

The Tender Sides of Gratitude

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My honest question in deepest gratitude is this: What will you do with you gifts?

Deepest gratitude is sometimes hard for me. It seems to have a shell sometimes that is hard to penetrate but the tender sides of gratitude show up for me in laughter. This week, for some reason, what really got me was this cute, little poem:

Turkey, turkey, look at you
Please be careful what you do
Thanksgiving Day is almost here
We eat turkey every year
Go and hide out in the woods
We'll eat pizza like we should

It made me laugh. It made me think about gratitude—about when we are most grateful, about how we all find grace and offer thanks...especially now, with all we're going through.

The soft underbelly of this COVID experience was clearest a year ago, long before vaccination was something that we chose to argue about. It was in the summer of 2020. It was a time of isolation. In that time, I lost something that I loved.

For years, I have been helping to lead the senior high youth group at a Star Island, at a conference that takes place in mid-July. It's a terrifying. I played it cool but I always got so nervous. I thought I'd say the wrong thing or do something stupid and uncool anymore. I was afraid that I wouldn't connect with the younger folks somehow... Every year, I was terrified and every year, it was great...to break through those fears and boundaries and find each other again...in the sanctuary of our lives or on the playing field, in life's unlikely encounters in which we reveal ourselves as undefended, tender and vulnerable...and real. I have tons of stories about how everything in youth group worked out just right in the end. I suppress a lot of stories about the disasters. I have stories about how things were going wrong, when we crashed and burned. Life has its ups and downs but the stories of disaster are harder to tell. I prefer the stories of success. You know, the everything-worked-out-well-enough-in-the-end kind of stories. Who doesn't?

Summer camp is one of these stories and we work hard enough to make it that way but we utterly failed in the summer of 2020. We were all in serious lock down. We were in the COVID throws of things. We had theories about how dangerous the virus was transmitted but we were arguing about it. And things were getting really bad...in Italy and in Seattle. We were scared and we went into lockdown mode.

Do you remember how shut in we were—scrubbing our hands and sanitizing, cleaning surfaces so rigorously...with witch hazel and rubbing alcohols, stockpiling

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N95 masks and toilet paper. We were fearful and in serious denial...and we still are but we're trying to change. Change takes time. And even though time takes lives, we were slow to change. We knew that there was a 'right thing' that we could be doing but we didn't know exactly what it was. We were freaking out back then, in the summer of 2020.

Here, in the almost-wintertime of 2021, things are different but back then, I wanted to hang out at Star Island. For years, I've been helping to lead a youth group with my long-time friend, Amelia Foreman-Stiles. I first met Amelia in 1994, before I started learning about grace and gratitude.

Grace and gratitude... You know, it's funny. When Richard Schramm and I were talking about how things might unfold this morning, we talked about what to do for the lighting of the chalice. I have some words that I tend to use but I can be flexible, sometimes. I do like the ritual though, the way it is static and unchanging... so we can change and notice how we're growing.

Back at my home church in New Jersey, when I was growing up, we didn't have a chalice-lighting ritual. It wasn't part of UU services yet. As my colleague Dan Hotchkiss has written,

Many people are surprised to learn that lighting a chalice as a part of worship only found its way into Unitarian Universalist congregations in the early 1980s.

I first started going to church in 1972, when I was 7. So, for me, even though I am a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, the chalice-lighting ritual seems new.

I first started take it seriously in North Carolina. I was in my mid-30s at the time. I thought that the ritual was pretty cool. I liked that the chalice was associated with the warmth of human community, with the light of truth that burns within us in life. I was thankful for that. I used to like knowing that this fire was never really "extinguished" but borne within the hearts of all of us, all of the time. I still like the thought that this fire of commitment, this flame that burns here this morning is a 21st-century example of what Emerson called the "divine spark" way back in the 19th century. So, it's an old flame—so to speak—and I like the continuity. It helps the hymns we hum to make good sense.

When the fire of commitment sets our minds and souls ablaze
When our hunger and our passion meet to call us on our way
When we live with deep assurance of the flame that burns within
Then our promise finds fulfillment and our future can begin

The fire of commitment, the flame that burns within... This is what the chalice symbolizes.