

## For Life That Enfolds Us

This is a very special day for me. It's almost five years since I retired, and some time before that I vowed I would stop preaching at this date (less talking, more listening!), so this is my last talk from a pulpit – and I'm so very, very glad that it's in Hamilton, where I discovered Unitarians! I've served three congregations as a Minister – Lakeshore, Olinda and Waterloo, and here in Hamilton, about 12 years after I joined, is where I was **encouraged** to think of doing that.

My title suggests being held and cared for (which I certainly feel, this morning) and what I want to explore with you is that **sense** of being cared for. I'll say that again, so that it's as clear as can be: the **sense of being cared for**. I don't want to say anything about whether we really are cared for (by our friends, or families, or a higher Power or God of any kind) because how can I know your circumstances and your convictions about that? What I **can and do** know something about is the **sense** of being cared for, and how that affects my life for the better, and how it maybe can affect yours.

A long time ago, close to 30 years back, I was asked to participate in a Thanksgiving Service here in Hamilton, way before I was a minister, when the church was in a house on Aberdeen Avenue. I was supposed to give a five-minute talk on what I was grateful for, and I remember exactly what my opening words were. I said, "***This has been the worst year of my life.***" (Then I went on to tell the things for which I was, nonetheless, thankful, especially being cared for by friends in this church.) Well, the past year certainly hasn't been even close to the worst of my life, in fact it's been pretty good; but I know that for some of you it's been **less than** good. This morning I want to talk a bit about what it means to be grateful in a world which sometimes seems so difficult, even rejecting of us.

Here's a story from Nick Cardell, a much beloved long-time UU minister who died a few years ago! (He once spent 6 months in jail for protesting at the School of the Americas, but that's another story.) Once upon a time, Nick took his son, then about six years old, camping in the mountains. Early one morning, he and his son went out for a walk by the lakeshore. Everything was very quiet; the sun was just coming up. In the stillness, Nick heard his little boy say, "*Thank you.*" "*That's all right, son,*" he said; "*I'm enjoying it too.*" "*I wasn't talking to you, Dad,*" said his son. "*Oh,*" said Nick, startled. "*Who were you talking to?*" "*Do you have to say thank you to someone?*" asked the boy. "*I was just saying thank you because it's so good.*"

I hope there have been many times in your life, and will be many more, when you have felt absolutely compelled to say thank you, or praise be, or whatever comes spilling out of your heart when the world seems absolutely wonderful to you. The experiences which lead us to say thank you are marvellous, and our response can't be contradicted by any logic or by the fact that we don't know to whom, if anyone, we're addressing our thanks.

Not only is thanksgiving involuntary and spontaneous; it also seems to me absolutely right. We know why we say thank-you for something -- it's to make the person who gave that something feel good. We send a thank-you card or email to express our appreciation of a gift, or a dinner party, or some kindness which has been shown to us, or we make a point of saying how much we enjoyed it, how grateful we are. And somehow, our saying thank-you increases the all-round total of warm feelings. Not only does the other person feel glad that they were appreciated, but we're happy to have expressed our appreciation. In acknowledging good deeds and beautiful things, we strengthen goodness and beauty.

But what's happening when we give thanks to someone or something other than a fellow human being, to that Power we may call God or Life or Nature, or the Highest Good, or for which we may have no name? Our need to give thanks may, for some of us, reflect a sense that we can relate to this Power in a personal way, but certainly even the theists among us don't expect that such a Being will feel better for our appreciation, do we? And most of us probably resist the idea that gratitude is demanded of us, that we **ought** to be grateful. We've had enough of that, thank you very much! And yet, there's that need to express our gratitude for the life that enfolds us.

I think the dynamic is really just about the same, in its essence, as with our friends. Appreciation of the goodness and beauty in the world, and expressing that appreciation, aligns us with goodness and beauty and strengthens them. Through our thanksgiving, the sum total of goodness is increased, to however small a degree. The thanks which are torn from our hearts as we watch a glorious sunrise, or enjoy great happiness with an intimate friend, or see a child recover from illness, or a garden become beautiful, or spiritual growth take place in a person or a group -- those thanks affirm the values of beauty and relationship and health and **af-firm (firm up)** our commitment to those values. As we give thanks, to whatever we see as the source of good things, to the highest in the universe, the divine, we take more of that divinity into ourselves. Our thanks bring us closer to goodness.

This past year has been quite different from some earlier times when I was, as we used to say, "*in a bad space*", and yet also different from times when I was in a state of euphoria and blissful well-being -- a state that I'm certainly old enough to know couldn't last! And what I find now, when I'm experiencing the old familiar rush of gratitude, is that I have to remind myself of two important things: one, **it's all temporary, all passing**; and two, **other people are feeling differently**. Those are two little reality checks which have to be pasted over the thankfulness and I wonder sometimes if they take the edge off it, and if so whether that's as it should be.

The knowledge that life won't always be wonderful is the other side of the truth which depressed or chronically sad people need to hear over and over: that life won't always be terrible. As someone who's been badly depressed in the past, I know that the two most important things I had to hold onto when I was feeling at my worst were the knowledge that **there were people who cared** and the knowledge (in my head, at least) that **the blackness wouldn't last forever**. The words, "*This, too, shall pass*," are a powerful lifeline, but they have to be repeated in as many different forms as possible because they're awfully hard to believe when you're suffering from depression or from the weight of bad circumstances. "*This, too, shall pass*" is applicable to the good times as well, and may add to the appreciation of life's fleeting joys. There's a wonderful story about a little boy who asked his father why everything and everyone has to die, and his father answers that the world was made that way so life would be precious. "*Something which is yours forever is never precious*," he says, and **it's true**.

What about the comforting knowledge that people care? Certainly that's a great part of my joy right now -- the joy of close friends and family, the whole world of connections and relationships. But no relationship is guaranteed, and one of the sad truths about life is that each of us is ultimately on our own. Yes, I know we often close our services, (as we will today) with the affirmation that we are not alone, and I deeply believe that we need to commit ourselves to "**being there**" for each other, but I also know that there's a point *beyond which* we are always on our own. That knowledge tempers my euphoric sense of well-being and thankfulness. I have to accept that that's how it is -- and yet that **even in our loneliness**, even in our deepest sadness and loss, we are connected, joined by a common experience, enfolded by life.

And the second reality check: **life's not easy for most people**. All round us people are going through grief and hard times, and we all know that in most parts of the world the political tranquillity and prosperity which we still enjoy in Canada despite economic ups and downs would seem an unimaginable paradise. Sometimes these days, when I'm walking around our home place in Nova Scotia, enchanted by the wild asters and goldenrod and trees changing colour, the sea sparkling, the seagulls calling, the clear sky, I have to ask myself if there will be a judgment sometime on the way I enjoyed it all so greedily. What right do I have to hug to myself all this beauty and abundance? Isn't my "*sharing*", through what we call "*charitable donations*", at best mere tokenism and at worst incredibly selfish, presuming that somehow it all belongs to me and not to those other people, the ones who who don't have the price of admission?.

I thought of this one day, when I was at a meeting about federal immigration policy and a group of us were discussing how many and what kinds of people we should allow into this country. I found myself asking the naive, perhaps, but surely **fundamental**, question: "*By what right do we decide?*" I think of it as I enjoy working in the garden of the lovely place in which John and I live: "*By what right do we presume to own this?*" I've never found a good answer; I'm thankful for it all right, but there may be something too easy about my gratitude. Sometimes it verges on complacency. Real gratitude might involve a bit more generosity than I currently practise. Oh, I love to have people come and enjoy our place with us, but I don't want them as co-owners! I don't want to have less to eat in order that someone else can be fed. I don't even want to be reminded, while I'm eating my Thanksgiving dinner, of those millions of children who go to bed hungry each night, the thousands who are starving to death right this minute. I don't **want** it, but I think it may be called for if my gratitude is to have meaning.

Well ..... I strongly suspect I'm not going to change overnight into a saint who gives up what I have so that others may have cause for thankfulness. But perhaps I can change a bit, and I think that my thankfulness itself may help. Because I'm a bit more of a poet than a scientist I tend to talk to the forces of nature as if they were **beings** -- the gods (as perhaps they are). "**Ye Gods**", I find myself saying. "*Thank you! Thank you! I'm grateful!*" And I seem to hear them talking back, a bit wearily, saying, "*So what are you going to do about it, eh? How will you pass on your sense of being cared for?*"

Perhaps whenever I feel that rush of gratitude for the countryside I can send a donation to a conservation or wilderness protection fund, or gather a bunch of wildflowers and take them to a shut-in. Maybe when I remember how lucky I am to have a good roof over my head and excellent food on the table, I can find a way to support affordable housing or the local food bank. Maybe, when I rejoice in my friends and family and this congregation which will always be in some sense my home, I can make a bit more time for those who have no home and no-one close to them.

As I do these things -- give thanks and do something about it -- I'll try to remember, too, that I'm likely to be more squarely on the needy end one of these days. My present abundance has absolutely nothing to do with any merit of my mine; I'm sure of that. Like some of you, probably, I get extremely irritated when I hear people say things like, "*God was looking after me*," following some disaster from which they escaped. The hundred or so who were saved from a volcano or from a capsized ferry -- were they saved by some Higher Power, and if so what about the nine hundred who perished? What God would do that kind of discriminating? And who could possibly be grateful for living in a world where the ratio of deliverance to disaster is so skewed?

My thanksgiving is not so much for the wonderful world -- it's sad and terrible in many ways, as well as marvellous -- or for being more secure than other folk -- I know I'm just as likely to lose my good life any day as to go on enjoying it. No, my thanksgiving is simply for the **sense**, the **feeling**, of caring life that enfolds me (against all reason perhaps, but **undeniably there**) and I think it carries a responsibility, to try to make things a little more fair. Perhaps, also, it carries with it a need to try to convey some of that **sense of being cared for** to other people, because it's very precious, something to treasure and be grateful for. To be able to trust that there is goodness at the heart of the world is a precious gift.

So I'll end with some poetic expressions of the sense that life enfolds us, and helps, and heals, and holds us, as our Song of Thanksgiving says. None of it is **provable**, except in the old sense of proving by trying, but perhaps it's *conveyable, pass-on-able*, to some extent. I hope that I can pass on to you, through the words of others, some sense of being enfolded, helped, healed and held. And need I say -- well, I **will** say -- that the word "*God*" in these three quotations stands for whatever you find highest and best.

First, words from two different parts of the Bible:

*How often would I have gathered [you] together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings .....*

*The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.*

And part of a poem by Gerard Manly Hopkins. He begins:

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. ....*

And then he describes how we have mistreated the world. But he ends by saying,

*And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs --  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

And I end with words which I find especially helpful in times of uncertainty. The poet Minnie Louise Haskins wrote these words, but they're probably associated more with the man who quoted them in a famous wartime broadcast, King George VI:

*..... I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."*

*And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."*

Let us be thankful for this mixed and marvellous life that enfolds us. *So may it be.*