

Fonzie's Prayer
The Discipline of Gratitude

By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
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Thanksgiving has always been my favorite holiday. When I was a kid we celebrated at my grandparents' house where all my aunts, uncles and cousins gathered to enjoy all the delicious homemade fixin's and each other's lighthearted banter and good company. It didn't matter so much that ours was a pretty dysfunctional family and that my own parents were the craziest of the lot—Thanksgiving was a day, despite all the dysfunction and craziness, that we experienced all the best of what it means to be a family. Sure, I usually had to moisten grandma's overcooked turkey with a little gravy or cranberry sauce to help ease it down, which had to be accomplished before I could rightly stake claim to a wedge of mom's pumpkin pie. And we always got started early enough that there was plenty of time and room for a second round of everything before leaving.

These days I use cranberry sauce to moisten my dry Tofurky, and try to resist the pumpkin pie if I can, but Thanksgiving is still, by far, my favorite holiday. Whether it's a Happy Turkey Day, or a Happy Tofurky Day, Thanksgiving helps me recall all the happy days I've had simply spending time with friends and family. No matter how much dysfunction and craziness I've seen, or how many bumps and bruises I've felt, or how much sorrow and need I've had to endure at times, Thanksgiving reminds me, as the old spiritual says, to "count my many blessings."

Speaking of happy days, this is also a good occasion to mention another of my favorite childhood memories, Tuesday nights in front of my small black and white TV watching *Happy Days*. Who can forget this iconic coming of age sitcom set in Milwaukee, Wisconsin during the 1950's? It focused mostly on the antics of Richie Cunningham, along with his budding teenage friends, Potsie and Ralph Malph, and his traditional, father-knows-best dad, apron-wearing mom, and pesky little sister. But, like any impressionable kid growing up in the 70's, my favorite character of them all was the man who, at the time, both epitomized and defined what it meant to be *cool*—Arthur Herbert Fonzarelli, or, as he was known to any who dared utter his name, "the Fonz."

Needless to say, being a traditional family man, Richie's dad, Howard Cunningham, didn't care much for his all American boy's leather-jacket-wearing, motorcycle-riding, slick-headed friend, no matter how cool he looked. Nevertheless, on just about the only episode I can actually recall, Fonzie, being the loner type, turns down numerous invitations to Christmas dinner. But when Richie discovers the coolest guy in town all alone in his cold garage eating from a ravioli can, he convinces him to come home to help repair a broken Santa and some tree lights. Mr.

Cunningham had been insistent upon having a traditional, family-only Christmas, but could not bring himself to turn Fonzie away.

As the family sits down to eat, the Fonz unexpectedly offers to say grace. Everyone else at the table, especially Mr. Cunningham, are visibly uncomfortable, given their guest's usual lack of eloquence and reverence for social etiquette. But the horse had already entered the starting gate and there was nothing they could say to prevent it. They solemnly and nervously bow their heads, all except Fonzie, that is, who, instead, looks upward with his eyes wide open, and, with a sentiment as profound as it was brief, delivered what was for me his coolest line ever, "Hey God, thanks!" At first the Cunninghams appear troubled by his brevity, as if there has to be something more to an appropriate Christmas blessing. But as Fonzie begins digging in, it soon dawns upon them that his sentiment was so sincere, and so succinctly whole, that it was more than enough. Fonzie, who had been alone on Christmas day eating cold ravioli, suddenly finds himself part of a kind family eating a warm meal and says the only thing that really needs to be said, "thanks."

On the other hand, I kind of understand what the Cunninghams were thinking. How can any one word ever be enough to express the feelings of gratitude for all that we have, or repay the kindness we receive from others? As the new owner of a fixer-upper who has received much help from so many who have spent hours moving boxes and furniture, stripping wallpaper, painting walls, refinishing floors, organizing work crews, providing meals, and so much more, I know just how inadequate the phrase, "thank you," can seem. If I were to truly count my many blessings and "name them one by one," as the song advises, it would take more time than you'd care to listen. So this simple word seems to pale in comparison to all I've received. Nevertheless, like Fonzie, I'm compelled to somehow articulate the enormous gratitude I feel, and though I may not know how to finish, it does seem a simple "thanks" might be the best way to begin. So, thanks!

At the same time, as intelligent people, we have to be careful about how we talk about gratitude in a religious context. Karl Marx famously said, "*Die Religion ist das Opium des Volkes*," or, "Religion is the opium of the masses," which was his way of calling religion a painkiller. Whether it's self-induced or put into the Kool-Aid for us, religion often numbs us to the painful realities of this world by emphasizing some heavenly ideal or pie-in-the-sky afterlife. Sometimes, I suppose, life can be so difficult, perhaps a little painkiller is justified. Many of the oldest American spirituals still sung today came from slaves so miserable that it seemed thoughts of a better place was their only refuge.

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home.
I looked over Jordan,
And what did I see,
Comin' for to carry me home,
A band of angels comin' after me,

Fonzie's Prayer

Comin' for to carry me home.

Here's another:

I hear the train a' comin'
She's comin' round the curve
She's loosened all her steam and brakes
And strainin' ev'ry nerve

*Get on board little children
Get on board little children
Get on board little children
There's room for many more*

The fare is cheap and all can go
The rich and poor are there
No second class aboard this train
No difference in the fare

*Get on board little children
Get on board little children
Get on board little children
There's room for many more*

But things are not always as they seem. Like other oppressed peoples, slaves were not allowed to use their own language, practice their own religions, or even sing their own songs. So they satisfied their keepers by guising their secret messages to each other as Christian hymns. *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* wasn't about acquiescing to one's miserable fate in the hope of a better afterlife, but was code for "be on the lookout for the wagons and carriages coming to help you escape." Later, when trains came along, *The Gospel Train's A'Comin'*, "get on board little children," served the same purpose. Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave and lead conductor in the underground railroad wrote many of these songs herself, including *Wade in the Water*, as a way of teaching runaway slaves to throw the dogs off their scent.

Who are these children all dressed in Blue?
God's gonna trouble the water.
Must be the ones that made it through,
God's gonna trouble the water.

*Wade in the water,
Wade in the water children.
Wade in the water
God's gonna trouble the water*

Their handlers heard them signing and were satisfied they had successfully forced their religion and values onto their slaves, transforming them into compliant automatons who had accepted their circumstances. But the reality is that their

captives had turned the tables and used religion as a vehicle for gaining freedom and justice.

When the Sun comes back
And the first quail calls
Follow the Drinking Gourd,
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the Drinking Gourd

The riverbank makes a very good road.
The dead trees will show you the way.
Left foot, peg foot, travelling on,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.

The river ends between two hills
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
There's another river on the other side
Follow the Drinking Gourd.

When the great big river meets the little river
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry to freedom
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.

The drinking gourd is a clandestine reference to the North Star at the end of the Little Dipper. Thus, as people so greatly concerned with social justice and matters of equality and equity, Unitarian Universalists ought to be cautious not to use gratitude as an excuse for ignoring the injustices of this world. For we do not put our faith in an afterlife, but in this life, no matter how troubling it might be, or pray to a god for help without lifting a finger to help ourselves. So, like these old subversive spirituals, ours may look like any ordinary religion in many ways, but our primary concern is with freedom and justice, with creating Heaven on Earth.

With this precaution in mind, however, I tend to agree with my colleague, Reverend Galen Guengerich, the senior minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in Manhattan. During a 2006 sermon entitled, *The Discipline of Gratitude*, Rev. Guengerich said, "...my conviction is that the defining element of our faith should be gratitude. In the same way as Judaism is defined by obedience, Christianity by love, and Islam by submission, I believe that Unitarian Universalism should be defined by gratitude."¹ This is so, he goes on to explain, because "the word religion does not mean to liberate or set free, but rather to bind together."

He's right. As devoted as we are to liberty and freedom, the very words defining our faith, Unitarianism and Universalism, succinctly express our shared

¹ <http://www.allsoulsnyc.org/publications/sermons/ggsermons/the-discipline-of-gratitude.pdf>

awareness that we are all connected and must live in solidarity and harmony with one another. Our religion, in the truest sense of the word, is about bringing us all together. We appreciate and celebrate that fact that none of us are exactly alike, but that doesn't mean we aren't all one, that we can't live in solidarity, and all shouldn't be treated as equals, with equal rights and equal opportunities.

So the most profound thing about what Rev. Guengerich is suggesting, is that this great desire for justice is born out of our appreciation for all that is. Gratitude is the result of a Cosmic consciousness. We cherish the worth and dignity of every person because we understand that all beings are connected, part of a holistic universe, part of the interdependent web of existence. As Guengerich puts it, "The first principle of the universe is not independence, but its opposite: utter dependence!" Otto Rank once said, "When religion lost the cosmos, society became neurotic."²

So I think Guengerich hits the nail on the head when he suggests gratitude is what our religion, if not all religion, is and ought to be about. As Thomas Aquinas said, "Religion is supreme thankfulness or gratitude," and, "Every ingratitude is a sin."³ And gratitude, again, is born out of our appreciation for our connections. So our Cosmic consciousness, the awareness, that is, that we are all one, all equals, causes us to desire justice and liberty for all. We are grateful for others, and, thus, we want what is best for them as much as we want what is best for ourselves. As theologian Matthew Fox puts it, "There is in the sense of cosmos a sense of balance, of harmony, and therefore of justice. For the word 'cosmos' is in fact the Greek word for 'order.' A cosmic spirituality is a just spirituality, for it cares with a heartfelt caring for harmony, balance, and justice. Indeed, injustice is precisely a rupture in the order of the cosmos, a rupture in creation itself."⁴ As UU's, we are unlikely to believe the creation is six-thousand years old, but, whenever and however it all began, we do agree with the first law of creation, "It is good." The entire Universe is, a Fox claims, the *Original Blessing*, and UU's, because we accept scientific claims about its origins, greatly appreciate just how rare and special life, all life, is. As Einstein said, "The most important function of... science is to awaken the cosmic religious feeling and keep it alive."⁵ And, indeed, this cosmic religious feeling is alive and well in us.

But this doesn't mean gratitude comes easy for us. That's why it's called a discipline, because it takes thought, effort, and practice. Like other spiritual disciplines—mediation, contemplation, yoga, fasting, simplicity, and silence for instance—practicing gratitude is ultimately about making us more aware and present in the here and now. In fact, the words "thank" and "think" sound alike

² Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1983, p. 66.

³ Fox, Matthew, *Sheer Joy*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1992, 2003. p. 359.

⁴ Fox, *Original Blessing*, *ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

because they are etymologically the same word. To be *thankful* is to be *thoughtful*. That's why we often follow "thank you" with, "that's very thoughtful of you." So one way to practice gratitude is by literally counting our blessings, or being more aware of the good things in our lives, which, naturally, motivates us to say thanks and be grateful.

In addition to our cosmic consciousness, and our longing for justice, this association of thankfulness with thoughtfulness is another reason I think gratitude is a good discipline for Unitarian Universalists. We are as devoted to being thoughtful as to anything else. Some have even complained we're a little too thoughtful, too stuck in our heads. This is the reason Ralph Waldo Emerson once called our religion "corpse-cold." There may be some truth to this, but I have found the problem with religion is usually not that people think too much, but that they don't think enough, and I'm proud to part of a religion that honors the crown chakra. So one way to give thanks, is to give thought. Being thoughtful is an act of grace, and is one of the many gifts UU's can offer the world. Being thoughtful is a discipline that makes us more present, more aware of the here and now.

Of course, not everyone is grateful for the thinkers among us. Thinking causes us to question things, and questions tend to shake things up. And this is really the last point I want to make about the discipline of gratitude; it doesn't always involve giving people what they want, but what they need. And in a culture that often frowns upon independent thinking, one of the greatest gifts we can offer is our thoughtfulness.

So, in the end, gratitude really is a discipline. It doesn't involve flights of fancy that deny the pain and injustices of this world, but requires us to do the hard work of justice making right here, right now. It calls upon us to remain aware of our connections and responsibility to others, even when we'd prefer to shut the world out and think only of ourselves. And it demands, no matter how safe it is to turn off our minds, that we struggle to think for ourselves. That's all hard work! That's why gratitude takes discipline! And that's why simply saying *thanks*, brief as it may sound, is the perfect prayer. So I invite you to open your eyes, lift up your heads, and say it with me now, "Thanks!" Amen.