GRATITUDE and APPRECIATION

Meister Eckhart said, “If the only prayer you say in your whole life is ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.”

It was when I was studying at Matthew Fox’s Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality that I became aware of Meister Eckhart, the most prominent Dominican Preacher and Theologian of his era (c 1260-1327). He preached in both German and Latin, and was a teacher of preachers. Matthew Fox, also trained as a Dominican Theologian, found in Eckhart an alternative perspective to the fall/redemption idea of Original Sin that has for so long dominated Christian thought. Matt Fox’s foundational work, Original Blessing (Bear & Co. 1983), presented this alternative perspective in 4 sections also stemming from Eckhart’s work: the via positiva, the via negativa, the via creativa, and the via transformativa. The Via Positiva, the way of affirmation, thanksgiving, blessing, celebrates the gift of creation, of life and love.

I will save the other paths for other sermons, but the via positiva is what Thanksgiving is all about. Thanksgiving has long been one of my favorite holidays. It was an important time in my church and a gathering time for my family as I was growing up. As I have mentioned before, the youth group took the lead on Thanksgiving in the Methodist Church where I grew up, organizing an early morning hike, breakfast, and Thanksgiving worship service, followed by the annual Turkey Bowl flag or 2-hand-touch football game. When the game ended, we all headed to our own homes for our family Thanksgiving Dinners. The entire day was a celebration of life, of creation, of family and friends. The older generation from my family Thanksgivings is gone, and I only rarely get a chance to catch up with a few of my friends from that Methodist Youth Group, but treasured memories flow back into my awareness each Thanksgiving season.

Thank you universe, thank you interdependent interconnected web, thank you God, for this life, this world, this land, this time. There is so much for which to be thankful, especially in this prosperous nation. I am grateful for all the opportunities with which I have been blessed.

I am trying to show my gratitude, my appreciation for all the blessings I experience, and for all the nice things people do for me. I believe that an appreciative attitude helps to make our interactions with each other better and healthier.

In regard to relationships, one of the best ways that we show our appreciation for each other is through respect. Treating others with respect even in difficult times shows that we recognize and appreciate their inherent worth. There is never a good reason for demeaning or humiliating others if we truly recognize their inherent worth and honor their dignity.

In our families, even those occasionally arrogant annoying and demanding teenagers deserve our respect, and often gratitude and appreciation. If we can remember our own youthful years, it may help us to appreciate the angst they are experiencing between school and our expectations for them. Each generation speaks, e-mails, texts or tweets in its own language. Just as many of us were frustrated with our parents over phone privileges, so today there are new things to fight about. When challenged, it is so tempting sometimes to just say, because I said so, but we honor our children when we try to explain and seek to help them understand rather than using our power over them. Jesus called the little children to him, treating them with a rare appreciation and respect.

Likewise in so many relationships in life, we encounter imbalances in power, wealth, and experience that can make relationships a challenge. It is important for us to seek always to appreciate and respect the other in our dealings. There will still be disagreements, but when we respect each other it is much easier to work through those differences.

If we continue to work on our relationships with our children, our parents, our friends and colleagues, we likely
will find that a mutual level of appreciation grows over time. Not all relationships can be fixed in such ways, but few can grow without mutual appreciation and respect. I am grateful for so many relationships of mutual respect and appreciation that I have enjoyed throughout my life!

What is true in close relationships is as true for those further from us. Gratitude, appreciation and respect are as valuable to those in the occupy movement as well as for the police who are responding to the movement. As much as those in power may want to do all in their power to stop the demonstrations, if we are a civil society, we must hear the voices of those without power or wealth.

I am grateful to those who are demonstrating in the occupy movement for they are bringing attention to the great disparity in wealth between the owners and the workers. The union movement has been under pressure for many years for empowering and protecting workers, and sometimes involving corruption, but today CEOs make 400 times what average workers make. This is a difference of a magnitude of ten from just a few decades ago. Something is really wrong with this picture. I appreciate those who have put their bodies on the line to highlight the problem of how inequitably wealth is distributed in this country.

I am grateful to those who have given us the democratic republic of the United States of America. I will not always agree with the policies of those who have been elected to lead at any level of government, but I will appreciate and respect the democratic process so long as it is practiced with justice and compassion. I also am grateful for the freedoms guaranteed in the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights and the other amendments to the Constitution.

I am grateful to business leaders who treat employees with respect and justly compensate their work, and especially for those that also conserve resources, recycle, and re-use wherever possible.

I appreciate those religious leaders of the Unitarian and Universalist traditions who handed down to us the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations and this congregation. In this tradition we try to respect a wide variety of religious beliefs and practices so long as they do not harm the believer or others. We also approach religion from a rational perspective which allows UU members to choose paths that speak to them without allowing coercion in beliefs. We encourage each person to follow their own journey so long as they are respectful of others. By sharing our varied beliefs, we each learn and grow. There are many paths up the mountain of truth, as the Perennial Philosophy teaches, and our varied pathways lead each of us to higher awareness and greater wisdom.

We face challenges in the 21st century never known before by humanity. World human population has already reached 7 Billion. Agricultural production will be sorely tested over the next few decades before population levels may begin to decline. Genetic manipulation of plants, animals, and fish to increase production and prevent disease remains highly controversial. The proliferation of nuclear weapons and power plants poses many potential problems, especially in Iran and North Korea. The continuing failure to resolve the Palestinian question fuels the dispute between radical Muslims and the West. And to my mind, even more of a concern is the accelerating pollution of the environment, and the growing evidence of significant climate change around the globe. Rain forests continue to fall to feed the developed world, and the atmosphere and oceans continue to suffer from growing populations.

I am grateful to those who are working on all these matters, to the many arms of the United Nations and to various national and international scientific bodies and agencies who are seeking to provide accurate information about climate degradation as well as to seek ways to mitigate the worst effects of these patterns.

The question for us to ponder today, is what difference our gratitude and appreciation can make in the world in which we live. We know from our own experience that gratitude, appreciation, and respect can help to make our relationships with others stronger and healthier, but what can such behaviors and attitudes accomplish beyond
the range of personal relationships? Can we make our world better through gratitude and appreciation? Certainly we can help to set a tone of civility that recently has been lacking in the public arena by practicing an attitude of gratitude, appreciation, and respect.

Many religious leaders have taught followers to respect others. Jesus is reputed to have taught that we should love others as we love ourselves. He is also remembered as having talked with a Samaritan woman when other Jews had no dealings with Samaritans and men did not so freely talk with unaccompanied women. Mohammed also raised the status of women, granting at least some property rights to women. Even so, women continue to fight for respect in the family, the workplace and in societies around the world. It took until the 20th century for women to gain full voting rights in this country and they have only been slowly accepted into full participation in the military. The Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention continue to deny women the roles of priest and pastor. The first women ordained in this country, Olympia Brown and Augusta Chapin were Universalists ordained in 1863, but even the Unitarians and Universalists did not encourage women to become ministers until well into the 20th century.

I am grateful that Unitarian Universalism is as progressive a movement as it is, but it is far from perfect and must continue to seek to grow and change to meet the needs of new generations. I appreciate the need for change and renewal even if I may not always agree with the direction a particular change may lead us. Within this movement and this congregation, our ability to change in positive ways may depend on our commitment to appreciate and respect each other even when we disagree. If we honor our covenant to respect each other, we can find ways to make room for many different ways of seeing and believing.

Just as we must stay in dialogue with co-workers and friends in order to maintain working and friendly relationships, we must begin with respect and appreciation to build the kind of community we all want and need. My challenge to all of us today is that we continue to honor that covenant and that we continue to work to understand each other’s needs and desires, so that together we can build a community that better meets all our needs.

I am grateful for your attention and support, I appreciate your wisdom. I respect and value each of you gathered here this day!

I remind you that the sermon in a Unitarian Universalist congregation is never the final word on any subject, but serves as an invitation to conversation, dialogue, and sharing!

At this time, I invite you to share thoughts about gratitude and appreciation!

Thank you for sharing your thoughts, feelings, and experiences!

So May it Be! Amen!