

Giving Thanks©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
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In the second of our two readings, Frazier Hunt tells us that he was filled with bitter discouragement as he was riding to Helen Keller's cabin on that particular July day. A piece of writing he had submitted for publishing had been rejected and he was fully engulfed by the pain of the rejection. The rejection was so potent it limited his ability to notice or attend to most of what was going on around him. Even though he was in the midst of the beautiful Canadian Rockies, the incredible beauty he was immersed in eluded him.

When I first read this story I began remembering times in my own life when things had not gone as I had wanted or hoped. Times when the feelings I was engulfed by seemed to shut out significant aspects of the world around me. I could remember how, at times, those feelings were like quicksand. The more I would struggle against them the deeper I would become mired in them. Like Hunt, I have had my times of being stuck in emotional muck. Many of us have had such experiences. My recent interactions with a good number of you would lead me to believe that some of us are currently feeling stuck in emotional muck.

Sometimes, when a person gets stuck, whether in quicksand, unwanted life experiences, or overwhelming and unpleasant emotions, a lifeline is needed. The wire that Helen Keller was following on her walk that day was such a lifeline. It was a lifeline that Hunt had provided for his friend. Those of you who know about Helen Keller, are aware that she was both deaf and blind. As a result, she had significant struggles in life. Beginning in early infancy, the visual and auditory aspects of the world were completely unavailable to her. When I imagine being permanently engulfed in silence and darkness a powerful sense of desperation fills me. Yet even though Keller lacked the very important senses of sight and hearing, she overcame the limits these deficits posed and the desperation they initially created. She overcame the trap her limitations seemed to put her in and found a way to have a very rewarding and fulfilling life. She became the first deaf and blind person to earn a bachelor of arts degree. Then she went on to become a noted author, lecturer, and political activist. How, we might wonder, was she able to overcome such incredible obstacles?

I believe Hunt's story provides a clue that might help us answer that question. From his account it seems clear that Helen Keller made the most of the abilities she had. She utilized the senses she did possess, the sense of smell and touch, to experience the world as fully as she could. In the story she inhaled the strange fragrance of wolf willow and turned her face to feel the full warmth of the sun. Immersed in that experience she then responded. In this case she spoke a single word "Beautiful." As I read Hunt's description I was reminded of times when I have been able to appreciate the beauty that was surrounding me. In those situations, gratitude was the emotion that arose and filled me. Gratitude is one of the feelings I imagine Helen Keller was experiencing as she took her walk that day. From her own writing I get the sense gratitude was something she felt quite often.

In the first of the two readings Keller writes about "the golden chamber in my life where I dwell delighted." She goes on to tell us "dark as my path may seem...I carry a

magic light in my heart.” It isn’t possible to know for certain the source of that magic light. Yet while the light’s source may be unknown and possibly even unknowable, I believe it is reasonable to say that her ability to feel gratitude was an essential element of that golden chamber. I say this because I know whenever I am filled with gratitude life seems significantly brighter. With an attitude of gratitude things around me take on a wondrous glow. It is as if whatever storm clouds may have been raining on my party suddenly part, and sunbeams begin to stream down around me. I believe the feeling of gratitude was something Helen Keller cultivated throughout much of her lifetime.

Some of you may be familiar with parts of her life story from the movie *The Miracle Worker* or her autobiography titled *The Story of My Life*. Both the movie and the autobiography convey the incredible influence that Anne Sullivan had on her life. Sullivan was Keller’s first instructor, helping her learn to identify things in the world through the use of hand symbols. This allowed Keller to learn the names of things in her world and to communicate with at least some of those around her. Over time she learned to speak, which gave her the ability to communicate with even more people. As the movie depicts so well, being able to identify and name things makes a profound difference in how a person is able to relate to the world. I believe having an attitude of gratitude has a similar affect. An attitude of gratitude significantly enhances the appreciation we have for our experiences, surroundings, and relationships.

This is what the father in our Story for All Ages was sharing with his son. Through the practice of giving thanks he was teaching his son how to experience the world through a lens of gratitude. With each situation the two encountered, he would first encourage the boy to notice and really attend to what he could see, hear, smell, and touch. Then came the second step in the learning process, the step of giving thanks. In the process, the boy became aware of details he might otherwise have missed. His senses became filled with the life and the wonder that was surrounding him. As the boy admits, saying thanks to trees and things can be embarrassing at first. But as he and his father approached their home he spoke his gratitude out loud, “Thank you stars,” he said. And he noticed that “the stars came out, one by one, as if from hiding.” I find it interesting that in this story, as well as in the short reading by Helen Keller, light is a key ingredient. It makes me wonder if developing an attitude of gratitude may move us along the path of enlightenment.

Up to this point my focus has been almost entirely on how an attitude of gratitude and giving thanks can be beneficial to a person. I don’t believe, however, that the benefits of feeling gratitude and giving thanks are limited to any single individual. While an attitude of gratitude may be developed and practiced by any one of us, my experience tells me that gratitude radiates outward and impacts the world around us. In my own life I have noticed that when I feel grateful, I tend to be more generous with others as well as more content and satisfied with what I have. Through the course of my life I have seen examples of this more times than I could possibly count. A situation I witnessed on a street corner in Pocatello, Idaho just over two years ago provides an illustration.

I was driving along a major street one day. As I approached a main intersection a man was standing on the sidewalk holding a brown, handprinted, cardboard sign. I would guess many of you have seen people like him here in the Bozeman area. From what was written on his sign it was clear he was homeless and looking for any type of

financial assistance passers-by were willing to offer. The stoplight turned red as I approached the intersection. While I sat stopped at the light I was able to see and hear a brief exchange between this man and another man who had just reached the corner on foot. The second man was unshaven and looked even more disheveled than the man with the sign. Sitting in my car, with the windows down, I watched this second man put his hand into his pocket and pull out all of its contents—a few coins. He gave the coins to the man holding the sign and said “Here you go. This isn’t much but it’s all I’ve got. I’m homeless myself and was just given money so I could get something to eat. It looks like you could use some food yourself.” The light turned green and as I began to drive away the two entered into a conversation.

That brief experience had a significant impact on me then and continues to affect my life today. Witnessing such a moving moment of compassion and kindness in action rocked me out of my usual way of perceiving and relating to the world. Throughout the remainder of that day I thought about what I had seen and heard. I began to imagine what led up to the scene and what happened after I drove away. I imagined the disheveled man who gave away the few coins in his pocket had felt grateful for the money he had been given earlier. After getting the food he needed it would have been easy for him to keep the change that was left to provide for future needs—but he didn’t. I imagined that, feeling filled with gratitude as well as food, he felt motivated to be generous. That led me to wonder about the person who had first initiated the giving—the person I didn’t see because they had gone on their way some time before. Might they, upon seeing the disheveled man, have had a feeling of gratitude for the blessings in their own life? Did that gratitude then lead to their being generous and starting this chain of events? And then my thoughts turned back to the man holding the sign. I wondered about the response he may have given for the gift he had just received. While I didn’t actually hear him say it, I am almost certain I know what it was—thank you. Two simple words that can convey so much. Two simple words that express gratitude. Two simple words that can create ripples of change—change which may travel farther than we can possibly know.

I have been talking long enough about gratitude and giving thanks. I think it is only right now for me to practice what I preach. Thank you for coming today. Thank you for your involvement in this liberal religious community, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman. Thank you for your willingness to listen to the message I have shared. May the message I have offered, and the gratitude I express to you, lift your spirits and inspire your actions in the hours, days and weeks ahead. And may the ripples continue onward and outward for longer than any of us can imagine.

May it be so