

## **“Two Words to Change Your Life”**

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
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### **Reading**

“Welcome Morning” by Anne Sexton

### **Sermon**

In December of 2007, John Kralik’s life hit an all-time low.<sup>1</sup> His law firm was losing money despite his working sixty hours a week all year without a break. He was going through a difficult divorce and living in a small, stuffy apartment where he often slept on the floor. His adult sons had grown distant and a romantic relationship that seemed to be a silver lining had just ended. It was in this time of bleakness that John went for a walk in the Angeles National Forest above Pasadena in California. Somewhere along the way, as John was reviewing all that was falling apart in his life, he heard a voice. It said: “Until you learn to be grateful for the things you have, you will not receive the things you want.”

Lost and tired, John sat down trying to catch his breath, full of wonder and confusion about this voice and its message. The voice seemed important, so he tried to make sense of it as he made his way back down out of the mountain. He remembered a gift his grandfather had once given him when he was a child - a silver dollar. His grandfather had promised that if John wrote him a thank you letter for the silver dollar, he would send him another one. John’s grandfather was true to his word. John then remembered the big stack of stationary he had sitting in his office and he came up with an idea. He would try to find one person to thank each day for the next year with a written note. In this way, John hoped, maybe he would start receiving more of what he wanted in life.

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<sup>1</sup> John Kralik, [A Simple Act of Gratitude: How Learning to Say Thank You Changed My Life](#) (Hyperion: 2010).

John Kralik recounts this entire journey in his book, *A Simple Act of Gratitude: How Learning to Say Thank You Changed My Life*.

Later this week, many of us will gather around tables with friends, family, or chosen family, for a day devoted to giving thanks. More than ever, I believe we desperately need this practice. Anxiety levels are high as we try to navigate the barrage of difficult news from all directions and at every hour of the day.

A year ago, there was a collective sense of shock at the results of the election, and since then we've been living through what what feels like an unprecedented time. Even with our efforts to resist policies that are harmful to our communities and planet, we have realized what a long haul it is, how deep the fractures are in our communities, and just how exhausting it all can be.

This is layered upon the personal challenges we each face in our lives as relationships are strained, finances are tight, and the darkening winter days are upon us.

So, we need this time of giving thanks. Thanksgiving as a holiday can be complex. The idealized version of a happy family gathered around a bountiful table of food is not the Thanksgiving that we all experience. And, the historical roots of the holiday are also more complicated than we sometimes acknowledge. The version of the mythical "first" Thanksgiving with pilgrims and native people happily breaking bread hides the complex and painful truth of that early colonial time.

Yet, the practice behind the holiday is crucially important to us now as we struggle to remember the gentle and life-affirming aspects of what it means to be human in this all-too dehumanizing time.

The Rev. Galen Guengerich of All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in New York City has argued that gratitude ought to be the defining religious discipline of Unitarian Universalism. Other religious traditions have hallmark disciplines - Islam is defined by the discipline of submission to the will of Allah, Judaism by obedience to the commands of God, and Christianity by love of God and neighbor. Guengerich posits that gratitude can be this discipline for Unitarian Universalism because, he says, "The discipline of gratitude reminds us how utterly dependent we are on the people and world around us for everything that matters."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/a-theology-gratitude>

Kralik's letters illustrate this reality. His first letter was to his son for a Christmas gift he received. Later, he began writing thank you notes to other people in his life - to his clients who paid their bills on time, to his daughter for just being who she is, to the barista at the coffee shop who made his drink, to the property manager who made sure his toilet got fixed.

Like Kralik, we are in a web of relationships with others who in big and small ways provide us with the care, the love, and the material things we need to survive.

This also extends to the natural world of course. One of the most comprehensive statements of our deep connection to the natural world is in the Thanksgiving Address, the central prayer and invocation of the Haudenosaunee (also known as the the Iroquois Confederacy).<sup>3</sup> The Thanksgiving Address names the role of each life-sustaining force in the natural world from Mother Earth to the waters to the fish, plants, food plants, medicine plants, animals, trees, birds, the sun, the stars. And, with naming and thanking each life-force, the idea is that one becomes spiritually tied to each of these forces in the natural world.

When I try to name all of the forces - human and otherwise - that make it possible for me to be here, the list gets incredibly long. It is also in many ways a simple list. Taking Anne Sexton's poem, I think about the hair I brush each morning - hair that is dark and straight like my father's and many ancestors before him. The fact that I can turn on hot water for a shower each morning. That breakfast and tea are on hand each morning. That I have a table, once owned by my now deceased and beloved father-in-law, to set my plate and cup upon each morning.

And, like Anne Sexton, I often forget to give thanks though I know there is much for which to feel grateful.

Gratefulness re-connects us with that sense of abundant enough-ness. The sense that what we need is here and the awe for all that conspires to make it possible to even be alive and here together on this precious, blue-green planet we call home.

There are many ways to actually practice a discipline of gratitude. Some of you may keep gratitude journals. Some of you may have a ritual of saying grace before meals. In the gift shop of a Catholic mission in California last year, I became enamored with a small jar with the words "blessing bowl" on it. I brought the bowl home, and, whenever I

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<sup>3</sup> <https://danceforallpeople.com/haudenosaunee-thanksgiving-address/>

can remember, we pull the blessing bowl out before dinner and each put a small sea shell into the bowl and name a blessing from the day - something we feel thankful for.

One of the practices I'm not as great at is writing actual thank you letters - this may be in part why I was so intrigued by John Kralik's book and journey.

For those of you who appreciate some scientific evidence, a recent study found that writing letters of gratitude can have mental health benefits.<sup>4</sup> The study involved nearly 300 adults who were all receiving counseling services at the time. They were divided into three groups. The first group was instructed to write one letter of gratitude to another person each week for three weeks. The second group was asked to write about their deepest thoughts and feelings about negative experiences. And, the third group did not do any writing activity.

What the researchers found was that compared with the participants who wrote about negative experiences or only received counseling, those who wrote gratitude letters reported significantly better mental health four weeks and 12 weeks after their writing exercise ended.

There were a couple other important observations the researchers made. One was that it didn't matter whether the participants actually sent their letters to their intended recipient. Only 23% actually sent their letters but they still benefited from the act of writing out their thank-you's. They also found that the positive effects of the gratitude letters didn't emerge immediately but took time. After one week, the groups didn't show significant differences in their levels of mental health but by four weeks out, differences were evident which were even more pronounced after twelve weeks. And, they found some evidence that this practice made neural pathways in the brain that made it easier to feel a sense of gratitude later.

I have never been part of a study like this, but I can speak from personal experience that it is often when I have lost track of those things and people for whom I am thankful that I start to sink a bit in my own mood and outlook on life. And, in contrast, when I remember to even just name to myself something that I am grateful for that I regain some perspective and find more meaning and joy in my life. And, when I actually do take the step of writing out my gratitude, I find myself feeling more deeply connected to others and to myself.

This isn't always the easiest discipline for any of us. And, there are certainly times when it is truly a challenge to give thanks - when life just keeps giving you lemons and nothing

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<sup>4</sup> <http://gratefulness.org/resource/gratitude-changes-brain/>

seems to be going right - when those you love are sick or dying, when you just can't seem to get back on emotionally or professionally or financially.

Even in these moments we can be reminded that we are utterly dependent on others and that there are simple ways we can give thanks. In his book, John Kralik called these "extreme" thank you's - thank you's that no etiquette book in the universe would ever require or suggest. For example, Kralik wrote one of these to his neighbors who had found his \$10 bill which had dropped out of his pocket and tucked it neatly under his front door.

Recently, I was leaving the house in a bit of a rush as we were running late and I was quickly trying to get Liam into his car seat. I began to drive down the road when I heard a loud thump and realized in that moment that I had left my coffee mug on top of the car and the mug was now on the side of the road. The mug was a gift and I felt some sadness and anger at myself to have been so careless, but we were late and I couldn't stop to go get it. Later on in the day, I walked up and down the road looking for it but couldn't find it. But, as we walked up the front lawn, I noticed it sitting there on the front step as if it had been intentionally placed. No note to say where it had come from. I thought about writing a generic thank you on Front Porch Forum but before I could do that I saw a message in my email inbox from a neighbor down the road. It said: "I am pretty sure that it was you driving the car with the travel mug on top yesterday...I was about to pull into N Park Dr and you were driving off towards town. I ran back and got it from the side of the road and put it on your porch steps. I hope you found it (and I hope my assumption was right — because why would you want a random stranger's travel mug?!?)"

I quickly wrote back to my neighbor to express my thanks. But, now I'm thinking a handwritten thank you letter would be much more appropriate.

I have to admit that actually writing thank-you notes is one of those things that feels important and that always gets pushed aside or forgotten amidst the mountain of other tasks.

In case this is true for you, I am inviting you to take a few moments to join in this practice with me this morning. At the ends of the pews, you will find blank thank you cards and pens. For the next few minutes, you are invited to think of someone in your life you can thank and to write them a simple letter. You don't necessarily have to

actually give this person the letter, but you certainly can if you want. And, I want to thank out loud, our Acting DRE, Liza, who helped create these cards.

[give everyone a few minutes to write their letter]

John Kralik's story ends in a very happily ever after way. He ends up becoming a judge in the Los Angeles court system. He repairs his relationships with his sons. He ends up with the woman he loves. He also ends up more aware of all the ways he is connected to the world around him and that he receives the generosity and care of others.

The lesson that I take from John Kralik's story isn't that giving thanks will make all your problems go away and lead to boundless prosperity and good fortune. The lesson I glean is that the discipline of gratitude reminds us of how we are bound to other people and that we live in a world not of our making. We are dependent on others in so many big and small ways.

So, while you think of it, may you paint a thank-you on your palm, lest it go unspoken, for this, this morning full of simple pleasures, this life full of care and tender moments.

Say "thank you." It may change your life.