

Feast of Gratitude  
Rev. Margaret A. Hart  
November 23, 2008  
First Universalist Society of Central Square, New York  
a Unitarian Universalist congregation

In words attributed to Jesus in the book of Matthew, chapter 25, verses 34-43, it is written:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the worlds; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?

And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Today is *Guest at Your Table Sunday*, highlighting a program of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. It seemed an especially appropriate time to reflect upon these words. To me, the biblical passage points out that we are all one; we are all aspects of God, or the Great Spirit, or whatever you choose to call the all-pervading force of love. In the Siddha Yoga tradition, Swami Muktandanda summed it up by saying: *God dwells within you as you; See God in each other.* Most world religions have some variation of the *Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.* In Unitarian Universalism, our first principle is: *We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.*

So, it is only natural that people in many Unitarian Universalist congregations participate in the *Guest at Your Table* program. We have been participating in this congregation for many years, so many of you are

familiar with it. But some of you are newer to a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and I would like to tell you a little about the UU Service Committee (UUSC) and the Guest at Your Table program.

The UUSC is an associate member of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA). Its work is based on the principles of Unitarian Universalism and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UUSC doesn't receive any funding from the UUA, but, like our local church, is funded solely by the generosity of its members and friends. In these tough economic times, when many individuals and not-for-profit groups are suffering hardships, it is especially important that those who can, be as generous as possible in their support.

In turn, the UUSC works with partners on the ground, not-for-profit groups working throughout the world on issues of human rights. Some examples are: the right to safe and accessible water for personal and domestic use; and training and support for the safety of women and girls in camps for displaced persons in Darfur, as they tend to the necessities of daily life such as gathering wood for cooking fires. The UUSC has projects in the United States as well as in various countries. They also provide hands-on, experiential learning through Just-Works camps and Just -Journeys. These allow participants to put their UU values into service and to grow spiritually in the process.

As you can see, there are colorful boxes and handouts which you are invited to take home with you. You are encouraged to place a box on your dining room table, or wherever you sit down to eat. One of the handouts is called *Stories of Hope*, and you can read one of those stories aloud to your family at mealtime, or read it quietly to yourself. Reflect on the people in the stories, and those pictured on the box. As you consider their courage, and your own gratitude for your abundance, please place a donation in the box, as though you have invited a guest to sit at your table. The boxes will be returned to church, along with your donations to the UUSC, on Sunday January 18. The *Guest at Your Table* program is a

major fundraiser for the UUSC, as well as providing a good opportunity for us to put our values into action. Thank you for your generosity to the Service Committee.

There is an insert in the order of worship this morning which explains the UUSC and the Guest at Your Table program. In addition, I hope you will take handouts from the UUSC which are on the table in the East Room, according to your interest. They include:

*Defending the Right to Water*

*Rights in Humanitarian Crises*

*Defending Civil Liberties*

and *Promoting the Rights of Workers*

There is also a small booklet : *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

The 60th anniversary of this declaration is being celebrated, and it is a seminal text of the UUCS. Many other declarations of rights have arisen from this one, in the ensuing decades, including the *declaration of the rights of the child*. The United States is one of only two nations which have not yet signed on to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; hopefully that will change with the incoming administration, especially if many of us lend it our support.

I had the opportunity recently to listen to an interview with Charlie Clements, UUSC president. The interviewer asked Charlie what he does to combat *compassion fatigue*, and he said that he tries to meditate every day as a way of remaining grounded in spiritual practices. He also said that he uses a prayer from the *Talmud* regularly. When the interviewer later asked Charlie what his prayer for our world would be today, he said it would be something like that from the *Talmud*: “that we will not be overwhelmed or daunted by the enormity of the uncertainty that is around us, but we will love mercy now, walk humbly now, and do justice now, understanding that if each of us does that, that will make a significant difference.” He also said that we need to understand that the world is moved by love. We can act on our values every day, even if we can't be activists. In this way, we will make a difference.

As I was reflecting on this morning's story, *Stone Soup*, I wondered why we are sometimes inhospitable. Are we, like the villagers in the story, wary of the stranger? Are we afraid of giving to others when we fear we might not have enough for ourselves and our families? Do we need to be invited specifically to give just one thing? Perhaps we need to be coaxed, or tricked, out of our comfort zone. In the story, a stranger pretended to be making soup out of a stone, and then said how certain items would really enhance the soup. Various villagers offered to bring what was needed, each contributing only a little something to the soup. In the end, it became an abundant mix which served them all, not only with a tasty meal, but also with an important lesson in pooling their resources to make something which none of them alone could have made. Not only were the meal and lesson valuable, but so was the fellowship they enjoyed. When we can overcome our fears and reach out to others, we too can enjoy learning and being together.

As I think about my own experience of hospitality, I realize that it has something to do with fear and feeling all right about our spaces and ourselves. My family lived in Parish for about twenty years. We had a two-family house, and it wasn't set up well for company; the space didn't have a good "flow" to it. Also, we had managed to accumulate a lot of stuff. One might describe it as "lived in" if one were kind; otherwise one might say it was "cluttered" or "messy". Needless to say, we didn't entertain there. When we moved, we selected a house that has a lot of space and a good "flow". We also got rid of a lot of stuff, though we still have way too much in the garage and basement. When we moved in to the new place, we decided to keep it uncluttered and clean so that we would feel comfortable inviting friends in. We've pretty well succeeded, and it feels great to live in. All of my siblings have visited our new home. And we had a Hart family gathering there with fourteen people for a lunch. It has been great fun!

It doesn't take too much effort to brush up the house when we know company is coming. And yet, we always feel that it is important to clean for

company. I think it's true for many people. Why is that? It might be a way of honoring our guests, or it might be because we don't quite feel good enough about being the way we are. And yet, I have been to friends' homes where they haven't picked up before I came, or if they did it wasn't obvious. And yet, I felt right at home, because they felt right at home, and were glad to welcome me into their homes.

Another experience I have had is when I am traveling and need to stop to use the restroom. If possible, I have stopped at McDonald's, Stewart's, or some other chain which is known to have public restrooms. But sometimes I have had to stop at an independently run gas station. A few of these have said "no public restroom" and have refused to let me use their employee restroom, even when I expressed a desperate need. Most have extended hospitality and permitted me to use their employee restrooms, even when they were messy and required that I walk behind the counter and into a storage area. To me, this constitutes true hospitality: becoming aware of the needs of others, and welcoming them, like family members, in ways which fulfill their needs. May we always extend such hospitality ourselves, even when it means stepping outside our comfort zones and confronting our vulnerabilities and those things which embarrass us. As we do this, we will find that we grow in the process. As Pema Chodron says in one of my favorite books, we need to go to the places that scare us, to learn the particular lessons they have to offer us.

When we are able to confront our own vulnerabilities and fears in a way that allows us to truly know ourselves, we will grow into a sense of comfort with, and acceptance of, who we are. Then it will be easier for us to see the needs of others, to feel compassion for them, and to feel that we want to reach out to help. Part of compassion for others is identifying with them, and realizing that it could be us, or our loved ones, who were experiencing similar predicaments. Then we know that we can't sit idly by, but need to offer assistance, even as we would want someone to assist us or our loved ones.

The message of this morning's story is that we can all make a difference. The message of the UUSC is that we can all make a difference. Both encourage us to join our efforts in order to make a bigger difference than any one of us could make. In keeping with the work of the UUSC, and the values espoused in the Unitarian Universalist principles and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I find this quote by Martin Luther King, Jr. fitting. He said: *Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere*. May we all do our parts, along with the UUSC, to confront unjust power structures and challenge oppressive policies. And may we find our hearts softened, and reach out with hospitality to strangers and friends alike.

There is a story in the Old Testament of angels, or messengers from God, who visited a home disguised as strangers. The hosts treated them with great hospitality, as the culture of that place dictated with strangers. Our culture usually teaches a more wary approach toward strangers. But ours is a countercultural religion. We never know in what form God will appear in our lives, if God even exists. It is our challenge always to receive each other as though it is God herself who is with us. Since God, or the spirit of love, resides in each person's heart, it most likely is.

It is also our challenge this Thanksgiving, and throughout the year, to live our lives not from a place of scarcity and fear, but to embrace our abundance, however meager it may at times appear, with gratitude and hope. When each of us makes our offering with a generous heart, we will discover that we have more than enough. May it be so.