Gratitude's Possibilities
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Do you want to get the most out of your life? I hope you do! Its's all very simple. Pay attention. Be grateful for everything. That's all which is required for us to live happily ever after. Once we have mastered resilience and ego surrender, attention and gratitude are all we need for equanimity. A spirit of gratitude lifts life's ordinary experiences, whether good or bad, into the possibility of transcendent experience. Wake up. We are called every moment of our lives to transcendence.

And gratitude is the game changer! It calms our nervous system, stimulates the neurochemicals in our brain, shifts our frame of reference to a wider view. In every moment we can choose a state of gratitude and watch our physiology shift. When we wake up in the morning, no matter how late we went to bed, we can greet the new day with gratitude for still being alive. We can eat a healthy breakfast, have our cup of coffee, but then as we get ready for school, or work, or to help those we are caring for each day, greet the coming day with gratitude. Be thankful for the work we have to do, or if you happen to be retired, be thankful that you no longer must work each day. What ever your life circumstance, there are reasons for cherishing gratitude.

Especially for any of us who commute by car at rush hour. An excellent time to practice gratitude: for the person who won't let you merge into their lane, or cuts you off, or is traveling too slowly on the highway, we are grateful for the patience and equanimity they can teach us. Grateful for the near crashes which keep us focused and wide aware, grateful for the mind-numbing traffic jams that inch along moment to moment, and for following behind buses as they stop to drop passengers every quarter mile along the way. These are all gifts for our consciousness.

As I wrote these lines, I am watching a glorious sunset ending a short, cold winter day. Being aware, being awake to life's possibilities, being grateful for life itself, is not a seasonal affect. Yes, it's invigorating to observe the first signs of new life at springtime, or to enjoy the hot languid days of summer, or the glorious leaf peeping of the autumn, but to every joy there is a season, and a season for every joy. Practice gratitude for the long cold winter nights and they are so much easier to endure. Winter is a reality, as is cold, but suffering is always a choice.

Yet gratitude is often a complex both/and situation. Let's take for example twenty-three years of being a Welcoming congregation. A generation ago you did the work to be recognized by the UUA as a congregation welcoming LGBTQ folks to join you. Over the years you have had GLBQ worship services, panels, workshops, and discussions. More recently you have worked to connect with transgender lives, marched in the Gay pride parade, and got out the YES vote on prop. 3. We should be grateful for how much this community has done so far.

Yet there is so much more that needs to be done, around supporting transgender, queer, questioning, and non-binary youth as they face ongoing violence and discrimination. They need us and our support. The UUA Welcoming Congregation designation was never intended to be one and done. It is stating a public moral claim to the inherent worth and dignity of every person, of every gender identity, and

every understanding of their inherent being. For those of us who rise to the ongoing challenges, we can be grateful for important work yet to do. We are aligning ourselves with justice, equity, compassion and love.

There is much to be deeply grateful for, having come so far, and with so much further yet to go. From a spiritual point of view, it is critical that we keep a proper sense of perspective as we engage with our lives. With gratitude for any role we can play. Dag Hammarskjold, perhaps the most famous Swedish diplomat of the twentieth century, in 1957, being re-elected Secretary-General of the United Nations, wrote in his journal a reminder to keep his role in the world in proper perspective.

He wrote: "You are not the oil (that provides the energy), you are not the air (which combusts) – (you are) merely the point of combustion, the flash point where the light is born. You are merely the lens in the beam (of light). You can only receive, give, and possess the light as a lens does. If you seek yourself, [and] *your rights*, you prevent the oil and air from meeting in the flame, you rob the lens of its transparency."

A leader's role is to bring forth light from the oil and air which exists. To create a safe space or "Sanctity – either to be the Light, or to be self-effaced in the Light, so it may be born, self-effaced so that it may be focused or spread wider. You will know Life and be acknowledged by it according to… your capacity… to vanish as an end, and remain purely a means." I wish more twenty-first century leaders could simply be grateful for their role in bringing about the common good, and not always try to be an end in themselves. Leaders are means to an end.

I am grateful for this ordinary time of year, as cold and miserable as it may sometimes be. In the Christian liturgical calendar, after dwelling four weeks in Advent, enjoying twelve days of Christmas, capped by a celebration of Epiphany, we have returned to two months of ordinary time until Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. But what is this so-called ordinary time and what is its spiritual significance? It is a time for paying attention; paying attention to the ordinary moments in our lives, and greeting them with gratitude. This is our spiritual discipline, to practice the possibilities of gratitude in all that life presents to us: good, bad, or indifferent. We seek to greet it all with sincere gratitude.

As Robert Emmons writes in his book *Thanks!* "Grateful people experience higher levels of positive emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, love, happiness, and optimism. The practice of gratitude as a discipline protects a person from the destructive impulses of envy, resentment, greed and bitterness." It is not that we have different experiences as a greedy or a grateful person, but we experience them differently. Envy, resentment, greed and bitterness can send you into a downward spiral, where everything looks increasingly bleak. Fortitude, gratitude, peace, and contentment conversely can create an upward spiral, lifting us into the light. Given the choice, there is far more peace and joy in gratitude.

Rumi's guest house poem is a metaphor for life. "Every morning a new arrival, a joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor." We learn to cherish the joy, honor our depression like an old friend, recognize the meanness as stirring us to greater depths, and spiritually dwell in the momentary awareness.

He asks us to welcome all these feelings: “Even if they are a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still, treat each honorably. [They] may be clearing you out for some new delight.” This is crazy wisdom, as bad as Jesus’ sermon on the mount, yet both are deeply spiritual teachings about how to engage with life.

So, as I became spiritually wiser, and for me it took decades, I learned to be grateful to be unemployed, or over employed in work that was way too stressful, to find work that gave me great meaning, and to endure the necessary but meaningless work as well. For years, I apprenticed myself to some of the world’s top scientists to learn biology and chemistry far beyond what they taught me in school, and yet accepted that no matter how hard I tried, at best I would be an educated novice in this emerging scientific field. I gratefully plowed into accounting and finance rules until I knew enough to create new financial instruments that could transform our industry. I gratefully cultivated the politicians and bureaucrats we needed by our side for regulatory and commercial approvals. In helping develop an industry, I was grateful for whoever came to us, as potential help from beyond.

The same has always been true of my spiritual life. About twenty years ago I went with a group of Unitarian Universalist men on a series of six weeklong vison quests, where we fasted and sought spiritual visions. On those quests I talked to bugs, to furry mammals, to God, to my long dead father, and encountered my own terrifying dark night of the soul. And yet I went back summer after summer because it took me deeper into wisdom and beyond, finally resulting in God calling me to ordained Unitarian Universalist ministry. I learned to dwell in God in gratitude.

Then, seven years into my ministry at First Parish in Brookline, I went on sabbatical and got spiritually wild with the possibilities. For several weeks I gave up coffee, alcohol, and getting to bed at any decent hour, in order to learn from whirling dervish Sufis how to dance with the divine. I should show you sometime my black leather whirling slippers that they taught me to dance in as meditation. My encounter with divine mystery was so transformative that after we had traveled together, they planted the Ka’ba of love in my heart. For which I am grateful.

Six weeks later found me at a Chinese mountaintop retreat center called Tao Fong Shan, a magical, mystery place, where I learned the teachings and disciplines of ancient Taoism. Much that they wanted me to do, as an obese middle aged American academic, was beyond what I could even conceive of doing. Taoism doesn’t accept such boundaries. By the end of an arduous month among them, they had me climbing, both physically and metaphysically, mountains beyond mountains. I am grateful that they would not accept my limitations, and that I did not actually die, as I discovered how to better employ my inner powers of concentration. The Taoists opened new vistas to me.

They taught me how to align my “Chi” or life force with my intention, to utilize mind, body, and spirit to experience a transcendental wholeness that I had never experienced before. As humanity begins to emerge from its adolescence, we have a growing capacity to find equanimity and wellbeing. It awakens our five senses to gratitude’s possibilities. Waking our senses to the earth’s call and the deep power of being in all. So that we can work toward a planet transformed by our care. Wait, we have a hymn for that, please join me in singing hymn #298: “Wake, Now, My Senses.” May we can go forth in grace and gratitude. Amen.