

## Filling the Horn of Plenty

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Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

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Giving thanks comes easily to me. I credit my parents for this aspect of my character. They taught us to say grace before meals--free form, extemporaneous grace with specific mention of particular people and events and blessings on any given day. Grace was, by unspoken agreement, usually Dad's task but one at which he encouraged us take our turns. Mom took us shopping each December for a toy to deposit, unwrapped, in the collection bin for Santa Anonymous, to be given to a child who might otherwise not receive a gift. I can still see the Santa Anonymous feature, as it used to appear in the Minneapolis Tribune (this was before the Tribune and the Star became one). A drawing of a large question mark superimposed over the face of Santa, accompanied by a story of a typical recipient family--sort of like the Guest At Your Table story Ben read for us this morning. And Mom and Dad never missed the opportunity to exploit what is called these days "a teachable moment."

I remember one in particular. I looked at a one-pound block of American cheese and noticed that the packaging was marked so it could be easily cut into one-ounce chunks. Noting the size of those one-ounce portions, I laughed and commented knowingly on the folly of the packagers. "Who would want to eat that much cheese at one time?" I asked.

Dad replied, as parents are wont to do, with a lesson about The Way Things Are outside the private little world of Lisa Doege. "If you were hungry and didn't have much money, and your family couldn't afford to buy meat, an ounce of cheese wouldn't seem like too much." Our mostly single income, state employee family was far from rich, but we were never hungry, a reality Mom and Dad highlighted as often as possible.

And so I grew into a natural attitude of gratitude--almost like breathing. Early training isn't the only reason thanksgiving is easy for me. There is also the little fact that my life, as an educated twentieth/twenty-first century, middle class US citizen, is full to overflowing with cause for gratitude. From the basics (food, clothing, shelter, abundant clean water, loving family, supportive friends) to luxuries (democracy, first class education, opportunities to travel, meaningful work) and on to luxuries that OUGHT to be basics (health insurance), I have all that I could reasonably hope for in life. Gratitude is easy.

Except.

Except when things don't go my way. When I don't get what I want. When disappointment reigns. When my heart is broken. Perhaps you have trouble giving thanks on such occasions, too.

On my way to becoming a minister I suffered an unexpected and disheartening set back. Having graduated with honors from the college of my choice, and been accepted by not one but two Ivy League divinity schools, and granted a degree from Harvard, and settled into my first choice internship site for a year of finishing touches, I set out to be interviewed by the credentialing body of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. I was a bit nervous about the prospect but the assurances of everyone I knew and trusted who were familiar with the process rang in my ears. I would sail through the interview.

The MFC had other ideas. I was pronounced not yet ready to be a Unitarian Universalist minister. I would need to complete my internship and return to the Committee a year later before I could be cleared for ordination and search.

It was not my most grateful hour. The next evening, before my tearful return to Dallas and the internship, I had dinner with a divinity school classmate. I poured out my tale of woe and Mary Alice listened with great care. And then she said, "This is a good thing that has happened, Lisa. If you have never been disappointed, if you have never been told 'no', you have no business being a minister. Because most folks are disappointed all the time. Most folks live a life of 'no.' This is a good thing."

Well. That was not what I wanted to hear at that moment. This was not the sympathetic outrage I expected. But it was wise. And it was true. And I have had occasions many times since to be grateful, both for Mary Alice's words and for the MFC's "not yet" verdict. Reluctant as I was to recognize them as such, they were blessings.

The minister who supervised my internship that formative year, the Reverend Dr. Laurel Hallman, has written:

*I say to myself: be grateful.*

*When the burdens of life seem overwhelming, when we cannot clearly see our way and hope seems frivolous, it is time to "give an accounting of gratitude."*

*Be grateful for the path that has brought you this far. There have been some close calls along the way, some scrapes with disaster--but you have survived them. And so many of your fears and worries have been about things that never came to pass.*

*Be grateful for friends, for common task undertaken and successfully complete. For the encouragement of other who were healthy when you were sick, happy when you were sad, hopeful when you had lost hope. They reminded you that life was much more than your experience of it at the moment.*

*Be grateful for life's celebrations and life's joys. But be grateful, too, for that which you would have avoided if you could, but which taught you the harder lessons of life. For it is in those moments that you can find the workings of a mysterious wisdom and know a more than human love.*

The words of Laurel Hallman.

Singer/song writer Peter Yarrow said the same thing in verse:

*Yes there are hands here to comfort you  
And if you need there are tears to cry with you too  
And there are hearts that will sing with you  
And voices to cheer when you've finally made it through*

*Sometimes it takes the dark to let us see the light  
You can't have that victory unless you've fought the fight  
Sometimes it takes a winding road to lead us home  
While you're windin' 'round my friend just don't go windin' 'round alone*

The lyrics of *Face to the Wind*.

That is one of my points here this morning. Yes, it is important to give thanks for all the gifts of our lives, even the ones we didn't want to receive. It is even more important to recognize and give thanks for the families, schools, churches, 12 Step groups, circles of friendship, and communities within we receive those blessings. While we each have some unique blessings, we also share some blessings in common, and it takes all of us together to fill our horn of plenty.

The year that has passed since last we gathered with loved ones around a Thanksgiving feast has been difficult, in ways both public and private. The economic crisis that still feels real despite word that the worst is past, the rancor over health care reform and the incivility of town hall forums, weather inhospitable to farming, reverses in the stride toward marriage equality, the slow pace of political and social change, continuing US involvement in two wars, illness, deaths of loved ones, accidents, frightening acts and behaviors we can't understand, job loss, divorce, loneliness...  
*Hard, hard it is ... to ... Give thanks for the harvest of a troubled year.*

But we do so anyway. Because we are here and because we are here together. Together, when any one of us is bereft, lost, confused, sad, ill or in debt, together, nonetheless, we fill our horn of plenty to overflowing.

Don't mistake my words for a Pollyannaish insistence that pain doesn't matter, that mistakes and heartbreaks are really wonderful gifts in thin disguise, and that an annual oblivious over-indulgence at a laden table is the proper response and antidote to life's trials and tribulations. Nothing could be further from my intended message, which is this: despite it all, in spite of it all, within and beyond, before and after the feasts and the

famine, deep inside each one of us rests eternal cause for thanksgiving--a beating heart, a breathing spirit.

The Buddha is said to have instructed, "Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us all be thankful." There are days, may they be mercifully rare, there are days in each of our lives when the only thing we have, the only thing at all we might be grateful for, is life. And that alone, bare as it may seem, terrifying as it may be, is enough for a song of thanksgiving. Our opening words this morning reminded us of an important detail we don't often highlight at Thanksgiving: the Pilgrims gave thanks for nothing more and nothing less than survival itself. Not prosperity. Not abundance. Simply survival. Yes, there were the friendly, helpful Native Americans, there was the harvest--all the trimmings of the story as we learned it in elementary school--but the real blessing, the core blessing, the one gift that alone would have been enough cause for thanksgiving was survival, life itself.

May this be the gift we hold close, the one we speak aloud, the one that periodically, amid the laughter and the cooking and the football and the eating and the parades and the reminiscing, we hold up to the light, and rotate and gaze upon in wonder until thanks springs from our hearts to our lips. Amen.