

'Tis a Gift to Be Simple  
Sunday, November 12, 2023  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County  
Eustis, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

My brother, sister and I were born on the tail end of the Baby Boom, and we grew up in a time and a place when and where children went to Sunday School. Even children whose parents did not come came to Sunday School picked up by the church bus. At the beginning of the Baby Boom the church we grew up in added a large Sunday School wing to the church building. There was a crib room for infants, a nursery for the 2 and 3-year-olds, a kindergarten room for the 4 and 5-year-olds, a primary room for the first through third graders, a junior room for the fourth through sixth graders, a youth room for the seventh through twelfth graders and a big open room with dividing curtains for the four adult Sunday School classes.

My grandmother was the Sunday School Superintendent and also taught in the primary classroom. There were three teachers, one for each grade, but before the classes went to separate tables divided by bookshelves in the back of the classroom, everyone gathered at the front of the room for opening exercises. Songs would be sung from a children's hymnal, birthdays would be recognized, an offering was taken, and there would be a prayer. The prayer consisted of sentence prayers by the children who volunteered to take part. Everyone who wanted to say a sentence prayer lined up in front and then we went down the line saying our sentence.

One Sunday a girl in a class ahead of me said, "Thank you, God, for floors to walk on." This was not the usual- thank you for my family or thank you for my pets. Its uniqueness prompted my grandmother after church to mention this girl's prayer to my parents. My father delivered fuel oil and so was in many homes in the area including this girl's. He said that the floors in this girl's home were pretty precarious. There were holes in the floor and even where there were not currently holes one could not be sure that one's foot might not create a new one as one found a rotten floorboard. Thank you, God, for floors to walk on. A sturdy floor is something I took for granted, but I learned that day that not everyone could do so.

I regularly give thanks for central heating and indoor plumbing. I think I do that because I know that both my parents grew up without them. My father would talk about breaking the ice on the washbowl to wash his face on a winter morning. My mother and aunts would reminisce about my grandmother warming bricks in the stove and wrapping them in towels so that her girls could put them at the bottom of their beds to warm their feet. When I throw my laundry in a washing machine, switch it on, and go and do something else, I think of my grandmothers heating water on top of the stove and boiling the wash. I give thanks for central heating, indoor plumbing and washing machines because I know that the generation or two before me did not have them.

So many things in life we might so easily overlook. It is only when we realize that others did not or do not have these things, that we think to give thanks.

An article in [The Washington Post](#) earlier this month was about people in South Sudan eating water lilies. It began, “It was 1 p.m., her children still hadn’t eaten, and every item on Nyaguey Dak Kieth’s ‘long to-do list’ pertained to surviving another day. So Nyaguey grabbed a plastic bucket and an empty sack and set off from her village surrounded by floodwater. Those waters had upended her life, but also provided a food option — not a desirable one, but one of the few left.

“Water lilies. They’d been keeping her family alive for two years.

“They were bitter. Hard to digest. They required hours of manual labor — cutting, pounding, drying, sifting — just to be made edible. Nyaguey could still remember her initial shock at eating them, figuring they’d be a short-term measure. And now, with the floodwaters holding their ground, she could trace a two-year arc of distress in what the lilies had become: sustenance so vital that people were slogging farther and farther into the waters to find them, before someone else did,” [Why people are eating water lilies in flooded, war-torn South Sudan - The Washington Post](#).

I only have to go as far as a local grocery to find food and food much easier to prepare and far more edible than water lilies. How often do I remember to give thanks for such bounty?

So many simple things in our lives we take for granted until we are reminded that someone else does not have them.

John Haynes Holmes was a twentieth century “American Unitarian minister, pacifist, and co-founder of the NAACP and the ACLU... He left the American Unitarian Association (AUA) (in 1918) because of the AUA's policy requiring Unitarian ministers to pledge their support for the United States participation in World War I,” [John Haynes Holmes - Wikipedia](#). He was also a hymn lyricist.

Our second hymn today will be one of his, “The Peace Not Past Our Understanding.” The words to the first verse are,

“The peace not past our understanding falls  
like light upon the soft white tablecloth  
at winter supper warm between four walls,  
a thing too simple to be tried as truth.”

A simple thing winter supper warm between four walls, but our news is filled with stories of people who are not in their homes. Their neighborhoods are being bombed, and they have fled. Their houses stand empty or perhaps act as a base for a military unit. They are dependent for meals on aid getting to them. They do not have the simple peace of “winter supper warm between four walls.” May we think to give thanks that we do have this.

So many simple things we take for granted. So many simple things for which we do not think to give thanks. And we do not have to be believers in God to give thanks. In his book, [Living Buddha, Living Christ](#) the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, “During a conference on religion and peace, a Protestant minister came up to me toward the end of one of

our meals together and said, ‘Are you a grateful person?’ I was surprised. I was eating slowly, and I thought to myself, Yes. I am a grateful person. The minister continued, ‘If you are really grateful, how can you not believe in God? God has created everything we enjoy, including the food we eat. Since you do not believe in God, you are not grateful for anything.’ I thought to myself, I feel extremely grateful for everything. Every time I touch food, whenever I see a flower, when I breathe fresh air, I always feel grateful. Why would he say I am not? I had this incident in mind many years later when I proposed to friends at Plum Village that we celebrate a Buddhist Thanksgiving Day every year. On that day, we practice real gratitude—thanking our mothers, fathers, ancestors, friends, and all beings for everything. If you meet that Protestant minister, I hope you will tell him that we are not ungrateful. We feel deeply grateful for everyone and everything.” Universalist minister Max Kapp wrote, “Often I have felt that I must praise my world for what my eyes have seen these many years, and what my heart has loved. And often I have tried to start my lines: ‘Dear Earth,’ I say, and then I pause to look once more. Soon I am bemused and far away in wonder. So I never get beyond ‘Dear Earth.’” Thank God, thank all beings, thank the dear earth, simply give thanks.

The Shakers of our first hymn danced and sang in thanksgiving, “’Tis a gift to be simple, ‘tis a gift to be free. ‘tis a gift to come down where we ought to be.” How do we celebrate our gifts? Do we pray? Do we dance? Do we sit bemused and far away in wonder? Do we sing? Do we give something back?

The twentieth century theologian and physician Albert Schweitzer said, “No one has the right to take for granted (one’s) own advantages over others in health, in talents, in ability, in success, in a happy childhood or congenial home conditions. One must pay a price for all these special boons. What one owes in return is a special responsibility for other lives.” I personally would not use the language of paying a price or owing. I would say, “In thanks for all these special boons allow me to give something to others. Let my thanks be embodied.”

Maria Theresa G. Gallardo Jr. or Rev. Tet, president-executive minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines and the first out lesbian and first trans president in that church’s history, says, “It is a miracle that no one is ever empty-handed; there is enormous power in having no possessions but the self to give and to receive what can be and become.” To know ourselves as a gift received and as a gift we can give to others is to know a simple but profound truth. We are a gift received. We are a gift we can give. “’Tis a gift to be simple, ‘tis a gift to be free. ‘tis a gift to come down where we ought to be.”

Unitarian Universalist Elena Westbrook reminds us to

“Let every moment be a prayer.  
With every sip of tea,  
let your lips move in thanksgiving.  
Be fully present to every stroke of the hairbrush,  
every cup of milk you pour for the children.  
Be present, without judgement or regret,  
without plans or expectations,

or even dreams,  
And every moment  
becomes a prayer.” Blessed be.