

# «Giving Thanks»

**Thanksgiving Sermon by Rev. Patty Hanneman, November 23, 2008  
The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC**

## **Responsive Reading**

to “let go” does not mean to stop caring  
it means, I can’t do it for someone else

to “let go” is not to cut myself off  
it’s the realization, I can’t control another

to “let go” is not to enable  
but to allow learning from natural consequences

to “let go” is to admit powerlessness  
which means the outcome is not in my hands

to “let go” is not to try to change or blame another  
it’s to make the most of myself

to “let go” is not to “care for”  
but to “care about”

to “let go” is not to *fix*  
but to be supportive

to “let go” is not to judge  
but to allow another to be a human being

to “let go” is not to be in the middle arranging all the outcomes  
but to allow others to affect their destinies

to “let go” is not to be protective  
it’s to permit another to face reality

to “let go” is not to deny  
but to accept

to “let go” is not to nag, scold or argue  
but instead to search out my own shortcomings and correct them

to “let go” is not to adjust everything to my desires  
but to take each day as it comes, and cherish myself in it

to “let go” is not to criticize and regulate anybody  
but to try to become what I dream I can be

to “let go” is not to regret to past  
but to grow and live for the future

to “let go” is to fear less  
and to love more.

*From Campbell’s Institute for Health & Fitness*

## Sermon

This morning the peace of autumn pervades the world. I noticed as I left my house this morning that my oak trees are finally letting go of their last few leaves. Soon all the limbs will be bare, a sign that the earth is readying itself for another cycle of growth and life.

It always seems a bit ironic to me that the national holiday of Thanksgiving falls at this time of year when we not only give thanks for the abundance in our lives but at the same time we go through this annual process of letting go. And perhaps it's not as ironic as it first appears, because I feel that in a very real sense, the letting go – of expectations, of the need to control, of feelings of envy or anger, of any number of emotions – is a necessary part of being grateful. There are any number of things that can mask our ability to truly appreciate the grace that is bestowed upon us every day.

This past Thursday morning I drove to an elementary school in a not-so-great part of Durham, to introduce myself to the principle and staff and take a look at their facilities. I am a member of Durham C.A.N., a community organizing group that has as its project this year to visit every public school in Durham to learn what their needs and greatest challenges are. This school was one of the lowest ranked schools in Durham this year on the No Child Left Behind scale of school achievement. I was not looking forward to the visit. I was afraid it would be a depressing sight, and I was not looking forward to even driving and walking through that part of Durham.

But what I found was a community working hard to turn itself around. I found that there are four local churches – no doubt churches whose theologies we would readily disagree with – four churches who had partnered with this school to tutor students. I found that one of their major challenges is that many of the parents of these children, even though they were born and raised right here, cannot read, write or do math at the level expected of their children, so they are unable to help them with their homework. One of the school's new incentives is to have Saturday morning classes for parents, to teach them the same skills their children are learning. I drove there feeling fearful, but I left feeling a deeper sense of connection with those folks, a deeper sense of responsibility to help that community, and a deep sense of gratitude for the simple privileges I've had in my life: the opportunity to be educated enough to do the work I love.

But I had to let go of my fears, and my prejudices, and those feelings of difference before I could feel that connection, and then the gratitude for the ways in which I have been blessed without having done anything to deserve it.

My worship and preaching instructor, the Rev. David Bumbaugh, reminded us several years ago the the history of science in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and now the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has been a history of continually enlarging our understanding of the universe – its evolution, its history, and its structure. He wrote, "We have explored both the macrocosm and the microcosm – those things impossible to see with the naked eye – and the more we engage with the natural world, the more complex we find it to be. We have, for example, found that on a subatomic level, there is a world in which particles oscillate in time, between past and future; a world in which particles appear in constant communication with each other and across vast spaces, at speeds greater than the speed of light; a world, they tell us, that is changed by the very fact

that we observe it.”<sup>1</sup> Pay attention to something and it changes. On some level then, there is no distinction between you and me, between the tree, and this candle. No distinction between those parents learning to read in Durham and myself. Perhaps I have already affected those students with my attention. I am awed by that reality and thankful to have been reminded of our connection.

At the other extreme, David writes, the macrocosm world, we have discovered that the universe is much larger than our imagination can hold. As our abilities to measure and observe become more precise, we have found a universe that is many billions of years old. And we find that much of our new insight into the early history of the universe resonates with our insights into the interaction of subatomic particles. The more we know, the more our knowing suggests that the universe is made up of patterns of energy that repeat and reoccur over many scales of size. The more we understand, the more we stand in awe and reverence for the evolution of the universe, *our* evolution, *our* place in the family of things.

David also writes that recent studies in the earth sciences hint that life didn't simply emerge *on* earth, but that life is a defining artifact *of* earth; that the earth became a self-regulating, living entity – Gaia; that we do not live *on* earth, but rather we exist as elements of the earth's living system; a living system that strives to incorporate ever greater and greater complexity and diversity in the life forms it creates and nurtures.

During the season of Advent that begins next Sunday, it is common to hear the story of how the Holy became incarnate in one human being, born in one place, at one time, for a chosen people. This morning I say that the Holy is continually incarnating itself in the oak trees that have given up their leaves, in hummingbirds, in those faithful Christians who tutor the children at the elementary school I visited last week, and in you and I. Each of us and everything around us, an incarnation of the Holy. This is the religious story that sets the stage for Thanksgiving. For when we can remember this *incarnation*, and can stand in awe and reverence before the abundance that is all around us, it brings us to an attitude which the Rev. Marilyn Sewell calls the attitude of primal thanksgiving; an attitude that comes to us when we are able to be truly present in the moment, responding in wonder to the truth of that moment; the truth that we are living in the midst of and are part of Holy incarnation.<sup>2</sup>

Have you ever wondered, out of all the configurations that your molecules could have been used for, how you were blessed to have been born a human being? One of the universe's most complex works of art? Complex beings with the capacity to love and grieve; to envy and be compassionate; to exist mindlessly for hours, then be moved to tears by a familiar tune. What a miracle that you and I are here!

Ours is a religious story that suggests that *in* us and *through* us the universe is grasping for better self-understanding, self-expression, and insight. I would argue that it is also grasping for a sense of appreciation and gratitude, and that in us and through us the universe is able to say thank you; thank you for sustenance, for abundance, for diversity and complexity that allows us to feel in awe of it all. And for the self-understanding that at heart we are one with all things and that our sense of separation is an illusion.

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<sup>1</sup> Bumbaugh, David. "Toward a Humanist Vocabulary of Reverence," *A Language of Reverence*. Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Sewell, Marilyn. *Wanting Wholeness, Being Broken*. Portland, Oregon: Fuller Press, 1998 (204).

When we live in primal thanksgiving, it becomes possible for us to identify with the joy of others instead of envying what they seem to have, for we are able to recognize that at the very heart of life there is a blessedness that holds us and sustains us as unique members in the family of life. In the light of primal thanksgiving, the ethics of short-term benefit, of instant gratification, of nationalist values, all seem short-sighted and in need of questioning. In the light of primal thanksgiving, we realize the dinner table is big enough for all of us.

I find that when I am really ready to let go of the way I think my life *should* look, then I can accept with real gratitude what life brings. We all naturally resist this letting go of expectations. But often this letting go is what needs to happen for new life to begin. There are any number of things that can mask our ability to truly appreciate the grace that is bestowed upon us every day. May we keep those channels of grace, those feelings of awe and wonder, uncluttered as often as possible. And may you have a happy, happy Thanksgiving.

### **Benediction**

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is or how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open.

*Martha Graham*