundred blessings everyday...a constant stream of thankfulness: For what we consume, use, see, the people we meet...everything receiving holy attention and focus. There are specific blessings designed for just about anything: eating bread, eating fruit, witnessing the ocean, a rainbow, a shooting star, meeting a wise person, smelling spices, hearing good news, hearing bad news. If you're Jewish you bless even bad news. If you're Unitarian you speak louder in order not to hear the bad news.

But even for the devout Jew, it's not really about thanking God for everything that comes along; it's an exercise, really, in finding the sacred in every aspect of life. Marge Piercy, a contemporary Jewish writer is able to condense that traditional Jewish litany of endless thanks with these words: "To be a poet is to open your eyes to everything around you." She is urging us to be poets in our lives. We seldom succeed. However, on Thanksgiving, it has become an American tradition to open our eyes to everything around us and feel gratitude. We open our eyes to the harvest, to friends, to every breath we take, and we sing praises for these..."GIFTS."

One of Piercy's books of poems is called: The Art of Blessing the Day. We need to ask ourselves with candor and humility: How often – really – do we practice the art of blessing the day... every day.

We sing praises not as an avenue for reaching God, but we do so for ourselves. We sing praises, we recite blessings, we utter our gratitude because that powerful experience helps **us** avoid taking the world for granted. Once we stop taking the world for granted, it is as though our vision of life expands exponentially. Ordinary things come into view. On Thanksgiving we focus on the transcendent meaning of a meal – a dinner, if we are so fortunate. How often is our meal a quick bite on the go, routine, unthinking, eat and run kind of daily experience. But at Thanksgiving, this dinner loses its routine and allows us to savor the candied yams as an unusual treat; the freshly made pumpkin pie sits on our tongues a little bit longer. We actually taste it. We become a people who are thankful for everything the garden has brought to the table. We notice those who are gathered with us. Our eyes are open to everything around us.

Ordinary things become gifts in our gratitude. When our eyes are open, the ordinary is transformed to something we feel should be writ large because we now feel connected to a larger reality. When our eyes are open we devote our attention to the world around us...and the world within us. We need, as spiritually seeking people, to be more open to the world and appreciative of life as opposed to the more routine and customary habits we fall into all too easily.

In a documentary, *The Life and Times of Allen Ginsberg*, he says: “When I was young I thought I was pretty dumb, so I decided I’d better be smart and shut up and listen, and be sensitive and innocent and shy and goofy, but really pay attention to what other people said – so I listened very carefully, always worried and anxious that maybe I was getting it all wrong, or that I was too stupid to understand – and I found that, actually, the people that were smarter than me were smarter than me, and they had something to tell me, so I heard it.”

This is a remarkably humble position to take for a poet of Ginsberg’s stature. It’s almost disarming how open he is to learning from everyone and everything around him. But it is only through humility that we discover the **power** that exists in the world. The power of things that we ignore in our self-absorbed lives comes to light when we stop to see it, hear it, smell it, and can focus on the very sacredness of all that deserves our gratitude and the singing of praise.

Most of us are not poets, at least not like Ginsberg or Marge Piercy. But if our eyes are open and we thus feel gratitude and sing praises, and feel blessed, Piercy says: “In this way we actually return to the world some of what we’ve been given.” In our gratitude we return to the world some of what we’ve been given.

Let me ratchet that up a little, not implying that Marge Piercy needs any improvement. A profound connection exists between gratitude –seeing the world more clearly with gratitude – and generosity; that is giving something back to the world. Gratitude and generosity...receiving and giving back.

Gratitude without generosity is meaningless. It’s a little too self-serving. The Indians at Plymouth made that clear: they shared from their bounty. They were grateful and then gave back generously to those who were less fortunate. The image of that first thanksgiving, perhaps romanticized but who cares - - the image that we honor in our society today is that pilgrims and Indians sat at the same table. Those who had and those who didn’t sat at the same table. The Indian welcomed the immigrant.

The prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures had something to tell us. As Ginsberg would say, “They were smarter than us and have something to tell us.” Are we listening?

Micah was the last in a series of prophets. Amos and Hosea and Isaiah thundered on and on about justice rolling down like mighty waters and that the pride of men shall be humbled. But Micah connected all the dots by contending that in order to see the world as it really is, to fully appreciate all we have, we need to give back; he offered

a very simple formula: We must do justice...love mercy...and walk humbly with our God.

His emphasis was upon generosity as an expression of gratitude. We receive and we must return...in terms of love and justice. (Do justice...give something back). Don't need to praise God and thank God but merely walk humbly in this magnificent world filled with sacred gifts that bless us everyday...and make sure that love and mercy be extended to those who have so little compared to you. [You can't be a grateful person and then walk away from loving your neighbor; only with grateful hearts can we make justice in the world.]

Do you know what the response was to Micah? The people's response at that time was echoed again in the parable of the Good Samaritan when the lawyer, after hearing Jesus proclaim we need to love our neighbor as ourselves, tried to find a loophole by asking: Just who is my neighbor. How far does this love thing extend?

And Micah was asked: What is the least we have to do to make things right with God? [They sound like the Utah State Legislature...which is essentially asking: What is the least we can do in the area of justice and love?] That's where we find ourselves today.

I respond by scolding the legislature like the old Hebrew prophets; I pour my wrath upon the Tea Party; I rail against the injustices perpetrated by the religious right who stop our progress against global warming with a Bible. I rant and I rave, but Micah...who is so different in temperament from the other prophets, speaks calmly to the people: How can you live with so much and not feel gratitude that inspires you to give unto others? Have you no humility?

His premise is that gratitude is transformative. And he's right because we feel it for a day – Thanksgiving is when we feel transformed enough to actually give back and to share and to be generous. And the next day we line up at 5:00a.m. at the super-stores to buy, buy, buy. But it is gratitude that makes your soul larger and your demeanor more humble and your heart more sensitive.

In this morning potpourri, from Indians at Plymouth Rock to Allen Ginsberg and the prophet Micah, I want to add one more spice to the dish: Why no end with Shakespeare – the crowning finale.

In Henry IV, the King says: O Lord that lends me life, lend me a heart replete with thankfulness.”

What a concept: Life is a gift that's merely on loan. If that doesn't humble us, what will? And lend me a heart with thankfulness? Why, we might ask. Because if we are thankful we will certainly give back to the world, share with our neighbor, live by the rules of generosity. Why be generous if we can get away with giving less in order to retain more for ourselves? Because it is humanly impossible to view the world

with open eyes and sing its praises without humbly reaching deep into one's own larder...grabbing hold of our bounty and offering others love and mercy and justice. And then we can walk humbly...and then the world can be sustained. Happy Thanksgiving. It's a glorious holiday. May we practice Thanksgiving everyday. May our eyes be as open as the poet's.