

# The Blessing Life

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I have the luxury to wake up when I wake up. It is unusual for me to have to use an alarm clock. Working from my home gives me this unusual flexibility. When I wake, I usually take a moment to remember my dreams and think about life. What I've noticed lately is that often, I mean actually, usually, among the first thoughts I have are complaints. I'm stewing about things that don't make me happy. When I stop to listen inside my head, I hear regrets and annoyances.

I don't wake up praising the glory of a new day, or notice the rainbows on my wall where the sun catches the small crystal that I place to catch its light as soon as it is above the horizon,

And I'm not, in those few minutes, worried about why we are at war or about the state of health care. I'm thinking of the puny annoyances of my particular life. This can be followed by a litany of what hurts and what is stiff and sore.

These are the sorts of thoughts that often clog the mind of your spiritual leader during meditation, too.

Now I'm sharing this glimpse of the underside of my wake-up reverie because it has been my experience that if I am honest about these personal things, I discover that often you have had similar experiences of being, well, human.

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I'm betting that -- sometimes, at least -- we share some of these scratchy bits.

I don't want to bathe my psyche in complaints.

I have been working to wake up in gratitude, or at least turn my attention to gratitude as quickly as I become aware of my complaints.

I am ashamed that, with all of the safety and comfort and joy in my life, that I would ever let the cranky parts incubate. Isn't something profoundly broken in a person who wakes up in a cottage by a creek -- warm, cozy, safe, coffee twenty feet away, noble grand-dog stretching and wagging nearby, all of my grandchildren healthy and adorable -- to not wake up singing?

But there it is.

I have these thoughts sliding through and barely pay attention to them until I take a minute to ask myself what I'm thinking about. Kind of like the music that often plays in my head, my own personal background music that I don't even notice, until I notice that my fingers are drumming to the rhythm, and I ask myself why my fingers are moving. I mean, there is all kinds of stuff that goes on just below the surface and out of my awareness, until I take time to listen, and then I hear myself . . . whining.

Perhaps the complaints come out of a place of longing. I do think longing is part of a human life. I'm developing a longer piece about that lonely space where we often live. Perhaps that's what makes those streaks and shadows in my mind if I don't catch myself. And this time of the year is often particularly challenging. Many of us are filled with longing and a haunting lonely emptiness in this holiday frenzy.

Anyway. Here's what I do to get in touch with Gratitude and begin befriending Creation:

First, I consciously breathe a few deep yoga breaths. Just taking air in deeply, slowly, with full awareness of my chest expanding, followed by my belly, and then a long exhale. Just a few breaths. Notice. Breathe. Notice.

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Then I go to my little altar and light three candles.

My altar has pictures of my loved ones on it, and a few framed pieces of poetry, and water from the Ganges, and a sitting Buddha statue, and a few pieces of candy that one of my most impulsive Napa patients saved for me, Prasad from a Hindu ceremony, flower petals. Sometimes flowers.

The center has three candles. The first is for sadness. Not my own, or at least not only my own, but all the sadness in the world. People who have lost something precious, stray dogs, people in pain, children who are afraid. Worries I heard about during joys and sorrows. All the sadness. You are not alone, I whisper. I am holding you in my heart. You are not alone.

Then I light another candle for joy, for all the people who have just found exactly what they need, discovered something new, are healed, are restored, are well. For people in love and celebrating and children laughing and cows chewing their cud while resting in the sun.

And then a third candle because I don't really believe in the division of life into good and bad or duality. Everything belongs to the whole and this third candle represents that. Everything is part of the One.

Then I light sage from the "One" candle and I walk through the house saying "Thank You" to the things and reminders of things that I love. The pictures of my loved ones. The flowers I usually have near the kitchen window, to the dog, to my bed in appreciation that it will be there to comfort me when I return to it at the end of the day, to my computer and google and all my books, and to my garden and the bay tree and the feral cats watching.

After I make a cup of coffee and check the first twenty emails, I go back and blow the candles out.

First the candle for sorrows because all loss will finally be healed. No matter how long the road, everything will eventually turn to joy. And then the candle for joys as I say "Thank You" again. And then, the One because there is only the one. One taste. Everything reconciled in the One. This is my theology and it is from this point that I speak when I say every Sunday, we are all in this together, we are never alone.

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By then I'm busy and the personal reflections are over for a while. It is my hope that my practice and the conscious expression of gratitude shape not only those few minutes in the morning but affect the rest of the day as well. It is my hope that because of this centering ritual, I greet the changes of the day with greater equanimity, that I listen more to others without letting my own stuff get in the way, that I act more from appreciation and less from fear or self-interest.

It is quite well demonstrated by studies of all kinds that expressing gratitude improves life in a big and lasting way. People who count their blessings sleep better, experience less pain, recover faster from illness, and do more good deeds for others . . . the list is endless.

I just scanned a book called Thanks by Dr. Robert A. Emmons. If I began to list for you all of the studies that demonstrate how life changes if you spend a little more time in gratitude and less in grouching, you would surely find this a smarmy, syrupy sermon.

The practice of gratitude shifts our lives for the better. You can shift your perception and that shifts your experience. Keeping a journal of thank-yous for three weeks can result in more energy and greater optimism about everything. Keeping a journal for three weeks had a marked effect on outlook in the test subjects six months later.

All of us here do have lives of relative safety and comfort and beauty. We have much to be thankful for, but for many of us, for much of the time, we have to use discipline to hold all of these good things in the forefront of our minds and not let the complaints and worries win our attention. Most of us have to practice this attitude. I don't know why, but we do.

My suggestion is that you find a practice of gratitude that works for you.

You know, our tradition doesn't require much practice from us. Most religions demand more than ours in the way of daily observances. To be good UUs, we only have to develop into our best selves without such a rule book. Most traditions give practitioners daily homework. Daily rituals to perform. I love the freedom of our way, but I miss the discipline of daily observances too. Good things can come out of more rigorous traditions. I'm suggesting that we each develop our own way of being awake, that feeds us and calls us to gratitude.

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My mother did what she called a Girl Scout trick every day. She was alert to doing something for someone else every day of her life. Often small, but if an opportunity did not present itself while she was out and about, she would call someone who was alone and possibly lonely during the evening.

My friend Pam was going through chemotherapy last Advent. She wrote me:

The growing darkness has been a comfort to me. This period of hibernation timed with the earth's own rest, has felt spiritually full. I feel like a bulb in the ground . . . waiting and preparing for new growth in the spring. I will light candles this Christmastide, Candles of joy despite all sadness. Candles of hope where despair keeps watch. Candles of courage for fears ever present. Candles of peace for the tempest-tossed days. Candles of grace to ease the burdens. Candles of loving to inspire all my living. Candles that will burn into the new year.

Candles, strings of colored bulbs -- light matters to us at this time of the year.

A member here wrote:

The Methodist Church of my youth taught me about faith versus good works. If I recall correctly, the Methodists felt like both faith and good works were necessary to get into the kingdom of heaven. I suppose I still agree although I might replace "kingdom of heaven" with something like "being a good person." Buddhist teachings have encouraged me to think of my faith as a practice, as something I do, as well as something I believe.

Being present in my life is often difficult for me; I'd much rather live in my head, where anything can happen and unpleasantness can be wished away. For me, coming to UUFRC is a discipline, a constant reminder that these issues I wrestle with don't exist only in my mind or in some airless intellectual sphere, but are created by and for the messy real world. It's a way to actualize the faith and the good works with a group of like-minded people, and even then I struggle when my expectations don't meet theirs.

The point is, our practices, whatever we design them to be, call us back to remembering what we value and what we want to become. Over and over.

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Practice might be of a more practical, green, justice sort, too. I know that our intern minister Nina walks miles every day, and she doesn't listen to books on tape while she walks. She just walks. That's a practice, and it supports her decision not to own a car. Others of you here have similarly decided not to drive. You might try eating one meatless meal more per week than you do now, or calling every company that sends you an unsolicited catalogue and saying "save a tree and take me off your mailing list." Carry your own reusable bag to the grocery store. Each of these can be part of your spiritual discipline.

There is something in the thought behind these acts, the intention behind them, that makes them qualify in my language as "spiritual." It is the mindfulness you bring to these task that makes them a "practice." The difference between yoga and simply stretching is the kind of heart-level concentration you bring to the activity.

I need all of these things to keep me balanced, so that I can participate in the work of the world with my heart open. Even with all my rituals, I still have long periods of falling asleep and losing my way. Especially, it seems, at this time of the year. This time of year, with all of its joyful and beautiful elements, is often very difficult.

If justice calls you as your practice, here at this Fellowship, we have two primary outlets. The Social Action Committee (SAC), and our local chapter of Peninsula Interfaith Action.

I find our SAC to be a well-organized, thoughtful and efficient committee. They respond quickly to new ideas, organize forums approximately every other month, and organize special offertories monthly. (Today is the day, by the way.) SAC is the group that sends representatives to other community committees like the Martin Luther King Jr. celebrations being planned. They organized the "Wear a Black Ribbon" campaign about "waging peace." And they organized the family participation projects like creek clean-ups, and most recently the food collections for Samaritan House.

If you are ready to step out, wearing your values, and affect the political in the direction of your principles while promoting sustainability in the community, this is a great place to plug in. We meet after the service on the first Sunday of every month.

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Our SAC can also take political stands in its own name. And we do. On issues like the war in Iraq or the death penalty we can speak as a committee and not embroil the entire congregation in the kind of discussions that tore congregations apart during the sixties.

We do have members who care passionately about issues, but I would hardly call us firebrands. I know my participation in these conversations has, over time, pushed me to step out more into the commons, speaking for the values I care about. I'm actually a shy person and this public speaking has been a challenge for me. But I have done it, over issues like the local ICE raids, the Cool Cities program, and signing the Kyoto Accords, and now there is our very big deal Panel Discussion on January 13 about the Saltworks land, the development of 1400 acres on the bay. It's January 13 here after church. PLEASE be here.

Our local PIA, Peninsula Interfaith Action, project is partnering with Roosevelt school, and at the state level, we're working on health care.

E.B. White wrote "It's hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenge. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I rise in the morning torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day."

It seems clear to me that we have to do both, and both can be religious work. To do spiritual practice without engaging the world seems self-centered and out of balance, and to do justice work without grounding is often strident and more alienating than healing.

A short and significant anecdote from Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen. I was very stirred by this story; it has lingered with me for months. I am eager to share it with you:

Often when he came to visit, my grandfather would bring me a present. These were never the sorts of things that other people brought, dolls or books or stuffed animals. My dolls and stuffed animals have been gone for over a half century, but many of my grandfather's gifts are with me still.

Once he brought me a little paper cup. I looked inside it expecting something special. It was full of dirt. I was not allowed to play with dirt. Disappointed, I told him this. He smiled at me fondly. Turning, he picked up the little teapot from my dolls' tea set

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and took me to the kitchen where he filled it up with water. Back in the nursery, he put the little cup on the windowsill and handed me the teapot. "If you promise to put some water in the cup every day, something may happen," he told me.

At the time I was four years old and my nursery was on the sixth floor of the apartment building in Manhattan. The whole thing made no sense to me at all. I looked at him dubiously. He nodded with encouragement. "Every day, Neshume-le," he told me.

And so I promised. At first curious to see what would happen, I did not mind doing this. But as the days went by and nothing changed, it got harder and harder to remember to put water in the cup. After a week, I asked my grandfather if it was time to stop yet. Shaking his head no, he said, "every day, Neshume-le." The second week was even harder, and I became resentful of my promise to put water in the cup. When my grandfather came again, I tried to give it back to him but he refused to take it, saying simply, "every day, Neshume-le." By the third week, I began to forget to put water in the cup. Often I would remember only after I had been put to bed and would have to get out of bed and water it in the dark. But I did not miss a single day. And one morning, there were two little green leaves that had not been there the night before.

I was completely astonished. Day by day they got bigger. I could not wait to tell my grandfather, certain that he would be as surprised as I was. But, of course he was not. Carefully he explained to me that life is everywhere, hidden in the most ordinary and unlikely places. I was delighted. "All it needs is water, Grandpa?" I asked him. Gently he touched me on the top of my head. "No, Neshume-le," he said. "All it needs is your faithfulness."

Faithfulness.

Be Faithful in calling yourself to your highest and best self, however you design your daily practice. Be faithful in expressing gratitude and blessing the world.

Blessed be.