

Attending to Thankfulness
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on November 24, 2019

With the Thanksgiving holiday just four days away, it seems both appropriate and fitting to focus our attention today on thankfulness. It is my hope that by getting an early start to focusing on the intent of the upcoming holiday that our experience of thankfulness may grow broader and deeper before the Thanksgiving meal is served. As we turn our attention to thankfulness, it might be interesting to consider some of the history of the holiday.

Many of us are familiar with the story of the harvest feast shared between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag people in 1621. This feast is often considered to be the first celebration of Thanksgiving Day in this country. The Pilgrims had a great deal to be thankful for. Had the Wampanoag people not been as friendly as they were, or as helpful at teaching the newcomers how to plant the food that would support them here, the Pilgrim group quite probably would not have survived to partake of the feast that fall. The first “official” Thanksgiving day, however, didn’t occur until 1789. That year President George Washington issued a proclamation naming Thursday, November 26, 1789, as a “Day of Publick Thanksgivin’”. It wasn’t until 1941 however that the U.S. House and Senate passed a resolution that designated the fourth Thursday in November to be the official national Thanksgiving Day holiday.

As the Pilgrims prepared for their first major feast in this country they did what many of us will do, they began thinking about what would be on the menu. Prior to the feast William Bradford, the colony’s governor, sent four men on a “fowling” mission. For those of you who are sports fans, fowling in this case doesn’t refer to what will happen in the football games on Thanksgiving Day. Here the word is spelled “f-o-w-l” not “f-o-u-l.” One written report of the time indicated the hunters returned with enough wild game to serve “the Company almost a week.” Clearly, the fowling team was very successful and the Pilgrims had much to be thankful for. They celebrated their thankfulness with the indigenous people of the area, the Wampanoag, who, by some accounts, provided more than their share of the feast.

That event was long ago and many miles away. And every previous Thanksgiving Day holiday is now in our rearview mirror so to speak. As we approach Thanksgiving Day this year, how are we preparing, as President George Washington proclaimed 230 years ago, for the coming “Day of Publick Thanksgivin’?” My guess is many of us are planning for or at least looking forward to the Thanksgiving meal. Some of us may be making travel plans, or planning to have visitors over for the holiday. But how much time and thought are we putting into attending to what we are thankful for? And as we realize what we have to be thankful for, how often are we sharing that thankfulness with others?

Over the coming days, I would encourage all of us to dedicate time each day to contemplating what we are thankful for. I recently read an article on mindful.org titled “10 ways to become more grateful.” Since grateful is a synonym for thankful it seems to me that some of the points mentioned in the article are appropriate here. The first of the 10 suggestions was to “keep a gratitude journal.” Basically this one says write down what you are grateful or thankful for. I don’t know about you, but I find that if I don’t consciously think about the things I am thankful for, I can easily begin to take them for granted. Writing down what we are thankful for is a way of focusing our attention on the many blessings in our life every single day. The fourth suggestion was to “share your gratitude with others.” The explanatory text after this point stated that “Research has found that expressing gratitude can strengthen relationships.” The simple act of saying thank you to the people in your life can have a significant positive impact on your relationships. And suggestion number 5 was, and here I quote, “Come to your senses. Through our senses—the ability to touch, see, smell, taste and hear—we gain an appreciation of what it means to be human—and what an incredible miracle it is to be alive.” Each of these, I believe, are good suggestions.

So far, what I have been sharing with you has been information about thankfulness. The information might be beneficial or even useful, but nonetheless, it is just information. It isn’t personal

in nature and you might or might not think that it is relevant to you. I would ask you to take a moment to think about how you feel about this information and to remember that feeling for the remainder of my sermon. I ask you to do this because I am now going to shift focus. I am going to shift focus to bring this topic home—home to you from me. I am going to bring it home by talking personally about what I am thankful for. And I intend to talk directly to you and the role you have played in my thankfulness.

Some of you know that ministry is a second career for me. Prior to changing careers I lived in the Flathead Valley in northwest Montana for 24 years. For most of those years I had a private counseling practice as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. As a young adult I came to understand that my professional calling was to be of service. For many years the field of social work was a great way to fulfill that calling. But after over 30 years of working in the field I found that the level to which I was able to be of service was limited. I felt there was more I needed to do. I came to believe that my calling wasn't just to be of service, it was to be of highest service. Maybe I was having a mid-life crisis. Mid-life crisis or not, at the age of 54 I closed my professional counseling practice, moved from northwest Montana to the metro Boston area where I entered a Master of Divinity program at Andover Newton Theological School. When I drove the U-Haul truck across the Montana/Wyoming border that summer I thought I would never work or live in Montana again. For those of you who may not know, there are only 5 Unitarian Universalist congregations in the state and only 2 of them had ministers back then.

It took me over 5 years to complete my degree and attain preliminary Fellowship status as a Unitarian Universalist minister. No ministry position was open in Montana at that time. I served two congregations over the next three years, one as a Developmental Minister and the other as a Consulting Minister. During my time as a Consulting Minister I learned that UUFB was looking for a settled minister. A settled minister position is more stable and potentially more long-term than a Developmental or a Consulting Minister position. It seemed to me that this could be my one and only chance to fulfill my calling to be of highest service and to live in the state I had come to feel was home, Montana. Without a second thought I sent my ministerial packet to your Search Committee for consideration. To my delight, I was chosen to be a candidate for the job. In May of 2016 I came to Bozeman for an 8 day interview with any and all people of the Fellowship who wanted to meet with me. Have you ever done an 8 day interview? It is really quite an experience. In the middle of that week it snowed 8 inches here in the valley. After leading the service in this building on May 8 the members of the Fellowship voted to call me as your settled minister. You, my good friends, made it possible for me to come home again. For that I want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart. You made it possible for me to return to the state I love and to strive to be of highest service. And because of you, I am able to wake up every morning to see the majesty of the mountains. I get to enjoy the beauty of the sunrise and sunset. And I get to see the stars most nights. I seldom saw the stars when I was in the Boston area. I don't have the words to tell you what a gift you have given me.

But there is even more I am thankful to you for. I am thankful that you continually inspire me and challenge me. You inspire me with your commitment to one another. And you inspire me with the way you work to create a spiritual community that is willing and able to go beyond the boundaries that result from having to share a common belief. You challenge me with your concern about and investment in all manner of social justice issues. Because of your concern and investment in social justice, you challenge me not just to be of service, but to be of highest service. This challenge has led to my involvement in leadership positions with both the Gallatin Valley Interfaith Association and recently the newly forming Montana Chapter of Interfaith Power and Light. In these two organizations I have the opportunity to work with other faith leaders in our community and across the state to address important issues of our time. Again, I say thank you.

I hope you agree that what I just shared was more than information about thankfulness. It was my personal experience of thankfulness that I applied two of the steps recommended in the previously mentioned article to. I took time to write down what I was and am thankful for. And then I shared my feelings of gratitude and thankfulness with you. So now I would ask you to attend again to how you feel. Is how you feel now different than how you felt earlier after the information I gave about

thankfulness? I know I feel very differently. I feel more alive, more connected and more energized than I did previously. If how you feel now is different in a positive way, I hope you will do as I have done. Take time to attend to what you are thankful for. And when you know what you are thankful for write it down. And then share what you are thankful for with others. If enough of us do this, we might just create a wave of good feelings that washes over not just the people we care about. We can create a wave that continues on into and throughout our community, across our state and beyond. May that wave of thankfulness begin now as we all attend to and share our thankfulness.

May it be so.