

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

### **11.25.13 Sermon: "Acts of Gratitude"**

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

If you follow the positive psychology movement, you'll see that gratitude gets a lot of positive press. The researchers have developed measurements to separate people into grateful and ungrateful types. (You can reflect for a moment as to where you think you might fall)

Here are a few characteristics of grateful people. Grateful people:

Have positive outlook independent of the events of their lives (could be dying of cancer and still feel grateful)

Focus on the blessings and gifts in their lives rather than slights and deficits.

Tend to compare their situation with those less fortunate and feel lucky rather than those more fortunate and feel envy

Notice pleasant sensory experiences, like a sunset, the smell of freshly baked bread, a breeze on the skin, the sound of sweet bird songs ... and savor them.

Embrace a difficult experience as a learning opportunity, and

Appreciate and acknowledge the contribution to their lives of family and friends.

Researchers notice those people who are grateful types, statistically speaking, tend to be healthier.

They have fewer strokes and heart attacks. They live longer. They are much less likely to suffer depression and other forms of mental illness. They have happier relationships and fewer divorces. On the whole, people who are grateful types turn out to be happier people.

The good news is that one can become more grateful by nurturing this quality.

Almost every religion focuses on stimulating gratitude in its adherents. They do that by asking people to be grateful to God. Expressing praise and thanks dominates the purpose of worship. I suspect though, that the positive effects of loving, praising and thanking God may not be paid back by the deity as a reward for being faithful. More likely, to my mind, the benefits come from cultivating the inner climate of gratitude that then generate the positive effects I just mentioned. Whether you believe in God or not isn't as critical as acting authentically grateful.

What is clear from the research is the importance of both feeling and expressing gratitude on a regular basis. So today, I'd like to explore ways to act grateful. The research also suggests that just acting grateful even when you're not fully there can stimulate the experience of gratitude to develop.

I learned this at the first meditation retreat I attended. The seven day retreat didn't cost very much money. The registration only covered food and lodging. The teachers offered the teachings without charge ... just as they had been offered for the last 2500 years. We would have the opportunity, at the end of the retreat, to make a donation for the teaching but didn't have to give anything if we didn't want to. "Great," I thought, "I can get enlightened on the cheap and save my money for other things!"

The problem was, every day of the retreat we did many different practices of gratitude. We honored each other through keeping the silence. We helped run the retreat with different yogi jobs like sweeping the floors, chopping vegetables, washing the dishes, and cleaning the bathrooms. People were so nice to each other, like making sure that there was enough food for everyone by taking smaller portions of special desserts. The teachers were very helpful and supportive. Being the recipient of so much generosity and feeling gratitude for the quieting and sharpening of my mind and the heightening of my senses, by the last day I was feeling very generous, ready to give far more than I had originally thought I might give.

The idea that a sense of gratitude, developed by receiving freely offered gifts, will stimulate generosity is one of the underlying principles of the gift economy. Gift economies are a controversial area of social research as scientists strive to understand the nature of gifts as a social transaction and the degree of expectation of reciprocal response. Gift economies, unlike exchange based economies, theoretically do not include the expectation of anything in return. All the gifts are given altruistically. In an exchange economy, a goods or services transaction would be evaluated based on fairness of the exchange. Did I get my money's worth or have I been cheated? Gratitude is unlikely to be evoked.

Eating at Karma Kitchen however, is not like this at all. At Karma Kitchen, you are seated at a table for lunch. A server takes your order just like a regular restaurant. The server delivers your food and you enjoy it. Then your server delivers you the bill that says, You owe ZERO dollars. Your meal has already been paid for by other diners. You are then given the opportunity to buy a meal for someone else and offer any amount of money you choose.

All the staff running the kitchen and serving the food are volunteers. They freely give their time once a month. They are inspired knowing that for a poor person, this may be their only opportunity to have a nutritious meal prepared for them and be treated like any other guest.

The Karma Kitchen in Berkeley California rents a regular restaurant for \$750 from noon till 3pm on Sundays. It is a popular destination so you'll need to come early to get a seat. They started doing this in 2007 with the idea that the meals should be entirely supported by donations and volunteer labor. If the donations didn't cover their costs, they'd just stop doing it. So the fact that they've been in continuous operation for the last six years says a lot about the model.

Panera Bread corporation has picked up on the idea. In the spring of 2010, they tried a similar experiment in Clayton, Missouri, near St. Louis, called Panera Cares. They set up a store where, when you get to the end of the food pick up line, there is a donation box for you to pay what you want. Some of the workers in that first store were at risk youth getting on the job training. That same year, they opened two more stores, one in Dearborn, Michigan and the other in Portland, Oregon. In 2013, they opened one in downtown Boston that I saw when I was visiting to participate in the UUA Board meeting.

As a provider of high quality food to the public, they see this effort as a way to give back to the community in a novel way. They want to make sure everyone who needs a meal gets one that is of high quality. They do list suggested donation levels but guests can also volunteer to work as a way to offer payment for their food. They see this as a way of offering a hand up rather than a

hand out.

And what is interesting is the result. I've heard that people are often generous in response to their donation for food policy. People are so generous, that the non-profit stores are the most profitable of the chain!

If we are talking about food donation however, right now one of the most amazing donation programs in the capital region is happening: the Equinox Thanksgiving dinner. Every year 3500 volunteers come together at the Empire State Plaza over several weeks to take donations of over 11,000 pounds of turkey, 400 gallons of gravy, a ton of green beans and two tons of potatoes and yams and 1200 pies to assemble 10,000 thanksgiving dinners. 500 are served at First Presbyterian in Albany and the rest are delivered to needy people's homes. Equinox started this 40 years ago to feed 200 students from SUNY who weren't going home for the holiday. It continues to grow today, all based on gifts.

(This is how I finished these words on Sunday – If you'd like to sample one of my delicious muffins, put the Sunday before Thanksgiving on your calendar for next year for a visit to our congregation!)

So if hearing about these acts of generosity hasn't yet stimulated your sense of gratitude, I hope to inspire you in a few moments with an act of gratitude, a gift of food from me: a corn muffin. All are lactose free and some are gluten free. I made them all this morning for your enjoyment. I hope this small act of gratitude for the opportunity to serve as your minister, will inspire your gratitude to help start off a restorative week of thanksgiving.

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