

Soul Matters

A Kaleidoscope of thoughts, images, stories, poetry, and ideas to engage



May

What Does It Mean To Be A People Of BLESSING?

A Soul Matters facilitator writes, “I guess after plan A fails, I need to remember there's a whole alphabet.”

It's not just our friend who needs help remembering that “there's a whole alphabet” out there; it's all of us. We all get stuck in wanting things a certain way. We all, at times, focus so intently on the few things going wrong that we completely miss the dozens of things that are going right. Tunnel vision too often takes over our days.

For our Unitarian Universalist faith, this is the central tragedy of the human condition. We respect those who frame our problem as sin and tainted souls, but it's nearsightedness that our religion is most worried about. For us “a life of blessing” is less about securing eternal reward or forgiveness; it's more about widening our view.

And there's a lot at stake when it comes to this wider view. When the world seems stingy to us, we are stingy to others. Those who feel blessed have little trouble sharing blessings with others. Our tradition takes this calculus seriously. As UU minister, Rev. Don Wheat, puts it “The religious person is a grateful person, and the grateful person is the generous person.”

So this month the question in front of all of us is not simply “Do you notice the blessings all around you?” It's also, “How are the blessings in your life leading you to bless others?” There is indeed a whole alphabet out there. May we notice it, and help each other do the same.



This Soul Matters packet was created by Rev. Carie Johnsen at Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta, ME.

Thoughts within were gleaned from the Soul Matters Network, the UUC Resource Circle, and other sources. If you would like to share your experience and wisdom for future packets, please email minister@augustauu.org. To receive an electronic copy please email info@augustauu.org. To learn more

QUESTIONS TO WALK WITH



Below is a reflection and a list of questions to open the mind's gateway to reveal the wisdom that is right below the surface of our everyday ordinary lives. Pick one question, any, the one that grabs you and won't let go, then walk with it. Let your mind wander and wonder. Let the question percolate. Listen curiously to what surfaces. Live into the answers. Be surprised by what is discovered. Share what you learn with someone meet



- 1. Do you believe you are a blessing?** We talk a lot about giving and receiving blessings. It's another thing entirely to believe that we are a blessing. This has nothing to do with hubris. It's about owning your uniqueness. Our Christian friends say that we've already earned grace without having to do a thing. We UUs prefer to talk about inherent worth. But we agree that all the proving, striving, achieving and competing to earn acceptance is a waste of time and a drain on the soul. Does this task of accepting yourself as a blessing come easy for you? Or are you still a bit too hard on yourself and imagine it as something you still have to earn?
- 2. Has age helped or hurt? At what age were you best at noticing the blessings around you?** Have you gotten better as time has gone on? Or worse? What would improve your gaze?
- 3. What is "working" in your life?** Buddhist teachers encourage their students to pay attention to what is "working" in their lives. This is a unique take on noticing the blessings around us. So often we focus on what is broken or stuck in our lives. But the truth is, most things in our lives are working so well that we should be utterly amazed. So are you? Utterly amazed by what is working?
- 4. Are you ok with asking for a blessing?** Sometimes it is easier to offer a blessing rather than admit you need one yourself? What's getting in your way? Why not let others know your need?
- 5. Do your words bless others?** One of our facilitators writes, "My Mom often told us to consider our words before offering an opinion. Her mantra was: "Are your words kind and helpful? If both adjectives do not apply, keep the thought to yourself!" Are there any words that have fallen from your lips lately that you need to go back and turn into a blessing?
- 6. Are your high expectations blinding you to the blessing?** What if your standard for blessing was:
 - living with integrity, most of the time
 - loving your work, most of the time;
 - loving the people around you, most of the time;
 - loving yourself, most of the time.

In short, how would your life look different if you added that one simple phrase to all your assessments: "...most of the time"?

- 7. Do you taste it?** How do you take in the simple yet precious gift of food. Yes, literal food. Forget the metaphor of "nourishment." When was the last time you just enjoyed that apple? That cup of coffee? That holiness of warm butter on freshly baked bread? Why do we let this blessing slip pass us?
- 8. Have you given thanks for your work?** Writing about the blessing of work, poet John O'Donohue writes, "May you see in what you do the beauty of your own soul." This is not always the case. It isn't always an option. But sometimes it is. Sometimes we have the power to pick work that reflects the beauty of our soul. Is that true for you? Do you want it to be?
- 9. How many mothers do you have?** Mother's Day, at its best, reminds us that many have mothered us. How are you planning to thank all of those who have helped "give birth" to you?

Spiritual Practice - Deepening Experiences

OPTION A:

Honor Your *Also-True* Story...with Art

Soul Matters minister Rev. Gretchen Haley writes:

“Each week in worship [in some way], I recognize and honor our “tangled blessing,” that is, the way that life tends to arrive not distinctly as joy, or grief, but rather all mixed up. So often people tell me about the ways that in the midst of their cancer treatments, they knew love and community better than they'd ever known their whole life. Or, how their love for their new baby is mixed with grief for their loved one who has died and won't be able to meet that child.

In my own life, I know this truth all too well: my children are adopted from foster care, which means that one mother's worst day became another mother's -- that is, my -- best day. ... I think that somehow, amazingly, the greatest blessing can come in the midst of the most terrible loss. It doesn't justify the pain or make it ok. It simply makes joy also possible, love also possible. And sometimes our task is simply to be awake and with a grateful heart to see the also-true story of the good in the midst of this grief -- the blessing in the midst of suffering.”

This month you are invited to honor your own “tangled blessing” or “also-true story” with art. Take time this month to revisit and meditate on your tangled blessing and then find a way to represent what it gave or taught you through some form of artistic expression: capture it in a poem, write it up as a series of journal entries or a letter to your future self, create a painting, pull together a photo gallery on your computer. The goal is to move this experience from memory to embodiment, so you have something more tangible to remind yourself of it in the days ahead.

OPTION B:

Don't Just Look at It—Taste It!

Psychologist and author [Rick Hanson](#), writes, “Scientists believe that your brain has a built-in ‘negativity bias.’ In other words, as we evolved over millions of years, dodging sticks and chasing carrots, it was a lot more important to notice, react to, and remember sticks than it was for carrots. That’s because – in the tough environments in which our ancestors lived – if they missed out on a carrot, they usually had a shot at another one later on. But if they failed to avoid a stick – a predator, a natural hazard, or aggression from others of their species – WHAM, no more chances to pass on their genes.” This is bad news when it comes to noticing and holding on to the blessings of our lives. For instance, it often takes five good experiences to make up for a single negative one. Or as Hanson points out, “In effect, the brain is like Velcro for negative experiences, but Teflon for positive ones.”

Fortunately, we are also equipped with the simplest but most effective antidote: attention. Truth is, blessings abound. And all it takes is 20-30 seconds of attention to and attunement with a blessing for it to sink in.

So this month, start up a new relationship with your blessings. Don't just notice them; notice them longer. Or as Hanson puts it, “It’s like sitting down to a meal: don’t just look at it—taste it!” You can do this in all sorts of ways: consciously pause and focus your attention, eat slower, look longer, keep a journal and jot down what happened, when and how it made you feel. It’s as simple as just not letting yourself get distracted and rushing on to the next urgent thing.

Come to your group ready to share how this practice of intentionally holding on longer altered your days and recalibrated that balance between our negativity bias and the blessings trying to sink in.



Other Wise

Perhaps I should have said it just between
The wine and grace, the wishing and the blessing.
That was a time for words, when the scene
Had just begun, before we passed the dressing ...
I might have paused, looked up and all around
Into the eyes of each of them.

A jest came easier, wit tossed into the sound
And lost. Between the stuffing and the pie,
Was yet another quiet moment when
I could have told them all. Instead, I sighed,
And let it pass. Just once before the end,
I should have cried, "Listen, before you go,
I love you. I just wanted you to know."

--Peter LaForge

The taste of food is not the result of my own effort. How wonderful is the miracle of taste! There is a mysterious interaction between the tongue, my nervous system and the quality of food itself. How this developed, I do not know; what the secret is, always escapes me. The taste of food floats the whole eating experience and gives to it a dimension of delight that joys the mind and gives to the whole being a sense of gentleness and benevolence. How can I say "Thank You" to God for food? By making the eating of food a blessed sacrament. By a self-conscious recognition of the source. By sharing my food with the hungry. By knowing that my food is a gift of which I am merely the trustee.

--Howard Thurman

We each have the choice in any setting to step back and let go of the mind-set of scarcity. Once we let go of scarcity, we discover the surprising truth of sufficiency. By sufficiency, I don't mean a quantity of anything. Sufficiency isn't two steps up from poverty or one step short of abundance. It isn't a measure of barely enough or more than enough. Sufficiency isn't an amount at all. It is an experience, a context we generate, a declaration, a knowing that there is enough, and that we are enough. -- Lynne Twist

Opening Words

Blessing that Meets You in Love

[It] should be noted
that this blessing
has come today
especially to tell you
it is crazy about you.
That it has been
in love with you
forever.
That it has never
not wanted
to see your face,
to go through this world
in your company.
This blessing thought
it was high time
it told you so,
just to make sure
you know.

-- Jan Richardson

Read the full poem here: <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/01/25/blessing-that-meets-you-in-love/>

Choose to Bless the World

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—
can be used to bless or to curse the world.

The mind's power, the strength of the hands,
the reaches of the heart,
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting
any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
bind up wounds, welcome the stranger,
praise what is sacred, do the work of justice, or offer love.
Any of these can draw down the prison door,
hoard bread, abandon the poor, obscure what is holy,
comply with injustice, or withhold love.
You must answer this question:

What will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world.

-- Rebecca Ann Parker

Closing Words

Nourish beginnings, let us nourish beginnings.
Not all things are blessed,
but the seeds of all things are blessed.
The blessing is in the seed.

-- Muriel Rukeyser