



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**Gratitude:**  
**Common Sense Spirituality**  
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[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

Our Spoken Meditation this morning was “A Good Day” by David Steindl-Rast. Many parts of this poem resonate with me. In particular, I appreciate Steindl-Rast’s emphasis that this day and each and every new day — down even to the arising and passing away of each new present moment — each day is *given to us*. And I can hear that “givenness” in the larger sense that each new day and moment is already now and *here*; it is an accomplished “*given*”—a *fact*.  
**Our choice about that “given” is how we will respond.**

Here in the D.C. Metro area, we have a higher-than-usual concentration of “Type A,” highly motivated, *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) personalities. Steindl-Rast is here inviting us to experiment with a softer way of being in the world. **What would it feel like *not* to seize the day, but instead, to *receive* the day as a given, as a gift?**

That notion of receiving the day is also one among many insightful perspectives on what it can look like to practice Sabbath once a week by giving ourselves permission to be fully “on vacation” or holiday, fully disconnected from technology and work, and instead, fully connected to the non-technological here and now.

Our Transcendentalist forebear Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden* that, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately.... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life....” On one hand, “Yes!” We must resist living “lives of quiet desperation.” On the other hand, **never ceasing to “seize the day” is a recipe for exhaustion and burnout.**

And the upcoming holiday season is a prime opportunity to practice a different way of being in the world.

For now, it's appropriate that one collection of David Steindl-Rast's essays is called Common Sense Spirituality. As The New York Times has said about Thanksgiving, "**The most psychologically correct holiday of the year is upon us...** Cultivating an 'attitude of gratitude' has been linked to better health, sounder sleep, less anxiety and depression, higher long-term satisfaction with life and kinder behavior toward others, including romantic partners." And although there is also deep wisdom in more complex, esoteric spiritual practices around gratitude, I appreciate Steindl-Rast's emphasis on gratitude as a simple, accessible, "common sense" spiritual practice available to us anew each day and moment. Consider how focusing on the things we *hate* (our sources of anxiety, enervation, and alienation) feels starkly different in our bodies than focusing on what we are *grateful for*, what makes us feel loved, energized, connected, and fully alive.

The singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer has written:

Every night before I go to sleep,  
I say out loud,  
Three things that I am grateful for,  
All the significant, insignificant  
Extraordinary, ordinary stuff of my life.  
It's a small practice and humble,  
And yet, I find I sleep better,  
Holding what lightens and softens my life,  
Ever so briefly at the end of the day.  
Sunlight and blueberries,  
Good dogs and wool socks,  
A fine rain,  
A good friend,  
Fresh basil and wild phlox,  
My father's good health,

My daughter's new job,  
The song that always makes me cry,  
Always at the same part,  
No matter how many times I hear it.  
Decent coffee at the airport,  
And your quiet breathing,  
The story she told me,  
The frost patterns on the window,  
English horns and banjos,  
Woodthrush and june bugs,  
The smooth glassy calm of the morning pond,  
An old coat  
A new poem  
My library card  
And that my car keeps on running  
Despite all the miles,

And after three things,  
More often than not,  
I get on a roll  
And just keep on going  
Keep naming  
And listing,  
Until I lay grinning,  
Blankets pulled up to my chin  
Awash with wonder  
At the sweetness of it all.

I appreciate this poem from Newcomer because, as I shared with you two years ago in a Thanksgiving sermon on "[Savoring the Small Stuff](#)," one of my most consistent spiritual

practices for more than a decade has been, as I lie down to sleep, to review contemplatively the past day, and savor at least three moments from that day that I'm deeply grateful for. **Even when if it has been, for the most part, a “Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day,” there are always moments deserving of gratitude that help reorient me.**

For me, the benefits of this practice over time have been profound. As one of my mentors used to say, “Practice doesn't make perfect; it makes permanent.” What we choose to inculcate, repeat, rehearse, emphasize and focus our time and energy on really matters. As neuroscientists tell us, **“Your brain is like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones”** and “it typically takes about five positive interactions to overcome the effects of a single negative one” (41). Intentionally practicing gratitude and receiving the gifts of the day is a powerful choice that can shift our experience of the world.

This past week, I delivered a well-received, but quite nerdy 5,000 word paper at the annual Harpers Ferry Ministerial Study Group. And one reason I love being a UU is that we embrace academic perspectives on religion. But Thanksgiving is a time to remind ourselves that much more important than IQ — our Intelligence Quotient — is what psychologists call GQ. (And I don't mean *Gentleman's Quarterly*.) **GQ means “Gratitude Quotient”: what is your aptitude and capacity for being grateful for all the good things in your life?** Intentionally practicing gratitude first thing in the morning, throughout your day, and at the end of the day can be a good way of raising your GQ. Last week, a Rumi poem reminded me of this:

Today I wake up empty and frightened.  
Don't go to the door of the study and read a book.  
Instead, take down [a musical instrument],  
let the beauty of what you love be what you do.  
There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground,  
there are a thousand ways to go home again.

Or, Jane Kenyon says it this way in her poem “Otherwise”:

I got out of bed on two strong legs. It might have been otherwise. I ate cereal, sweet milk, ripe, flawless peach. It might have been otherwise. I took the dog uphill to the birch wood. All morning I did the work I love.

At noon I lay down with my mate. It might have been otherwise. We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks. It might have been otherwise. I slept in a bed in a room with paintings on the walls, and planned another day just like this day. But one day, I know, it will be otherwise.

For most of us, our lives are otherwise already in many ways. Buddhism reminds us of the impermanence of all things — which can be all the more reason to be grateful for what we already have now. David Steindl-Rast is a Christian monk, but he has been engaged for decades in Buddhist-Christian dialogue. (Those of you who have read Thich Nhat Hanh’s profound book Living Buddha, Living Christ may recall that the foreword is written by David Steindl-Rast.) And his call to gratitude is in many ways deeply Buddhist. Indeed, the opening lines of his first book on Gratefulness are: “This book is about life in fullness. It is about coming alive. I could summarize it in two words: **Wake up!**” (7). And, of course, our need to wake up to fuller awareness of all of life’s daily “givens” is reflected in the title given to Siddhartha Gautama upon experiencing Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree—“The Buddha,” which literally means, “The Awakened One” — the one who has *woken up* to the true nature of reality.

On the other hand, and still related to the perspectives of Buddhism, perpetually “seizing the day” can sometimes leave us rather too “mind-*full*” in the negative sense of “busyness” in which our minds are completely full, saturated, and overflowing. The upcoming holiday season is an opportunity then— as is each day and each moment — to **slow down and mindfully (in the best sense of that word) practice receiving—instead of always seizing—the full splendor of the gifts of each day in gratitude.**

Steindl-Rast writes that when we start to practice receiving the world in gratitude, we become increasingly aware of the “gratuitousness” of this life and this world (9): the sheer abundance of things for which to be grateful. And it is particularly poignant that Steindl-Rast’s poem “A Good Day” has been made into a short book that features photographs from Louis Schwartzberg. Before becoming a monk in the U.S., Steindl-Rast lived in Nazi-occupied Austria from ages 12 to 19. And regarding the common worldview that brought this poet and photographer together, Schwartzberg writes in the “Afterword” of A Good Day that,

My parents were Holocaust survivors who came to this country with nothing more than the clothes on their back. They met after the war came to America, moved to Brooklyn, had a family, and made a wonderful life.... Living under their roof, I saw how they were grateful for every blessing that came their way: sunshine, the most humble of foods, a roof over their heads, a job — and most importantly having children. To them, that was heaven on earth. Their thankful attitude had a profound affect on me. Through their eyes, I learned that even the smallest of things — a wildflower growing out of a crack in the sidewalk, and the ordinary things — another sunny morning, were just as important and just as deserving of attention as the once-in-a-while, extraordinary things. They are all worthy of celebrating through the lens of gratitude. (81)

In that spirit, I will close with a “A Thanksgiving Day Blessing” by Starhawk:

We give thanks for this good green earth and all that lives upon it.

Thanks for the air, the Great Breath that flows from leaf to lung and back again, sustaining life.

Thanks for fire, leaping flame and glowing hearth, warmth in the cold season.

Thanks for water, the life-renewing rain, the springs, streams, and rivers, the pools and lakes, the great oceans, womb of the first life.

Thanks for soil and for the web of life within it, tiny bacteria, threadlike fungi, slithering worm, that nourishes the grain, the wildflower and the redwood.

Thanks for the sun, for life-sustaining radiance showering down on us each day.

Thanks for the moon, for the waxing and waning light that drives the tides.

Thanks for our living bodies with their miraculous abilities to heal, to give and receive pleasure, to create new life.

Thanks for the food we eat: thanks to all the beings whose death sustains our lives.

Thanks to all who tend and grow our food, who plant and harvest, who bring it to us, who cook it for us with love.

Thanks for the great creative spirit that continues to invent, to play, to increase the diversity and beauty around us.

Thanks for the cycles of birth, growth, death and decay that come back around, always, to regeneration.

Thanks for the love and the community we share, for all the ways we express love, all the acts of kindness and compassion that weave us together.

Thanks to the courage of all who stand up for the earth and for justice, who against all evidence and all odds continue to believe in our power to make a better world.

Thanks to all who say yes — yes, we will do it!

We will renew the land and feed the hungry.

We will face down tyrants and set the prisoners free.

We will repair the damage and heal the wounds.

We will learn to live with open hands and open hearts, in balance and in peace.

We give thanks.