

Celebration of Abundance
McMinnville 4-3-16

The Buddhist tradition tells stories of Kwan Yin, the goddess of compassion and mercy. She is revered because of her unconditional love and compassion. She is seen as a savior and protector of those who are vulnerable and in trouble. She is a bodhisattva, one who, motivated by compassion, commits to reaching enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. Kwan Yin is depicted in many different ways. Sometimes sitting in a lotus position, legs crossed. Sometime sitting with one leg out in front of the other, as if ready to spring into action. Sometimes with dozens of arms and hands, “the thousand arms,” that reflects the reality of many, many needs in the world.

Kwan Yin is motivated by her compassion for the suffering of others. The stories say that her power comes from the good karma that she creates as she helps alleviate that suffering. As I have learned more about Kwan Yin, I wonder where her strength comes from. I especially wonder as I notice my own weariness with facing, let alone alleviating, all the troubles of the world. How does she replenish her well of compassion while she is working so hard to alleviate all that suffering? What keeps her going?

The stories don't answer this question, so I've made up my own. The answer that I have come to is: gratitude. I like to imagine Kwan Yin as a goddess whose compassion flows from a pool of gratitude; a pool that she replenishes by noticing the many gifts that are given to her, including her gifts for healing and protection. I imagine a goddess who has the incredible ability to notice the many gifts that we are given in each moment, and who draws on that feeling of gratitude to support her work for the benefit of others.

Gratitude is an emotion and practice that we are hearing a lot about these days. It is one of the areas where brain researchers and

psychologists are turning their attention. Those who study happiness—yes, happiness is a scientific area of study--tell us that that gratitude is a way to be happy. We might think that being happy leads us to be grateful, yet what they've found is the opposite: being grateful leads us to be happy.

In addition to happiness, gratitude has many other benefits: increased life satisfaction, optimism, hope, less depression and anxiety, and fewer physical complaints. Being grateful can help us find and feel a sense of meaning in our lives.

So, what is gratitude exactly? One scholar in the area of gratefulness is Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk and interfaith scholar. He has specifically fostered interfaith dialogue between monastic Christians and Buddhists, and his work has focused on the intersection between spirituality and science.

(If you'd like more information about this amazing man, I recommend his TED talk on gratefulness, which has been viewed by over 5 million people, and his website: Gratefulness.org.)

Brother David suggests that gratitude is a reaction we have when two things happen: when something that is of value to us, something that is of worth, is given to us as a gift, it is given freely, not earned or paid for. We are grateful when something we value is given to us as a gift. We find gifts in nature: a gentle rain, a sunrise, a flower, a beautiful park. We find gifts in other people: those who clean our streets and who make sure we have pure water, those who made coffee this morning and made sure we had a bulletin, those who are here to share this time and space together. We find gifts of life and love. We find gifts of creativity and inspiration. We find gifts in the wonder of each moment we are given.

It might be easy to dismiss gratitude as whitewashing or denying all that is difficult in our world. And, there is much that is difficult in our world.

Gratitude is not putting on rose-colored glasses. It is not ignoring the losses, difficulties, and injustices that are real and do exist. Gratitude is the practice of noticing the difficulties, but also noticing that which is good and right. Gratitude is getting filled up again so that we can attend to all that is difficult in the world.

Gratitude is an emotion; it is also a value and a virtue. Some, like Brother David, call it a spiritual practice. It is spiritual because it helps us connect to something larger than us, it helps us find meaning, and it is how we can put our values to work in the world. It is a practice because, well, it takes work and intention!

Evolutionary psychologists tell us that we are hard wired to notice what is wrong; noticing what isn't right, what is different and potentially dangerous is a survival mechanism. We've evolved to notice what is wrong, because it might just save our lives. We are not wired so much to notice what is right and good. Psychologist Rick Hanson says that negative experiences stick to our brains like Velcro while positive ones slide off like Teflon. No matter how much we have, we can often feel like we need more. The practice of gratitude helps us remember all that we have been given. Noticing the gifts we have been given and nurturing the feeling of gratitude takes practice.

Brother David teaches that there are three simple steps to gratitude. In fact, you might notice these steps as familiar from when you were a kid learning how to cross a street.

The first step is to stop, get quiet, and focus our awareness. We have to slow down. We can do this by building stop signs in our lives so that we can open ourselves to the possibility of gratitude. There are many different kinds of stop signs that we can build in, like meditation and prayer, for example. First, we have to stop.

The second step is to look; I'd say it is to notice. We open our eyes and ears and other senses to all that is around us. We open ourselves to that which is given; notice what surrounds us. And, we open our heart to the gifts that our senses may not recognize—love, care, compassion. We have to be aware and notice.

So, first we stop and we notice. Then, we go. The third step is to take action, take a creative leap. This last step calls to do something with the opportunity and awareness that this precious moment of gratitude has given us. Those who study gratitude find that when we are grateful, we are at peace, we are not fearful, we are generous. When we are grateful, we are filled up and feel like we have more to offer the world. Like my story of Kwan Yin, where she takes her moments of gratitude and turns them into care and compassion for those who suffer, we can also turn our gratitude into action that benefit us, and the world.

It requires intention to build stop signs in our lives so that we can become grateful. I think that our time in worship together can be one of those stop signs. The word worship means to hold up something of value, to consider things of worth. When we gather on Sunday morning, we stop---or we at least pause or slow down—we become intentional about setting aside time to notice things that we value, many of which we have been given to us as gifts. In worship, we can stop, notice, and then go out into the world ready to do the work that we are called to do.

The practice of gratitude may not come naturally to everyone. It doesn't come naturally to me. I am by nature a planner, and part of my skill is that I am good at anticipating what can go wrong and planning for it. One of my common questions is "What's plan B?" And, I am very good at analyzing what could be better. So, I have to be deliberate in noticing what is good and what is going well. I forget to do this sometimes, so I definitely need stop signs in my life to remind me to stop, notice, be grateful, and then go out into the world. My regular stop sign—my gratitude practice--is part of my morning ritual of journaling. I write

each morning, before the busyness of the day begins. I end each journal entry with at least three things that I am grateful for. One gratitude practitioner suggests that we find three different things to be grateful for each day. I have to admit that I have repeats-family, friends, meaningful work, cats-and I do make an effort to notice something new each day. I find it usually isn't hard when I stop and notice. This gives me an optimistic outlook, ready to start the day, and helps me remember that basically things are pretty OK, and often way better than OK.

Many religious traditions emphasize the practice of thankfulness, sometimes in worship, often through prayers of thanksgiving. This can be a hard thing for Unitarian Universalists who don't believe in a supernatural, non-human deity. Who do you thank for nature? Who do you pray to if not God? Mary Oliver offers these words from her poem "A Summer Day":

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?

Stop, look, go. No deity required.

Gratitude can be an organizing principle of life, something that we turn to regularly. We begin and end life dependent on the care of others. In between, we have unacknowledged dependency. In our society there is very little that we do that is not made easier, or even made possible, by the work and care of someone else. The latest research in evolutionary psychology suggests that our brains may in fact be wired for gratitude. Noticing the gifts of others can help us initiate friendships and form allegiances. Being grateful helps us form community. It just may be that being grateful is in fact the best way for us to survive, together.

Our lives are full of gifts, large and small, if we but take the time to stop, look and go.

I'd like to do our meditation and discussion just a little differently today. I invite you now into a time of reflection on what we are grateful for. In a moment I will say a few words to begin our meditation. After our time of silence, Brynn will begin playing quietly. When the music starts, please take a moment to write down what you are grateful for on your piece of paper and come up and place it in this basket. If you'd like help getting your piece of paper in the basket, please raise your hand and we'll help you out. Once everyone is done, I'll share what we are grateful for.

I invite you now into a time of meditation with these words from Paul L'Herrou:

We give thanks for this day and for these people and all the people who have enriched our lives.

We give thanks for the gift of life with all of its pain and its joy, its struggles and its triumphs.

We give thanks for love, which created us, which revivifies us and links us to others in struggle and in joy.

We give thanks for eyes to see and ears to hear, the ability to feel and the imagination to see beyond the obvious.

We give thanks for the spirit of creativity that inspires and encourages, that brings novelty in the midst of familiarity and risk in the midst of comfort.

We give thanks by giving to others in return for all that we have received.

We give thanks in the depths of our souls as we enter this time of silent contemplation.

There is much to be grateful for in this world of abundance. As we go forth into this day, may we use these precious moments of gratitude for the good of all.