

“What We Need Is Here”: A Sermon for Thanksgiving 2015

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The Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock

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“We are all just walking each other home.” -Ram Dass

Opening Words

“Why, when there could have been nothing, is there something? This is a great mystery. How, when there could have been nothing, does it happen that there is love, kindness, beauty?” - Jane Kenyon

Chalice Lighting

“When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.” - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Readings

“A Harvest of Gratitude,” by Percival Chubb, #656 in [Singing the Living Tradition](#)

“Wild Geese” by Wendell Berry

Sermon

When I was growing up in Northwest Arkansas, every Thanksgiving we would pack up my Daddy’s baked ham and head north to Joplin, for the feast hosted by my grandmother. Everyone came, it seemed; even my Aunt Alma and her partner, Lucy, made the trip together all the way from California. It was never a fancy affair; there was no silver and no stemware to be found. Grandma’s house may have been small, but it somehow held all 50 or so of us, with people gathered in nearly every room. My cousins and I even ate our turkey and pie sitting around a card table in Grandma’s bedroom. Looking back, though, what has stayed with me through the years are the sounds -- the music of the voices rising and falling, the rhythms of people sometimes all talking at once, the plain language poetry of stories told in a dialect not quite Midwestern and not quite Southern, a speech that would become my native tongue.

Most years, as Thanksgiving approaches, as I make my lists and plans for the holiday, it is the voices of family I hear, their voices rising up in me like a hymn of Thanksgiving. Though we are separated, they and I, some by distance and others by death, the music of their voices has grown sweeter over time, for I now know what I hadn’t known as a child -- all the griefs and heartaches and hardships they bore, all the good reasons they had through the years to hold back, to stay away, to say, “No. Not now. Maybe next year.”

This week, as I listened to reports of heart-breaking violence in Paris, and then again in Mali, and listened too, to a national and international conversation saturated with fear, a part of me felt such despair for our world that a time for giving thanks seemed both far away and not quite right, not right now, anyway. My heart and mind were full, too full, of the noise of the world. It was only after I slowed a bit and quieted my heart that I could hear again over the noise of the world the music of the voices of the people who raised me, people who gathered together to give thanks, even when life was so hard it must have hurt, and hurt a lot. The music of my people this year calls me back to the tradition of Thanksgiving – and to give thanks, especially in times of trial, for what matters -- for the gifts of loved ones, and for good food, and for another day of living.

Thanksgiving 2015 is just days away. Some of us will gather with loved ones in homes near and far and some of us will gather with loved ones, here, in our church home. Whoever we are and wherever we gather, within each of us there may be feelings not so easy to name – feelings we might rather ignore or push away, but real life concerns, both for our own lives and for the life of our world, feelings that are part fear, part anxiety, part anger, part despair – and beneath it all a yearning, a longing for rest, and for peace.

This week, as I looked out at a world rocked by terror, I thought about our two college kids flying home from the east coast for the holiday, and couldn't help remembering how small our three children were on that September morning fourteen years ago when the twin towers fell and how it was impossible then to shield them from what had happened to our world. I imagine that the stories from Paris and Mali took some of us back to September 11th, to where we were and what we felt on that day.

This week, I turned again to words that spoke to the despair I felt then as a mother of young children, the same despair I felt again this week. They're words I saw posted in all kinds of public places in the days after 9/11, and saw again this week being passed online from person to person, words found in our Unitarian Universalist hymn book. Maybe you know these words from the Kentucky farmer and poet, Wendell Berry:

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

These words are my scripture for they call me to pick myself up out of my despair and to find my way out into the world and to find there a place of rest and peace and grace.

Wherever you are this week, I hope you will find rest and peace and allow grace into your lives. It's a holiday week at a time when the news of the world is hard and exhausting and so I say, take care of yourselves and one another. As your minister, I offer some suggestions for your spirits. *Find your way out into the world.* If you can, get your body outside under the open sky. Look up and watch a flock of wild geese. If you can't get outside, sit by a window and look at the November sunlight as it washes over the trees and grasses. *Go easy on yourselves and one another.* In your holiday celebrations and gatherings, forget about perfection. This is not the year to stress and simmer over either place settings or the places people dine. (My cousins and I were very happy to eat in Grandma's bedroom.). What matters is being together and having enough to eat. Everything else can wait. And when someone starts to snip or nitpick, or if tempers flare, it's time to slow down, take it easy and remember that underneath the bluster is a human heart that hurts. After all, as Ram Das once said, "We are all just walking each other home." *Rest when you can.* (I don't know what more to say about that one.) *Go offline and unplug, at least for a while.* Turn off, for a time, the news of the world, not to retreat in ignorance, but to allow your soul time to rest so that you can return to the news of the world with a quieter heart and a stronger and more deeply rooted resolve, ready to stand against the fear mongering and bigotry of the day.

When the youngest among us ask questions about what is going on the world, (and so often they do know) answer with truth: Bad things sometimes happen and when they do people can get hurt. We don't always

know why bad things happen. Bad things don't happen because any god made them happen. Bad things can happen when humans don't treat other people the way they themselves would want to be treated. And we can remind our young and ourselves when the news of the world turns dark, to look for the "stars" – the people who turn toward one another to help and to love with acts of grace. And one final suggestion for your spirit – pray. Today is a day when, however we may name the Divine, we can join our hearts in the prayer our choir sang for us, a prayer that we in our world might "make friends out of strangers," a prayer that the "walls (that divide us) will melt away," a prayer for freedom, and for peace, and for grace -- a prayer for our world in this season of Thanksgiving 2015.

No matter what happens, the human spirit can endure and prevail. *"The living,"* writes Wendell Berry, *"can't quit living because the world has turned terrible and people they love and need are killed. They can't because they don't. The light that shines into darkness and never goes out calls them on into life. It calls them back again into the great room. It calls them into their bodies and into the world, into whatever the world will require. It calls them into work and pleasure, goodness and beauty, and the company of other loved ones."*

We all, whoever we are and wherever we come from, Wendell Berry wisely reminds us, belong together in what he names the "great room" of life – a place bigger than one country or any one way of faith -- a place of goodness and beauty, a place of kindness and mercy.

We are all in this together, I believe with all my heart, in our world, and in our homes, and here in our congregations. We need one another, and we need to be together, now more than ever. By now, some of you have read my Thursday letter, letting you know that your leaders decided to make room here for more people and to keep us worshipping together as one community, so we'll begin worshipping in Thomson Hall starting December 13th, while our leaders decide whether we might offer two Sunday morning services.

I've already heard from some of you. Some are excited – "Wow! Great!" you've said. And some are -- not so sure about all this. "But we love the coziness . . ." I've heard. One thing I can promise you is that we will find our way – and together we will find a way to do what is right. What matters most is that we are here together, living our values, welcoming all into the great room of life. Wherever we gather as a congregation to celebrate life, our gathering place will be a place of goodness and beauty, a place of kindness and mercy, because we, ourselves, will make it so.

On this Thanksgiving 2015, my prayer for our world and for our lives, yours and mine, and the life we share together in this place, is that we might hold in our hearts what our poet calls the "ancient faith" – "what we need is here." This faith to which the poet testifies is neither Jewish nor Christian nor Muslim, it is not Hindu or Buddhist, this ancient faith stretches back farther than any of those traditions, for it is a human faith, the "in your bones" knowing that we have here, together on this earth, what we need – enough for all, enough food, enough shelter, enough love -- courage enough and love enough that fear need not divide us.

And so, along with the poet, we pray, not for some better place or time, not for *"new earth or heaven, but to be quiet in heart and in eye clear. What we need is here."* What we need is here, in whatever land we live, whatever language we speak, whatever the music of our ancestor's voices and however and whether we choose to name the Divine, all of us belong together in the great room of life, where there is goodness and beauty, kindness and mercy for all, because we, ourselves, with human hearts and human hands, choose to make it so. We have what we need. What we need is here.