

Gratitude and Remembrance

Jamaica Plain, November 21, 2004, Rev. Terry Burke

"To be a pilgrim" - our opening words for today's Thanksgiving service are from an old hymn based upon the words of the English Puritan separatist John Bunyan. "To be a pilgrim" - Pilgrims automatically make me think of our local Plymouth Protestant separatists, and their feast of Thanksgiving which, Unitarian Universalist style, we celebrate early today. When I was growing up in Michigan my local telephone exchange was "pi," or "pilgrim." I assumed that it referred to the Plymouth types; perhaps it did. As Unitarian Universalists, we are all pilgrims on our spiritual journeys to find meaning in our lives. Gratitude is the appropriate response for that gift, for that opportunity to find meaning. As we know all too well, our Plymouth Pilgrims feasted as an expression of gratitude and thanksgiving, sharing their bounty with the local Native Americans.

We heard a poem today by a pilgrim of gratitude, the late Nobel Prize winner Joseph Brodsky. Brodsky was born in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, in 1940. I can't imagine a much less auspicious time and place of birth. On my sabbatical I saw the mass graves of hundreds of thousands of Leningrad residents who died of starvation during the 1000 day Nazi siege which began in 1941. Brodsky started writing poetry as a teenager and soon became the spiritual heir to the great poet and dissident Anna Akhmatova. He was rewarded by the authorities with a sentence in a labor camp "in the North." Freed after a year and a half by an outpouring of Soviet and international protest, Brodsky was forced into Western exile. He was our country's Poet Laureate in the early 1990's and taught for many years at Mt. Holyoke College in western Massachusetts. A bi-sexual man, he died of complications of AIDS in his mid fifties. In our poem he recalls the troubles of his life, and then says, "Yet until brown clay has been stuffed down my larynx, only gratitude will be gushing from it." While on sabbatical during Easter 2001, five years after his death, I saw Brodsky's grave in Venice. I have never seen a grave covered with so many flowers. Clearly many, many people had brought them to his grave in gratitude for his friendship.

Many people find it hard to feel gratitude this Thanksgiving. Since the election I know people who've had broken limbs, bad backs, serious falls, strained necks. Many of us seem to be grieving with colds and flus. I remember the Stalinist term for intellectuals who failed to get with the program, "internal emigrants," people who remained in the country but rejected the party line.

A friend told me a story of her Buddhist teacher who spoke recently on gratitude. He expressed his concerns about the election, then said, 'I'm grateful that the election made me realize for the first time what it's like to be a minority, and what it's like to feel powerless and that no one will hear my voice. I'm grateful for that.'

Recently I heard our Unitarian Universalist president Bill Sinkford speak about the election and the need for us as Unitarian Universalists to reach out , to talk to others who may have different ideas from ours, and to share our vision. It helps to remember our history and traditions of dissent in such times, for example Nobel Peace Laureate Emily Greene Balch grew up in our church.

I once heard a Quaker scholar describe Unitarian Universalists as "the liberal establishment in exile."

An important aspect of gratitude is remembering. Gratitude and remembering are also Biblical values, as our other readings remind us. In the lesson from Deuteronomy (not simply a character from T.S. Eliot's *Cats*) the people of Israel are to remember their exile in Egypt, when they were aliens in a strange land. Israelites are to give first fruits of the harvest to a priest with the formula, "a wandering Aramean was my father." They are to remember that the land itself is a gift from God. Scholars point out that in Hebrew, the "wandering Aramean" suggests "vulnerability" and "destitution." The Israelites are then to have a feast of thanksgiving in which they share their bounty with the aliens in their midst. The writer of Deuteronomy has a special concern for aliens, orphans, and widows. How do we share the bounty of America with the alien, the marginalized, the non-persons in our midst? That's not a popular theme these days. Still, it touches my heart: my grandfather was an immigrant, and I worked as an illegal alien in Paris when I was

young. Twenty years ago I visited the refugee camps in El Salvador, where people often had seen loved ones raped and murdered, and they had lost their homes and farms. In one of the camps, the residents gave me a beautiful cross that they had made, painted with peaceful village scenes. They were grateful to be alive.

When we remember and are grateful, we are likely to share. Our sharing can take many forms, from turkeys for local families at Sojourner House to Guest at Your Table Boxes that help the work of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee around the world. A surfeit of wealth is a sign of spiritual poverty. None of us is Bill Gates of Microsoft or the Waltons of Wal-Mart, yet in our wide world we are the American elite.

Searching for meaning on our journeys as UUs, we are still pilgrims - we need to remember, to be grateful, and to share. How do we feel gratitude when we have trouble getting out of bed in the morning? A friend told me that she makes "gratitude lists," writing down 10 things she's grateful for. She told me, "Sometimes I can only write ten times, "I'm grateful that my cat is sitting on my lap."

Let's take a few moments now to make a personal gratitude list. You may want to write it down, or simply do it mentally. In good UU style, it can be a list of ten or five or however many you wish.

Will you tell us some of the things you are grateful for?

On our pilgrimage together, may we remember to be grateful, and remember to share our gifts.

Happy thanksgiving!

Reading:

Joseph Brodsky, May 24, 1980

(Translated by the author)

I have braved, for want of wild beasts, steel cages,
carved my term and nickname on bunks and rafters,
lived by the sea, flashed aces in an oasis,
dined with the devil-knows-whom, in tails, on truffles.
From the height of a glacier I beheld half a world, the earthly
width. Twice have drowned, thrice let knives rake my nitty-gritty.
Quit the country that bore and nursed me.
Those who forgot me would make a city.
I have waded the steppes that saw yelling Huns in saddles,
worn the clothes nowadays back in fashion in every quarter,
planted rye, tarred the roofs of pigsties and stables,
guzzled everything save dry water.
I've admitted the sentries' third eye into my wet and foul
dreams. Munched the bread of exile: it's stale and warty.
Granted my lungs all sounds except the howl;
switched to a whisper. Now I am forty.
What should I say about life: That it's long and abhors transience.
Broken eggs make me grieve; the omelette, though, makes me vomit.
Yet until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx,
only gratitude will be gushing from it.