

Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax

Themed Church Magazine - October 2016

Blessings



Photo credit KimTurnerPhotos

Definition

blessing n.

- a beneficial thing for which one is grateful
- something that brings well-being
- a person's sanction or support.

synonyms: gift, good fortune, miracle, grace (*as in*, a prayer before meals), protection, favour, benediction

Table of Contents

A People of Blessing	2	Wise Words.....	8
Our Spiritual Exercise.....	3	Books.....	9
Your Question.....	6	Video & Podcasts.....	10
Articles.....	7	Movies, TV & Songs.....	10

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.



Despite all the darkness, human hope is based on the instinct that at the deepest level of reality some intimate kindness holds sway. This is the heart of blessing. To believe in blessing is to believe that our being here, our very presence in the world is the first gift; the primal blessing.

John O'Donohue, from *To Bless the Space Between Us*

Our Spiritual Exercise

Option A: #soulblessings

Soul Matters minister Rev. Claire Feingold Thoryn writes:

"If you go online to sites like Instagram or Twitter and search for the [hashtag "blessed"](#) (hashtag is sort of like adding a keyword to something), [you'll see] people, especially celebrities, will post something that is essentially bragging and add #blessed to attempt to make the post sound humble. Celebrity photos of the red carpet, huge diamond rings, champagne, and extravagant travel, all are apparently signs that the recipient is #blessed.

Lots of people use the hashtag in a mocking or ironic way, like the person who tweeted: Caught a piece of bacon falling out of my sandwich right before it hit the ground. #blessed

It's funny, but all these #blessed blessings suck all the real energy and power from the concept of feeling blessed—of soul-deep gratitude. Real honest gratitude is never smug or braggy. A blessing is richer than wealth and tastier than bacon.

Additionally, those social media posts on Instagram and Twitter only show a self-curated image.

#blessed is a manic, "Jazz hands!" kind of happiness. Everyone is smiling and has great hair.



A #blessed life apparently never includes pain or loss, or even mild discord or inconvenience.

But of course we know that kind of life is impossible. I think a truly blessed life comes from: living with integrity; loving your work, most of the time; loving the people around you, most of the time; and loving yourself, most of the time."

So this month let's right the ship! Let's together honor those blessings that are richer than wealth and tastier than bacon, and that are true gifts, *most of the time*. Here are three options to participate in this communal spiritual exercise:

- If you are on Twitter: tweet moments of true blessing using the hashtag #soulblessings.
- If you do Instagram: post pictures of the #soulblessings you see in the world around you (and be sure to tag your picture).
- If you use Facebook (yes, hashtags work on Facebook too!), you're invited to post pictures or tell a story of #soulblessings both on your own personal page as well as on our group Soul Matters Facebook page.

Do it throughout the month, even daily if that feels like a good discipline for you. The point is for us to experience #soulblessings together.

To look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And then another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And then another: the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon. Until I learn to be in love with my life again.

Barbara Kingsolver

Option B: Honour Your *Also-True* Story...with Art

Soul Matters minister Rev. Gretchen Haley writes:

"Each week in worship [in some way], I recognize and honour 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 honour 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 C: 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 simply as just not letting yourself get distracted and rushing on to the next urgent thing.

Option D: Reach 100

“Jewish tradition gives us a goal: We should say one hundred blessings each day. When we try it, we discover that it’s quite difficult to find one hundred things each day for which to be thankful. So difficult, in fact, that we spend most of our time looking.” (Dannel I. Schwartz and Mark Hass)

Here’s more information on this practice of finding 100 Blessings each day:

- http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/987904/jewish/How-Many-Blessings-does-a-Jew-Say-Each-Day.htm
- http://www.aish.com/sp/pg/100_Blessings.html

But if we’re looking for 100 blessings each day, how would we have room in our day to do anything else?! The response of rabbis is “How could you possibly make it through a day without it?”

So, try it. See if you can make it to 100. Then try it again the next day. Then again. And after that see if you want to stop.

Option E: Pay It Forward

Many of us are likely familiar with the idea of “paying it forward” rather than simply “paying it back.” To pay someone back for a blessing or gift accomplishes little more than evening the score. The concept of paying it forward changes everything. Suddenly the blessings in our life are sources of abundance rather than sources of debt. This spiritual exercise invites you to tap into these sources of abundance.



Two simple steps:

- Spend a few days assessing the major blessings in your life.
- Then figure out how to share them.

The key is to identify blessings that can and should be spread beyond the circumference of your personal experience. It may be a favorite

trail in the woods that you share with a friend. If doing art feeds you personally, take a child under your wing and stimulate their love of color and light the same way someone once did for you. Maybe you’ve been helped through tough times and learned a lot because of it. If that’s the case, then who in your life is going through tough times now and needs the blessing of being able to talk to someone who has “been through it before”? The options are endless. We can pass on and pay forward wisdom, wealth, support, passion and even the love of simple things--like gardening, skiing or music.

The point is to get so in touch with the way you’ve been blessed that you can’t help but want to spread that blessing around.

To whom much has been given, much will be expected in return.

Luke 12:48

Your Question



No need to treat these questions like “homework.” You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply find the one that “hooks” you most and let it lead you where you need to go.

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. **Have you paid them forward?** Many of us are likely familiar with the idea of “paying it forward” rather than simply “paying it back.” To pay someone back for a blessing or gift accomplishes little more than evening the score. The concept of paying it forward changes everything. Suddenly the blessings in our life are sources of abundance rather than sources of debt.
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. Do you see neutrality where blessing should be?** Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” Howard Zinn, renowned activist and professor, was fond of saying, “You can’t be neutral on a moving train.” We see it all the time – in others and in ourselves: people have the chance and the power to offer a blessing in the face of suffering, but they settle for passively instead. Often there are good reasons; we are not capable of taking on every injustice or saving every hurting individual that crosses our path. And yet...
- 10. 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?
- 11. What’s your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what the theme is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

Articles

Black Lives Matter: A Blessing

<http://pres-outlook.org/2015/10/black-lives-matter-a-blessing-guest-commentary/>

How to Pack a Blessing Bag

<http://www.thrifynorthwestmom.com/blessing-bags-assemble-bags-keep-hand-need/>

The Blessing of Music: A Man in Nursing Home Hears Music from His Era

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyZQf0p73QM>

The Body’s Grace: The Blessings of an Imperfect Body

from *On Being* with Krista Tippett

<http://www.onbeing.org/program/bodys-grace-matthew-sanfords-story/185>

We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOXMjCnKwb4>

Take in the Good

<http://www.rickhanson.net/take-in-the-good/>

from The Art of Blessing the Day by Marge Piercy

But the discipline of blessings is to taste each moment, the bitter, the sour, the sweet and the salty, and be glad for what does not hurt. The art is in compressing attention

to each little and big blossom of the tree of life, to let the tongue sing each fruit, its savor, its aroma and its use.

Read the full poem here:

<https://www.randomhouse.com/knopf/authors/piercy/poem.html>

Recommended Resources

As always, this is not required reading. These pieces are simply meant to get your thinking started, and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to “be a people of blessing”.

Wise Words

Primary Wonder

Days pass when I forget the mystery.
Problems insoluble and problems offering
their own ignored solutions
jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber
along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing
their colored clothes; caps and bells.

And then once more the quiet mystery
is present to me, the throng's clamor
recedes: the mystery
that there is anything, anything at all,
let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
rather than void: and that, O Lord,
Creator, Hallowed one, You still,
hour by hour sustain it.

Denise Levertov

The gesture of a gift is adequate.
If you have nothing: laurel leaf or bay,
no flower, no seed, no apple gathered late,
do not in desperation lay
the beauty of your tears upon the clay.
No gift is proper to a Deity;
no fruit is worthy for such power to bless.
If you have nothing, gather back your sigh,
and with your hands held high, your heart held high,
lift up your emptiness!

Jessica Powers

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

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

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

from Sweetness

Just when it has seemed I couldn't bear
one more friend waking with a tumor, one more
maniac with a perfect reason, often a sweetness
has come and changed nothing in the world
except the way I stumbled through it.

Stephen Dunn

We can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures.

Thornton Wilder

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**

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/>



Books

Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now

by Rebecca Ann Parker

This collection of essays inspires a “renewed dedication to engage in making the world a blessed place that is open and welcoming to all people. This is simply a remarkable set of essays and anyone who is concerned with liberal religion, diversity, or issues of social justice needs to read this volume.” (From the Amazon review)
Book available from UUA bookstore.

To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings by John O’Donohue

John O’Donohue’s “compelling blend of elegant, poetic language and spiritual insight offers readers comfort and encouragement on their journeys through life. O’Donohue looks at life’s thresholds—getting married, having children, starting a new job—and offers invaluable guidelines for making the transition from a known, familiar world into a new, unmapped territory. Most profoundly, however, O’Donohue explains “blessing” as a way of life, as a lens through which the whole world is transformed.”

Learning To Fall: The Blessings Of An Imperfect Life by Philip Simmons

“Philip Simmons was just thirty-five years old in 1993 when he learned that he had ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease, and was told he had less than five years to live. As a young husband and father, and at the start of a promising literary career, he suddenly had to learn the art of dying. Nine years later, he has succeeded, against the odds, in learning the art of living. Now, in this surprisingly joyous and spirit-renewing book, he chronicles his search for peace and his deepening relationship with the mystery of everyday life.”

My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging by Rachel Naomi Remen

The author, “a cancer physician and master storyteller, uses her luminous stories to remind us of the power of our kindness and the joy of being alive. Dr. Remen’s grandfather, an orthodox rabbi and scholar of the Kabbalah, saw life as a web of connection and knew that everyone belonged to him, and that he belonged to everyone. He taught her that blessing one another is what fills our emptiness, heals our loneliness, and connects us more deeply to life.”

Got no check books, got no banks. Still I'd like to express my thanks -- I got the sun in the morning
and the moon at night.

Irving Berlin

Videos & Podcasts

Difficulties Illuminate Existence

Rev. Gary Smith reads from his essay in *Landscapes of Aging and Spirituality*, and reminds all of us, regardless of age, about the hidden blessings in “the boulders of our lives.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTGYfkBRwi8&feature=youtu.be>

Nature Rx

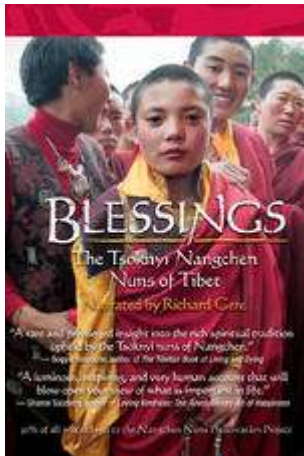
A funny and clever video about the healing blessings of nature.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bf5TgVRGND4&t=14>

Take in the Good

Rick Hanson at Chicago Ideas Week <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jA3EGx46r4Q>

Movies & Television



Blessings: The Tsoknyi Nangchen Nuns of Tibet

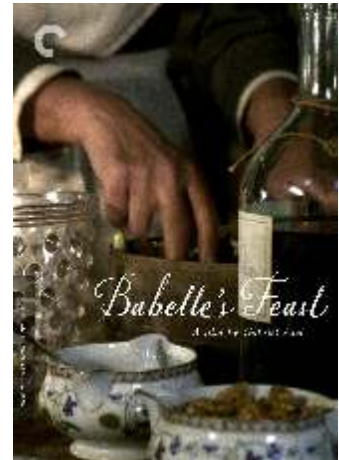
This compelling documentary “tells the story of 3000 nuns living in the remote nomadic region of Nangchen in Eastern Tibet who practice an ancient yogic tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Despite near extinction during the destruction of the Cultural Revolution, these

remarkable spiritual practitioners have emerged to rebuild their monasteries by hand - stone by stone. ... A unique meeting of East and West, the film is an inspiration to anyone seeking a spiritual path through the challenges of 21st century life.”

Amilie

“One woman decides to change the world by changing the lives of the people she knows in this charming and romantic comic fantasy.”

Babette's Feast



Songs

“Thank You” by Alanis Morissette

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDp6F_Baf5I

“Everything is Holy Now” by Peter Mayer

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiypaURysz4>

“The Play” by Peter Mayer

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADl_q5u9dIU

Join the Soul Matters Facebook page to engage in the theme with participants from around the US, Canada and Europe: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/soulmatters/>

Our theme for November is “Letting Go”