

**Savoring the Small Stuff:
Ordinary Gratitude as Spiritual Practice**

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

18 November 2012

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland

frederickuu.org

*This morning
the beautiful white heron
was floating along above the water*

*and then into the sky of
this one world
we all belong to*

*where everything
sooner or later
is part of everything else*

*which thought made me feel
for a while
quite beautiful myself.*

—Mary Oliver, “Poem of the One World”

As I was preparing the final draft of this sermon on gratitude, I conveniently stumbled upon a *New York Times* article that echoes many of my themes. Regarding Thanksgiving, the article’s lede declares, “**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.”¹ But a precondition for reaping these benefits is making the time and space in your life to *notice* those thing for which you are — or should be — grateful. And I’m going to be inviting us this morning to consider someways that we can be more intentional about noticing the parts of our lives for which we are most grateful and least grateful.

¹ John Tierney, *The New York Times*, “A Serving of Gratitude May Save the Day” (November 21, 2011), available at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/22/science/a-serving-of-gratitude-brings-healthy-dividends.html?_r=0.

I. Noticing

Douglas Burton-Christie is a theology professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. He has written about the shift that happened when his daughter was three years-old and started preschool. During the first years of his daughter’s life he spent most days with her. He knew what her day was like. He was present to share her highs and lows, her joys and despairs. But when she began to spend a large portion of each day at preschool and he would ask that classic question “What did you do today?” the only response he could elicit was at most a short list of activities. (Some of you may have experienced this phenomenon with your children and teenagers.)

To circumvent his daughter’s reticence to share, Burton-Christie invented a game called “Noticing.” Instead of asking, “What did you do today,” he started asking his daughter, “**What did you notice today?**” “Piece by piece, he learned about her world.” And because she demanded that he participate as well, he also “**found himself noticing a lot more.**”

What do you tend to notice in your daily life? And why? There are almost countless aspects of our moment-by-moment experience that we could notice at any given time — different sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, or emotions — but our personalities shape what stands out to us and what fades into the background. We can also get so busy that we fail to notice important details that are right in front of us. But **when some detail does break through and resonate with us — either positively or negatively — that may be an invitation to reflect on why that aspect stood out in particular.**

I sometimes think of the poet **Mary Oliver as one of the patron saints of noticing.** Many of her poems emerge from her longtime practice of rising early, walking through the woods around her house, and closely noticing the world around her. In her latest collection, [*4 Thousand Mornings*](#), one of the poems that resonated with me most strongly is titled “Poem of the One World.” She writes,

*This morning
the beautiful white heron
was floating along above the water*

*and then into the sky of
this one world
we all belong to*

*where everything
sooner or later
is part of everything else*

*which thought made me feel
for a while
quite beautiful myself.*

If Oliver had not been paying attention that morning, she might have missed the white heron. But on that morning — one of a thousand mornings — that heron spoke to her spirit. Its graceful transition from floating in the water to soaring in the sky invoked a tangible experience within her of being connected to what we Unitarian Universalists call “the interdependent web of all existence.”

So, one concrete way of cultivating gratitude is to be more intentional about noticing the world around you. And you can amplify the power of this practice — and keep yourself accountable to regularly noticing what you are grateful for — by making a commitment to share your daily gratitude (or gratitudes) with someone else, whether it is a child, a partner, or a friend. For example, I’ve seen many people this month on Facebook and Twitter, posting one gratitude per day for the month of November.

II. The Awareness Examen

In my own life, one of the most consistently helpful ways I have found for increasing what I notice is a practice called the Awareness Examen. The name of the practice, the Examen, sounds like examination (and the two words are etymologically related), but the ‘Examen’ to which I’m referring is spelled with an “en” at the end instead of an “in.” It derives from a Latin word that describes the pointer on a scale — what used to be called the “tongue on a balance.”

Picture the display on a non-digital scale immediately after you step on it. The arrow vibrates back and forth quickly until it hones in on the exact weight. The practice of the Examen is like the arrow on that scale. It helps you weigh the value of various aspects of your life.

The examen was first detailed by Ignatius of Loyola, the 16th century founder of the Jesuits, in his book *Spiritual Exercises*. I wouldn't necessarily recommend that book to you as the next book you should add to your reading list, but the examen has also been described in a much shorter and more accessible book by Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn called [*Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*](#). In short, the examen encourages you to respond to two questions at the end of each day either around the dinner table with your family or silently before you go to sleep: (1) **“What was my moment of greatest *consolation*?”** and (2) **“What was my moment of greatest *desolation*?”** (19).

Put more simply, you can ask “What am I *most* grateful for today?” and “What am I *least* grateful for today?” Over time, to add nuance, you can ask variations on your consolations such as, “Where did I feel most *connected*, most *alive*, most *energized*, or most *loved*?” Correspondingly, you can ask “Where did I feel most *isolated*, most *enervated*, or most *taken for granted*?” Many of our committees and groups here at UUCF bring their meetings with a contemporary form of this practice called a “Check-in.”

I started practicing the Awareness Examen almost a decade ago, and it is one of my most consistent spiritual practices. I've continued to practice it almost daily because I have found it so valuable. One of the most powerful and practical gifts of this practice is that it helps you *notice* those people, places, and activities that consistently bring you consolation. And **as you notice patterns of what consistently makes you feel connected, alive, energized, and loved, the invitation is to find ways to cultivate *more* of that person, place, or activity in your life.**

Conversely, as you practice the Awareness Examen, you may also notice that there is a pattern of certain people, places, or activities that consistently bring you desolation. **As you notice patterns of what consistently makes you feel isolated, enervated, or taken for granted, an invitation is to consider if you should find ways to have *less* of that person, place, or activity in your life.**

III. The Spiritual Practice of *Savoring*

This practice of noticing and choosing what is life-affirming over what is life-negating can seem particularly simple or obvious: structure your life to do *more* frequently those things that bring you consolation and do *less* frequently those things that bring you desolation.

However, we can often get so busy that we don't take time to notice even these simple patterns.

Even if I'm dead tired when I lay down to go to sleep, my practice — instead of counting sheep — is to gently think back through my day, and name those things I'm grateful for. It's honestly a great way to fall asleep: *savoring* those things you are most grateful for. In wake of the election, I spoke last week about the importance of savoring: when love wins, when peace prevails, and when the marginalized are included, we need to pause and savor that moment. In recent year, **savoring has become one of my most central spiritual practices**. To be clear about what I mean by savoring, it is giving yourself permission to *linger* over your moments of consolation and re-experience them with your whole self to help fully integrate those consolations into yourself.

The Awareness Examen is an old spiritual practice, dating back, as I said, at least to the 1500s. But contemporary neuroscience is confirming the benefits of savoring your consolations. Some of you may be familiar with the 2009 book [*Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom*](#) by Rick Hanson, a Ph.D. neuropsychologist, and Richard Mendius, a M.D. neurologist. One of the insights that has stayed with me from that book is the metaphor that, **“Your brain is like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones”** (41). These two scientists, along with many other researchers, are mounting an argument that those of our ancestors whose brains *noticed* negative — potentially threatening — experiences faster and remembered those potentially threatening experiences longer, were more likely to avoid predators, survive, and pass their genes on to the next generation. And when our ancestors were living in the wild with potential predators all around, having a brain that latched onto negative experiences like velcro — in an almost obsessive way — was an important survival tool. But in our contemporary world, this evolutionary inheritance can sometimes give us a neurotic focus on the negative over the positive. And we can wish our brain were more inclined to hold on to all those positive aspects of our life that we are grateful for. But **our**

sources of gratitude often slip away from our attention, like teflon, especially when we are under stress — which mimics that experience of being under threat from a predator — and we find ourselves fixating first and foremost on the negative.

Through my spiritual direction training, I had heard about savoring before reading *Buddha's Brain*, but I was nonetheless pleased to see Hanson and Mendius explicitly promoting the practice of savoring. To counterbalance our brain's tendency to be "like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positives ones," they write, regarding our consolations:

Savor the experience. It's delicious! Make it last by staying with it for 5, 10, even 20 seconds; don't let your attention skitter off to something else. The longer that something is held in awareness and the more emotionally stimulating it is, the more neurons that fire and thus wire together, and the stronger the trace in memory.

Focus on your emotions and body sensations.... Let the experience fill your body and be as intense as possible. For example, if someone is good to you, let the feeling of being cared about bring warmth to your whole chest.

Pay particular attention to the rewarding aspect of the experience — for example, how good it feels to get a great big hug from someone you love. Focusing on these rewards increases dopamine release, which makes it easier to keep giving the experience your attention, and strengthens its neural associations in implicit memory. (69-70)

So if you feel like your life is particularly un-Buddha-like at any given moment, then a practice of savoring the small stuff — the simple, ordinary parts of your life that you are grateful for — is a way of cultivating a more Buddha-like brain.

IV. Ordinary Gratitude

Personally, when I'm walking my dogs around the neighborhood, I often take a deep breath, and savor the view of the surrounding vistas. Mountains speak to my spirit in the same way that heron spoke to Mary Oliver. And the many break-taking views all over Frederick are

one of the many reasons I am grateful to live here. I try to savor these views many times each day.

Every time I walk out the front doors of UUCF and across the parking lot to my car, I similarly try to take a deep breath and savor the many reasons that I am grateful to work here: the opportunity to spend my life joining all of you in promoting and living out the principles of Unitarian Universalism and diving deeply in all six sources of UUism.

Each morning when I get up, I usually find that Magin has already made breakfast for me. I try to pause and savor Magin's gift of embodying her love through concrete acts like cooking.

Speaking more broadly, despite the diversity within Unitarian Universalism, many of us can agree about the importance of savoring that first cup of coffee or tea in the morning. Along these lines of slowing down and savoring each bite of our meals, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk has written an entire book titled [*Savor: Mindful Eating, Mindful Life*](#). Among many practices, he recommends, **setting down your utensil between bites to give yourself an opportunity to truly savor each mouthful.**

Here in the developed world, where it can be easy to take simple conveniences for granted, we can sometimes forget to savor even the simple pleasure of taking a hot shower. Savoring can be a way of transforming a shower from a chore you have to do to before your first appointment of the day into an experience of **how pleasant, relaxing, and relaxing a cascade of warm water can be.** And in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, those of us who lost power received a reminder to be grateful and **savor the remarkable fact that most days we can flip a switch and produce light and heat.**

To note one further invitation for gratitude and savoring, the Sufi mystic Rumi has a challenging line in his poem "Breadmaking" that says, "**The way you make love is the way God will be with you.**"² To keep this sermon G-rated and child-friendly, suffice it to say, that is an invitation to slow down, and truly savor those people, places, and activities that bring us the greatest consolation.

² Coleman Barks, [*The Essential Rumi*](#), New Expanded Edition, 185.

IV. Gratitude as a *Practice*

Of course, all this talk about gratitude and savoring is easier said than done. Cultivating ordinary gratitude, noticing our consolations and desolations, and savoring them are all *practices* that happen over time. As with practicing the piano, practicing basketball, or practicing yoga, method and frequency matter. As you've heard me say before, quoting one of my swim instructors, "Practices doesn't necessarily make perfect, but it does make *permanent*." If you are sloppy with your swimming strokes, you may find that your lazy stroke has become your unconscious way of swimming – even in competition. The same rules apply with practicing a piano piece, honing your free throw shot, or trying to do a yoga pose correctly. **Practice makes permanent by ingraining habits that are difficult to break.** And so it is with gratitude. Even though our brains are "like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positives ones," the more we *notice* our consolations and give ourselves permission to *savor* what we are grateful for, the more we can inculcate a groove of gratitude even in our gratitude-resistant, Teflon-like brains.

If gratitude is a practice that we are invited to practice everyday, then the holiday season is like the World Series of practicing gratitude. And on Thanksgiving Day, when many of us will be spending time with family, we are presented with a particularly fruitful time to remember that our brains are "like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positives ones." Our family members are often simultaneously some of the people we are most grateful for and the ones who can trigger our worst selves most easily. As was said at a recent training a few of us attended for our Pastoral Care Team here at UUCF, **"Your family members are the ones who can most easily press your buttons because they are the ones that sewed on your buttons!"**

The *Buddha's Brain* researchers have noted that, "in relationships, **it typically takes about five positive interactions to overcome the effects of a single negative one**" (41). So if being around your family is particularly challenging, an invitation is to try to carve out some time each day you will be around extended family to savor what you are grateful for as a way of compensating for those accompanying desolations. That may involve journaling or a really long walk to get some perspective if familial strife hits a peak.

Application

For this morning, with the potential stress and joy of Thanksgiving still a few days away, I would like to invite you to spend a short time practicing the art of savoring. In a few moments, I'm going to ring the bell, and invite you to ask yourself, "What am I grateful for?" Then, pause in the silence, and *listen*. After about a minute, I'll ring the bell again. During the silence in between, allow yourself to be potentially surprised about what emerges for you as a source of gratitude.

And as you do so, remember the guidance from *Buddha's Brain*: "Make [your consolation] last by staying with it for 5, 10, even 20 seconds [or longer]." Savor this source of gratitude with your whole self. "Focus on your emotions and body sensations.... Let the experience fill your body and be as intense as possible."

What are you grateful for this morning?

What do you need to savor?