

Soul Matters, July 2014

What Does It Mean To Live A Life Of Blessing?

** ** *

After a party at my home, I have a strange ritual. I like to do the cleaning up alone, or just with my spouse. I don't actually like to have help from the people we invited. Because as I'm moving the cups and glasses and dishes into the kitchen, I am remembering the people who sat in the various chairs or stood at the tables, and our conversations and laughter. As I wash the dishes, I am remembering the food and wine that fed our friends and fueled the merriment. It is a way of adding to my blessings, and being grateful.

I am now in the process of sorting and packing and clearing up after what could loosely be described as a very long party with all of you. And I am counting my blessings. It is easy for me, like many others, to get so caught up in what went wrong, that I can't see all the things that went right. I am pretty highly self-critical about my mistakes. So I am trying, right now, to remember all the blessings of my two years with you. And they are many.

The Worship Team blessed me recently by telling me some of the ways in which I had blessed them. Some of those blessings were very personal, some were about the team, and some were about the church. I find it a blessing, as a minister, to be able to bless others in several spheres, working with individuals, groups, and the church as a whole.

We all have the capability to bless those around us – family and friends, co-workers, church communities, neighbors, and even strangers.

Some years ago, there was a small group of women in Anchorage calling themselves the Parking Fairies who, dressed in tutus and fairy wings, would put coins in the downtown parking meters that were about to run out of time. (The Anchorage Parking Authority had stiff fines for expired meters.) The City actually made this practice illegal, which is when I became an unofficial parking fairy. Today, I routinely overpay parking meters for the time I need, and drop coins into expired meters for others. It is a form of 'paying it forward' that I enjoy.

A wise person once said, that, "The religious person is a grateful person, and the grateful person is the generous person." The point, in paying it forward, is to be so aware of the ways that you've been blessed, that you want to share that with others. The world is full of beautiful and marvelous things and people. The trick, in living a life of blessing, is to notice them, and recognize them for the blessings they are.

May you find that that this month is filled with blessings for you, and may you be a blessing to those around you.

With love and appreciation for all the blessings you have given me,
Beatrice

Our Spiritual Exercise:

As mentioned in the introduction, noticing our blessings moves us to pass those blessings on others. Giving and receiving blessings are deeply intertwined. This month, you are invited to pick from one of two spiritual exercises. Both offer the chance to explore more deeply this connection between giving and receiving.

Come to your small group prepared to talk about which option you picked and why you were drawn to that option over the other.

OPTION A:

Pay It Forward

Many of us are likely familiar with the idea of “paying it forward” rather than simply “paying it back.” To pay someone back for a blessing or gift accomplishes little more than evening the score. The concept of paying it forward changes everything. Suddenly the blessings in our life are sources of abundance rather than sources of debt. This spiritual exercise invites you to tap into these sources of abundance.

Spend a few days assessing the major blessings in your life. You will notice pretty quickly that some of your blessings are “just sitting there”—i.e. they are feeding you but are far from having their potential tapped out. The key is to identify blessings that can and should be spread beyond the circumference of your personal experience. It may be a favorite trail in the woods that you share with a friend. If you’re an artist, you may take a child under your wing and stimulate his love of color and light the same way someone once did for you. Maybe you’ve been helped through tough times and learned a lot because of it. If that’s the case, then who in your life is going through tough times now and needs the blessing of being able to talk to someone who has “been through it before”? The options are endless. We can pass on and pay forward wisdom, wealth, support, passion and even the love of simple things—like gardening, skiing or music.

The point is to get so in touch with the way you’ve been blessed that you can’t help but want to spread that blessing around.

OPTION B:

Give Or Receive?

This exercise asks you to wrestle with a question: At this particular moment in your life, are you more in need of receiving blessings or giving them?

Clearly we should be in the business of both in giving and receiving, but there are times in our lives when one needs to take center stage. There also times when we’ve leaned way too far in one direction and need to tilt back. For instance, maybe you’ve been so committed to a social justice cause lately that there’s no room left to go for a jog in the woods, see a movie or read that latest detective novel everyone’s been talking about. Or maybe your challenge is more complicated. It’s one thing to make time in your day for walk in woods; it’s quite another thing to feel that life is stingy or let you down. You may hunger for a blessing from life but not know how to get it. If so, take sometime this month to figure that out. Maybe you hunger for the blessing of a relationship but find yourself alone. How could

you put yourself in a better position for the blessing of a new relationship? Or how can you be filled in other ways? Or even, how can you notice that you are already being filled in other ways?

And then there are those of us who feel plenty full. If this describes you, maybe at this particular moment your challenge and need is to spread the blessings around. If so, see spiritual exercise A!

The major challenge of this exercise is personal discernment. We rarely take the time to assess this sacred balance between giving and receiving blessings. You might be surprised about where that assessment leads you.

Questions To Live With:

As always, don't treat these questions like "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find the one that "hooks" you most. Then let it take you on a ride. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into-- and break open--your ordinary thoughts. And then come to your Soul Matters meeting prepared to share that journey with your group.

1. At what age were you best at noticing the blessings around you?
Have you gotten better with age? Or worse?

2. Have you ever missed a blessing in a curse?
Are you missing it right now?

3. Are you good at receiving blessings?
One of our facilitators writes, "There are two aspects of blessing: the giving and the receiving. To receive a blessing we must be vulnerable in the experience of kindness." Are there any blessings you are missing out on right now because you are hesitant to be vulnerable?

4. Do you believe you are a blessing?
We talk most often about giving and receiving blessings. But it's another thing entirely to believe that we are a blessing. This has nothing to do with hubris or seeing yourself as successful. It's about owning your uniqueness and loving who you are. Christians say that we've already earned grace without having to do a thing. Many UUs prefer to talk about inherent worth. But we agree that all the proving, striving, achieving and competing to earn acceptance is a waste of time and a drain on the soul. Does this task of accepting yourself as a blessing come easy for you? Or are you still a bit too hard on yourself and imagine it as something you still have to earn?

5. Who around you needs help finding their song?
A father shares that his "greatest life's accomplishment" was helping his son discover his love of skiing. After weeks of teaching his son the basics, his son was finally able to make it down the hill on his own. Halfway down, the father noticed that his son was singing. "I realized in that moment," said the father. "that I had helped my son find his song." There are people all around us who need help finding their song. Has life placed anyone in your path who needs this unique blessing? Are you even aware that this is being asked of you?

6. Are you better at noticing some blessings than others?

Some of us are good at noticing the simple things. Others of us never fail to notice the blessings of nature, but overlook the blessings from people. Some of us go out of our way to tell strangers they made our day, but somehow never get around to saying thank you to our spouses or children. Where do you have a “blessing blind side”? And how do you plan to widen your view?

7. Do your words bless others?

One of our facilitators writes, “My Mom often told us to consider our words before offering an opinion. Her mantra was: “Are your words kind and helpful? If both adjectives do not apply, keep the thought to yourself!”” Are there any words that have fallen from your lips lately that you need to go back and turn into a blessing?

8. Do you see neutrality where blessing should be?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” Howard Zinn, renowned activist and professor, was fond of saying, “You can’t be neutral on a moving train.” We see it all the time – in others and in ourselves: people have the chance and the power to offer a blessing in the face of suffering, but they settle for passivity instead. Often there are good reasons. We are not capable of taking on every injustice or saving every hurting individual that crosses our path. And yet...

9. What is “working” in your life?

Buddhist teachers encourage their students to pay attention to what is “working” in their lives. This is a unique take on noticing the blessings around us. So often we zero in on what is broken or stuck in our lives. But the truth is, most things in our lives are working so well that we should be utterly amazed. What might you do today to be utterly amazed by what is working?

** ** *

Recommended Resources:

As always, this is not “required reading.” We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started--and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to “live a life of blessing.”

First Thoughts:

The following are initial reactions to this month’s theme by some Soul Matters facilitators. As always, their willingness to share is a gift, as it helps stimulate and expand our thinking!

There are two aspects of blessing: the giving and the receiving. To receive a blessing we must be vulnerable in the experience of kindness. To accept a blessing, we must be able to sit in the presence of awe.

I’ve been surprised, since I’ve become a minister, just how often people ask me for a blessing for themselves, their relationship, their child, home, dog. I’ve come to realize that it is simply an invitation for everything good in the world to be focused in one direction, for one brief moment.

When I was 16, I was a foreign exchange student to Granada, Nicaragua. (It makes me wonder what would happen if we all...) imagined, just for a day--heck, if you last an hour you're doing great--that we were a foreign exchange student from (any less privileged country) living for a year in the United States, specifically your home town. You wake up in a ROOM with WALLS, a ceiling, a ROOF, in a BED with a DOORWAY. You go to a BATHROOM with LIGHT, a TOILET, running WATER, TOILET PAPER!, TOWELS.... You pick your favorite fragrance of SHAMPOO, SOAP... MORE GIANT TOWELS.... Every inch of your life becomes an incredible blessing!

I want to see the small blessings; we have opportunities with every breath: the dog who licks my hand when I’m feeling down, the car problem that doesn’t manifest until we arrive home from that big trip, the friend who

recognizes she’s just bitten my head off & acknowledges it with an apology, the inspired idea that, when shared, many benefit from

I am looking forward to this month as a time to reflect on ways we can be a blessing to others – how we can bring kindness, helpfulness, respect, and good will to those in our lives – even on the periphery. Sometimes we have to go out of our way, but often an everyday gesture or word of encouragement can be a blessing. Sometimes silence is a blessing – my Mom often told us to consider our words before offering an opinion – “Are your words kind and helpful? If both adjectives do not apply, keep the thought to yourself!” It’s worthwhile to consider when an intended blessing might not be received as such ... (back @ humility, huh?)

There are the “inside out” blessings: the tragedy that offers a lesson and an opportunity to rise to the occasion to become Who You Want To Be. Years ago I broke with a group of friends with whom I no longer shared personal values and I found my self-respect take a growth spurt and developed new friendships where honesty, humility and respect blossomed. After not being my best self as a caregiver to one elderly relative, another one has come along and I have the opportunity to become that better self again.

I guess after plan A fails, I need to remember there's a whole alphabet.

Other Wise Words:

“Despite all the darkness, human hope is based on the instinct that at the deepest level of reality some intimate kindness holds sway. This is the heart of blessing. To believe in blessing is to believe that our being here, our very presence in the world is the first gift; the primal blessing.”

- **John O’Donohue,**
- **Blessing the Space Between Us**

“Nowhere does the silence of the infinite lean so intensely as around the form of a newly born infant...Once we arrive, we enter into the inheritance of everything that has preceded us; we become heirs to the world. To be born is to be chosen. To be created and come to birth is to be blessed.

- **John O’Donohue,**
- **Blessing the Space Between Us**

An early-morning walk is a blessing for the whole day.

- **Henry David Thoreau**

Humor is mankind's greatest blessing.

- **Mark Twain**

To find one real friend in a lifetime is good fortune; to keep him is a blessing.

- **Baltasar Gracian**

Change, like sunshine, can be a friend or a foe, a blessing or a curse, a dawn or a dusk.

- **William Arthur Ward**

"If you identify your greatest weakness and study it until you turn it into your greatest strength, you will discover what no one else has discovered. And other people will think you're a genius."

- **Feldenkrais**

“No one can tame the tongue--a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.”

- **(James 3:8-10)**

“To whom much has been given, much will be expected in return.” **(Luke 12:48)**

Choose to Bless the World
By Rebecca Parker, UU minister

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will,
A moving forward into the world
With the Intention to do good.
It is an act of recognition,
a confession of surprise,
a grateful acknowledgment
That in the midst of a broken world
Unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.

There is an embrace of kindness
that encompasses all life, even yours.

And while there is injustice,
anesthetization, or evil

There moves
A holy disturbance,
A benevolent rage,
A revolutionary love,
Protesting, urging, insisting
That which is sacred will not be defiled.
Those who bless the world live their life
as a gesture of thanks
For this beauty
And this rage.

The choice to bless the world
can take you into solitude
To search for the sources of power and grace;
Native wisdom, healing, and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into community,
The endeavor shared,
The heritage passed on,
The companionship of struggle,
The importance of keeping faith,
The life of ritual and praise,
The comfort of human friendship,
The company of earth
The chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility waiting.

May I never again
take for granted a friend
objectify a stranger
be indifferent
to falling rain
falling leaves
falling snow
eat bread without thought
hear music without care
laugh without praise -
thus shall I ever give thanks.

**-Rev. Shannon Bernard,
Unitarian Universalist**

It is not what you first think.
There is no effort of will,
no firm resolve in the face
of this thing called living.
There is only paying attention
to the quiet each morning,
while you hold your cup
in the cool air
& then that moment
you choose to spread your love
like a cloth upon the table
& invite the whole day in again.

- Brian Andreas

Perhaps I should have said it just between
The wine and grace, the wishing and the blessing.
That was a time for words, when the scene
Had just begun, before we passed the dressing ...
I might have paused, looked up and all around
Into the eyes of each of them. A jest
Came easier, wit tossed into the sound
And lost. Between the stuffing and the pie,
Was yet another quiet moment when
I could have told them all. Instead, I sighed,
And let it pass. Just once before the end,
I should have cried, "Listen, before you go,
I love you. I just wanted you to know."

--Peter LaForge

We each have the choice in any setting to step back and let go of the mind-set of scarcity. Once we let go of scarcity, we discover the surprising truth of sufficiency. By sufficiency, I don't mean a quantity of anything. Sufficiency isn't two steps up from poverty or one step short of abundance. It isn't a measure of barely enough or more than enough. Sufficiency isn't an amount at all. It is an experience, a context we generate, a declaration, a knowing that there is enough, and that we are enough.

- Lynne Twist

Any time we proclaim something boring, what we really are saying is that we don't have patience for it. Rather than looking at ourselves for the source of the problem - and therefore the solution - we look at whatever is provoking the feeling and label that the problem. A lot of human experience can be considered boring. There are huge stretches of parenting, in relationships, in work, where "nothing" is happening, or at least nothing obvious. We can consider those moments boring and seek to alleviate that boredom with any distraction available. Or we can see such occasions as opportunities to tap into our patience and look more deeply... With attention, nothing is boring, even the most routine tasks. If you tune in to how the warm soapy water feels as you wash the pots and pans, how does that change the experience for you? Or weeding the garden, how does it feel to bend and stretch in the sunlight? What is the name of that gray bird with the crested head that suddenly appeared? This level of experiencing life isn't one that we tune in to, but it is one that can bear many riches of wonder at the very fact of being alive in this amazing world.

- M. J. Ryan

Online Videos, Music & Podcasts:

The Play- Peter Mayer
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADl_q5u9dlU&feature=relmfu

Everything is Holy Now- Peter Mayer
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiypaURysz4>

Bing Crosby & Rosemary Clooney - "White Christmas - "Counting My Blessings Instead of Sheep"
<http://www.songlyrics.com/berlin-irving/count-your-blessings-instead-of-sheep-lyrics/>

Gay Baby Short Film- unexpected blessings
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwIRY9Iri7U&feature=watch-vrec>

A Man in Nursing Home Hears Music From His Era - the blessing of music
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyZQf0p73QM>

On Being with Krista Tippett
The Body's Grace - the blessings of an imperfect body
<http://www.onbeing.org/program/bodys-grace-matthew-sanfords-story/185>

We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOXMjCnKwb4>

Books:

Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal
By Rachel Naomi Remen

The Grace of Silence
By Michelle Norris

Gilead
By Marilynne Robinson

Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now
By Rebecca Ann Parker, Robert Hardies

Articles

We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones
<http://old.richarddawkins.net/articles/91-to-live-at-all-is-miracle-enough>

Movies

Babette's Feast

The Wrestler

Fiddler on the Roof