

Grace, Gratitude, God?
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Count your blessings.
You've heard that phrase.
Count your blessings.
Literally, count them.

I have two wonderful children.
I'm in the best physical health of my life.
I have a job I love 90% of the time.
I get to work with five fantastic employees at the church.
That's nine so far, and I'm just getting started.
I haven't started listing my friends, mentors,
the way the sun glistens, even in the cold, off the river,
the joy of music,
the chance to read and hear great stories, that expand
the imagination and reach the heart,
or the most basic, most essential blessing of all:
to simply be alive; to breath the air and walk the earth
and have this brief moment to exist.

Count your blessings.
Go ahead.
Think of at least five things that you're grateful for in
your life.
You can use some of the things I named, if that works for
you.
They can be little things or big things.

You can do this.

. . .

Doesn't that feel good?

To remind ourselves that we have been given grace — blessings, some of which are unearned and undeserved, offered freely to everyone;

others we acknowledge have come about in part because of our own work,

are sustained by our effort — in part — but also not our own doing;

I have participated in the existence and sustaining of my children, for example,

and of my friendships,

but they exist apart from me, and the blessing of their presence

is not controlled by me.

These blessings, these graces - we have been given so much to be glad for.

Doesn't it feel good?

It's so easy to focus on what's wrong, what's broken - and I'm going to get to that in a moment, this isn't going to be a pollyanna sermon,

I'm going to get to that,

but I'm so tired of cynicism I can't stand it.

Not just out there in the world,

I'm tired of the cynicism in my own heart.

I don't want to focus on the problems, I want to count
the blessings —
because there is so much to be thankful for.
The generosity of so many of you, who give of your time
and money and love,
the kindness of friends and strangers,
the beauty of the earth - the beauty of the earth, just
right there for us,
so much to be thankful for.

Miester Eckhard, the mystic, said that if the only prayer
you ever say is "thank you"
that will be sufficient.

When you stop and really say thank you,
when you let the true spirit of gratitude into your heart,
well, I don't know about you, but I want to sing.
We give thanks today for this time we share,
sing a song of gladness for this day, this life, this
morning,
once more the gift is given.
I think thanks should be sung, so you feel it from your
toes to your fingertips,
don't let it just be an intellectual assent,
feel it,
sing praise for the gifts of life.

In northern West Africa, the Mandingo and Malinke
people sing praises,

don't just count your blessings, sing them, sing thank
you, thank you,
Kaanamajoo.
Thank you.

Anthem: Kaanamajo

Thank you.
So much to be grateful for.
So many graces which come to us, if we but have eyes to
see and ears to hear.
If our heart is but open, so much that comes to us.

But I promised this wouldn't be a pollyanna sermon.
Because I know, you know, the truth.
It ain't all biscuits and gravy.
Is it?

When despair for the world grows in me,
says Wendell Berry,
I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his
beauty in the water,
rest in the grace of the world,
but let's not skip the beginning too quickly:
when despair for the world grows in me.

There's a bittersweet nature to thanksgiving, isn't there?
We sing our thanks - for this food we share.
For this bounty.
We celebrate the harvest.

Psalm 65 is listed in my bible as “thanksgiving for harvest”

It sings,

“Praise awaits you, our God,
You who answer prayer,
You care for the land and water it;
you enrich it abundantly.

The streams of God are filled with water
to provide the people with grain,
for so you have ordained it.

You crown the year with your bounty,
and your carts overflow with abundance.

The meadows are covered with flocks
and the valleys are mantled with grain;
they shout for joy and sing.

And, you know, sometimes, yes:
I want to sing praise to the holy, to the god of my
understanding,
but then these words trip me up.
“For so you have ordained it.”

But what about when the streams are not filled with
water?

What about when the people have no grain?
Has God ordained that, too?

I had to go all the way to Psalm 65 to find one about
thanksgiving,
because most of them begin with Lament.
My God, my God, why hath you forsaken me?

The Psalmists knew full well that thanksgiving can be
bittersweet.
That when you open your heart to gratitude,
you open your heart to sorrow, too.
When despair for the world grows in me.
When we feel forsaken.

What then?
How are we supposed to say Thanksgiving, how are we
supposed to sing the god of grace and glory —
or, if you prefer, take God out of it —
how are we supposed to sing at all, be glad at all,
when our hearts break?

When we are betrayed?
When we feel abandoned, alone?
When our life goes off the rails, though our own actions
or the actions of others,
or just circumstances, just because that's the way it is
sometimes?

How are we supposed to sing praise to grace,
how are we supposed to celebrate the gifts of life,

when war rages, when violence rends, when sorrow swells?

What grace is this?

What goddamn grace is it, that leaves such wounds as these?

We are here now at the central question of religion. The eternal, essential question that religion, be it religion with or without a higher power, seeks to answer.

But I cannot give you the answer.

There is no answer.

There is life.

There is truth.

But there is no answer.

The truth is, there is sorrow, and there is joy. And sometimes it is a grace to feel the pain of life. Sometimes it is grace - surprising grace - to weep, to just weep and let it go, and out of that valley, to rise again, not in ignorance of suffering, but in response, to live compassion, and with joy when it comes, as well, to appreciate life, for we know all too well its precious nature.

There is no answer.

There is practice.

There is life.

When you count your blessings, when you see the grace
of life,

you can handle the hard parts with more of your own
grace, with more strength, courage, and love.

I can testify, my friends, for I have been down in the
valley,

and I have been to the ridge above the valley -

and the path goes up and down again,

and it isn't progress, onward and upward forever,
some days suck, and bad,

but some moments are glory, are life, are joy.

There's no answer, there's practice.

We give thanks for the food we share, we sing.

The great Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn is very ill.

He lies in a Thai hospital, after suffering a brain
hemorrhage.

He has, in his words and actions, been such an
inspiration and a comfort to millions.

And he would remind us that life is precious, so that we
should rejoice in the everyday moments,

and be gentle and compassionate with each other.

If you are looking for a grace that you can say over your
Thanksgiving meal,

you can use this one,

from Thich Nhat Hahn,
verses for eating mindfully.

Listen to the words, the motion from thanksgiving to
compassion to love.

1) Looking at your Empty Plate

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> My plate, empty now,

> will soon be filled

> with precious food.

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> 2) Looking at Your Full Plate:

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> In this food,

> I see clearly the presence

> of the entire Universe

> supporting my existence.

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3) Contemplating your Food

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> This plate of food,

> so fragrant and appetizing,

> also contains much suffering.

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> 4) Beginning to Eat

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> With the first taste,

> I promise to offer joy.

> With the second,

- > I promise to help relieve the suffering of others.
- > With the third,
- > I promise to see others' joy as my own.
- > With the fourth,
- > I promise to learn the way of non-attachment and equanimity.

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- > 5) Finishing your Meal

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- > The plate is empty.
- > My hunger is satisfied.
- > I vow to live
- > for the benefit of all beings.

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- > 6) Drinking Tea

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- > This cup of tea
- > in my two hands-
- > Mindfulness is held uprightly!
- > My mind and body dwell
- > in the here and now.

>

- > 7) Washing the Dishes

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- > Washing the dishes
- > is like bathing a baby Buddha.
- > The profane is the sacred.
- > Everyday mind is Buddha mind.

If you google the title, which is in your program, you'll find this.

You can use it for each stage of your meal - or something like it, for every meal.

I myself, this month of grace, have been trying to say a prayer before every meal.

Sometimes I forget.

I've also starting drinking tea - no more diet coke for me

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and while the tea cools, I open my heart and listen for the still small voice within -

the voice of the spirit, of God, I call it, sometimes,

maybe it's your own conscience, the wisdom of your heart,

of the earth, of the ancestors -

but when we give thanks for the everyday things, we sometimes connect with something more.

The sacred is the profane.

I said in the sermon blurb for today that I would give a theistic and an atheistic way to give thanks for graces, unearned gifts,

so here goes:

Say thank you.

That will be sufficient.

You don't have to identify to whom or what you are giving thanks.

It doesn't need an object.
It just needs a subject: you.

And when you give thanks,
you don't need to start with the big stuff.
Indeed I don't recommend it.
Start with the little things.
Be grateful for a cup of tea.
Be grateful for a friend who reaches out.
Be grateful for the day itself, for the new morning, the
gift given anew.
Start with the concrete, exact,
count your blessings, actually count them.

For Unitarian Universalism, the sacred is in the everyday.
The holy - call it God or call it Life or call it Love or leave
it unnamed -
is discovered, is felt, comes to as grace not from the
outside but from the inside,
everything is holy now, everything is a sacrament,
we can say thank you, sing praise, say yes, to each
moment,
to the real world that is before us.

Here is the atheist grace, what you can say before you
eat,
not just Thursday but any time.
Ready?

"We give thanks for this food before us, for the earth our home and humankind our family. May it nourish our bodies and our lives."

Here is the theistic grace, what you can say before you eat,

not just Thursday but any time.

Ready?

"We give thanks for this food before us, for the earth our home and humankind our family. May it nourish our bodies and our lives."

I didn't slip up.

They're exactly the same.

If you want to add "We give thanks to you, God, for this food" you may.

It's fine.

But you don't have to.

God don't give a lick.

What matters is that attitude of thankfulness.

The spirit of gratitude.

The welcoming of grace - of the gift of life - into your being.

We exist!

Sing praise!

We breathe! We taste and touch and feel!

Sing praise!

We love and hope and weep with compassion for one another!

Sing praise!

Sometimes our heart breaks, because we are alive!

Sing lamentation, then sing praise!

Because we can get up again and rise to greet the day.

There is no answer.

This is only practice.

Accept the gifts of your life.

Accept them.

A compliment - just say thank you, and don't argue.

Someone loves you, let them.

You are caught up by the beauty of the snowflake, stop and watch it fall.

Accept it.

Is your life perfect?

What the hell does that even mean?

Who told you you would get whatever you wanted whenever you wanted it?

Seriously?

I know who told me that,
and they lied.

That is not the way the world works.

You get what you get and you don't throw a fit.

More than that:

you get what you get and you find what's beautiful in it,
you accept life as it comes,
you say thank you,
and out of gratitude, not resentment,
you live your best, most loving life,
and make the world better.

Do we have sorrow and pain?
You better believe it.
For some, these holidays are painful.
I know, my friends, I know all too well.
But it is our choice, what we take in to our soul.
If we have eyes to see and ears to hear,
Lo, lo, lo, the clouds of evil round us hide all that is
bright,
so may we have courage, grant us wisdom,
from the fears that long have bound us,
may our hearts be free.

With the first taste,
I promise to offer joy,
with the second taste,
I promise to try to relieve the suffering of others — of
myself —
with the third,
to see others' joy as my own
with the fourth,
to be a person of peace.

Count your blessings.

Count them.

1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

Keep going.

Don't be naive.

Hold too the suffering in your heart.

Move from your gratitude towards compassion and justice.

Toward love.

But don't forget your blessings.

Count them.

The every day, every moment things,

sing praise

for music, for food, for laughter, for hope,

for kindness,

this very particular act of kindness,

for that one smile, haphazard, which came your way,

for the person who made the coffee this morning,

for the stranger who held the door,

for the red-wing bird who sang his heart out and you got

to listen in,

for the friend who called you up in your time of need, just

to say they cared,

for the warmth of a hand in your hand, bound together,

sing praise,

don't forget to count your blessings.

1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

We sing our praises, our thanksgivings,
both sorrow and gladness we find now in our living,
we sing a hymn of praise to the life that we bear,
for all that is, for grace, given and received,
believers, skeptics, doubters, lovers of life, dreamers and
doers,
we sing our thanksgiving, we sing our praises,
not for the imagined world,
but for this real actual world,
as it is, sing praise, give thanks,
and go from here with the song of love and hope echoing
in your soul.
Let us sing together.