

## **“Fierce Gratitude”**

**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Oregon**

**Service Words by Rev. Heather Starr, Minister**

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**Host: Christine Boyer**

### **CALL TO WORSHIP**

Good morning. It is so good to be here with you this morning. I'd like to begin by inviting all of you to take a big, deep breath with me. Here we are. Here we have gathered. It is so good to take this time, this moment, this break, this Sabbath, this time of rest to come together and sit beside each other in community. The world is constantly in motion, the stream of time is constantly flowing; we can't stop it. But we can pause our own hurtling rush through space for a short while, and be here, right here, thankful and alive, tearful and tired, restless and anticipating, worried and determined, hungry and impatient, loving and vulnerable, human and hopeful, together. It is so good to soak in this time together, in this good company, on this chilly November day in Central Oregon.

Come, let us worship together.

### **STORY FOR ALL AGES**

The story I'm going to tell you this morning is an African story called “The Tree that Grows Hair.” It's a story from the Unitarian Universalist curriculum that the children are learning from this year called “Stories from Under the Wisdom Tree.” In this story, there is a drought. Can any of you tell me what a drought is? Right—a drought is when we run out of water. Now what are some things that you use water for, every day? What would you do if you turned on the faucet at home, and there wasn't any water? Well, listen to what happens in this story.

In Africa, there was a young princess who had beautiful long hair. She had servants whose job was to carry her hair, because it was so long, and so heavy. The young princess was very vain and thought that her hair was more important than just about anything. And she loved her hair more than she loved anything else.

Now there was a servant boy—named Muoma—who liked the princess in spite of her obsession with her hair. One day Muoma saw a strange colorful bird fly through the princess's window. He listened as the bird told the princess how he had heard her hair was the most beautiful and softest hair in all of Africa. Muoma even heard the bird ask the princess for some hair for its nest. And Muoma heard the princess yell at the bird to “go away” and that she would not give it any of her hair for a nest, because she loved her hair too much to let a silly bird have any of it. The bird obligingly flew away. But Muoma dreamed of the bird sitting in a strange tree on top of a mountain. The boy didn't know what it meant, but he had this dream over and over again.

After the bird flew away, the land became quite dry. The drought caused great famine all over the land (can someone here tell me what a famine is?). That was not all. The young princess was standing in her dry garden when a very strong, dry wind came up and blew the princess's hair right off her head. The princess' servants shrieked and ran after the hair, but the hair was gone and the young princess was bald. She was so upset, she would not leave

her bedroom. Her father, the king, did not know what to do. But Muoma, the young boy, did. He came before the king and told him that he knew how to get the princess's hair back. He told the king of his dream about the mountain with the tree and the bird. But the king and all the king's advisors just laughed at him.

Muoma decided to go to find the mountain anyway. He packed what food and water he could find—which wasn't very much—and he set out. He walked a long way before he stopped to rest and eat some of his food. As he was eating, a swarm of ants assembled at his feet. The leader of the ants asked Muoma for just a crumb of his food and explained that the drought had left them hungry and that many of them had died. Muoma was a generous boy. He gave the ants what food he had.

Then he began to drink the water he had brought. But as he was drinking, a voice called out and asked for just one drop of water. Muoma saw it was a lone flower growing from the cracked earth between some rocks. He was surprised to see a flower growing there at all. Muoma said "you are a brave flower." Muoma poured the rest of his water on the plant. Just as he was about to set out walking again, a mouse rushed up to him, begging, "please, sir, help me. My children are lost up on the top of the mountain. Please, help me find them."

Now Muoma was a kind and thoughtful boy. And though he was so thirsty and so hungry and so tired, he climbed the mountain. He finally made it to the top. When he reached the top, he saw before him three wondrous trees: one of gold, one of silver, and one of emerald. As he gazed upon the golden tree, there was a bright flash and the tree looked as if it were on fire. But as the light began to die down, the bird from his dreams appeared there and before him was a great feast of fruits and sweets and cool, clear water. The bird said "eat and drink your fill, Muoma."

Muoma was so thirsty and hungry and right away he began to eat. But as he was taking his first big, full bite, he remembered the mouse and the mouse's lost children. He called out, "oh no! I must go help the mouse!" The bird stopped him and said "I know of the mouse and your promise to help. But I was the mouse, the flower, and the ant. These were tests to see if you were good-hearted and kind and worthy of the gift, to see if I could trust you."

"What gift?" asked Muoma, amazed. "The seed of the Tree that Grows Hair. Tend it well and water it every night. The rest will be up to your princess." Muoma returned to his village and planted the seed in the princess's garden. He watered it carefully and faithfully each evening. One evening, the princess saw Muoma in the moonlight as he watered the tree. After he left, she came out from her bedroom—because she still let no one see her, she was so embarrassed about having lost her hair—and she tentatively touched the green tendrils of the new plant.

The next evening when Muoma came to water the Tree that Grows Hair, he found that it had already been watered. And the next evening, he hid in the bushes and watched as the princess came out into the garden, singing and carefully tending to the plant. "How beautiful you are," she said to the tree. "And how beautiful you are and will be," said Muoma as he emerged from his hiding place. "Who are you?" the startled princess asked. Before Muoma could answer, a gust of wind came and blew the princess's head cloth off.

"Your hair!" he exclaimed. And indeed, the princess did have hair again. It was more beautiful than ever. Muoma and the princess danced and laughed together as they told the stories of their wild experiences to each other. In the morning, the birds crooned at them from

the branches of the tree. “I’ll give them all some soft hair for their nests,” she said, running to get scissors. I’ll put it in their nests.” As she placed her bits of hair in the last nest, she noticed the dark clouds in the sky. It began to rain at long last, all over the land.

The king came out into the garden and said to Muoma, “I treated you as a foolish boy. But you have proven yourself to be both noble, brave, and kind.” Muoma and the princess became dear friends. They were happy together and took care of the birds and the trees together. And the princess remained always thankful for all that she had, including her long beautiful hair—but never again did she love her hair more than everything else around her.”

## REFLECTION

### “Fierce Gratitude”

Rev. Heather Starr

The term “icon” comes from the Greek word *eikon*, meaning image, which was in Greek the normal word for a picture or any other artistic representation. Over hundreds of years, icons came to be images of eternal archetypes, “objects of devotion and prayer.” Throughout history and throughout the world, carefully hand-painted images have acted as a “focus for devotion to [Jesus] Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints, and the [icons] themselves have become symbols of the care and compassion of those whom they depicted” (*Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*). The icon, one scholar writes, “invites us into [its] company.”

I’ve been pondering this whole month the way that Thanksgiving is presented to us in this American culture as an icon—the icon of the Thanksgiving table, the family gathering. We are all encouraged to try to replicate the ritual experiences that create this iconic image: the golden turkey, of course, at the head of the table or in the center, depending on where the camera that documents the whole thing will be positioned, the necessities of cranberry sauce and gravy. I delight in the ways that each family or group develops its own variations on a theme—“do you do mashed potatoes with peas?” we might ask a guest coming for the first time, “or sweet potatoes with pecans?” “Both!” could be the eager reply, or neither with “mashed parsnips” in their place.

The central elements of this icon of Thanksgiving are well-known though—the abundant meal, the gathering, the rituals of cooking and overeating, the underlying emphasis on appreciating that we can do this, that we can have this, that we can indulge in this. In fact sometimes it’s so underlying, that appreciation, that it gets buried all together. I was struck this Thanksgiving by how many friends and family I talked to, including myself, who got caught up in moments of nostalgic pining. How easy it was for us to get lost in dreaming up the Thanksgiving That Once Was, the Thanksgiving That Could Be, the Perfect Thanksgiving...If Only. If only I could get home and be with my family. I only I *wanted* to be with my family. If only my family were different. If only I had *more* family. If only I had *less* family. If only I liked cranberry sauce. If only we hadn’t gotten divorced, or if only we had. If only Mom wasn’t sick, or we had grandkids, or a bigger dining room table, or somebody was a little nicer, or not always late, or wasn’t so intolerably boring. If only she didn’t always bring that jello dish, or if only she was here and brought that jello dish, because now that it’s not here, we miss it, we miss her, we miss her terribly. Gratitude comes in all sorts of strange and sometimes quite contorted forms.

Another danger I'm conscious of is when "being grateful" becomes this focus on what we *have*—possessions, possessions. I'm grateful that we have a nice house and two cars and a big TV and plenty of clothes and food in the fridge and etc. and etc. It's good to be thankful, to appreciate having all our basic needs met, but it's also important to keep track of when we're simply expressing our satisfaction for *having things*. I'm particularly wary of this around Thanksgiving, because, after all, the holiday originated because the Puritan Pilgrims were celebrating, in part, what they *had*—homes and food and freedom—and land. In fact much of what they celebrated was being *shared* with them, not given to them for them to possess, but as more and more white people came to this land and possessed it, this thankfulness transformed from humble appreciation to greedy, and violent, possessiveness. To quote from Howard Zinn's eloquent *People's History of the United States*, "Columbus and his successors were not coming into an empty wilderness, but into a world which in some places was as densely populated as Europe, where the culture was complex, where human relations were more egalitarian than in Europe, and where the relations among men, women, children, and nature were more beautifully worked out than perhaps any place in the world (21). The Indian population of 10 million that lived north of Mexico when Columbus came would ultimately be reduced to less than a million (16)." All this violence because, essentially, instead of learning how to live together and to share the resources, the white people felt they had to have and conquer the land at the expense of the lives of people who'd lived there for years.

Let us be mindful of this, let us strive to practice living more simply whenever we can so that, truly, others can simply live. These are some cautions, warnings about how easily Thanksgiving can become Thanksgrieving when we are *greedy* instead of truly *grateful*. Cautions are necessary when talking about something powerful. This reflection is about cultivating "Fierce Gratitude." "Fierce" because I am talking about active appreciation, not passive receiving. "Fierce" because being assertively grateful, choosing to be thankful, can be a source of power, can take us out of a victim stance and help us to claim our power as people with an astonishing array of choices and options. Fierce "Gratitude" because gratitude brings us into the present moment, challenges us to notice what *is*, right now, not what we wish for the future or what we regret about the past. We know this intuitively; just the simple act of saying grace, pausing to say thank you before a meal, brings us into the here-and-now, into *this* moment, at this table, with these people, and this abundance. "Fierce Gratitude" because being thankful is too easily portrayed as a passive stance, instead of a revolutionary response to the consumerism of our culture. It is a powerful approach to take to be grateful for what *is* instead of saying "more, more, more."

The title of this reflection is also inspired by a film—called *Fierce Grace*—based on the life experience of Ram Dass, the author of the seventies' classic *Be Here Now*, and more recently of the book *Still Here* in which he documents his recent experience of aging and a stroke—what he calls "being stroked." Ram Dass became paralyzed by the stroke, but continued to see it as a reason to look at his life directly, including facing head-on our universal, and individual, personal mortality. He writes "the stroke gave me a chance to appreciate in a much deeper way the preciousness of the love that surrounds me. The stroke created more love than I had ever seen before. There were prayer networks, healing circles, meditation groups—I saw all these hearts opening all around me. I had tried to do that, to open hearts, through my lectures and my tapes and [books], and here it was, happening all by itself. I felt love coming at me from all directions" (*Still Here* 198). Ram Dass refuses to

become a victim of the stroke. Instead, he reframes it as Fierce Grace, and searches out the meaning for him of this transformative life experience.

To me, this intentional reframing, this “fierce gratitude” is a defiant act. It is a way to do what any teenager brought up as a Unitarian Universalist was taught was one of our seven principles (though it’s not, not exactly), and that’s to “fight the dominant paradigm.” In adult-Unitarian-Universalist-speak, that means: ask questions. Ponder whether or not whatever bandwagon comes along is one that I want to get on, and if I do, how to do it in a way that maintains my values and concerns. For example, how do I make these holidays, this period of inescapable cultural ritual from Thanksgiving through New Year’s, my own?

“Fierce gratitude” challenges us to be thankful for what *is*. Not what we wish could be, not what we might prefer or what television commercials might be manipulating us to long for, but deeply appreciative for what is, right in front of us, just as that person or place or plate is, just as it is. Even saying “thank you” isn’t as simple as it seems. I was walking towards the gym last week and I saw a woman holding a little girl while she was talking to a friend. The little girl was wearing the coolest fuzzy hat with pointed tips and bells, and I said “great hat!” to the girl as I came closer to them. The woman holding the little girl, probably her mother, said “say thank you,” “say thank you,” several times to the girl, over and over again, insistently, and I almost felt bad—I’d just wanted to complement the kid on her great hat, and here I had interrupted the adult conversation and forced the kid into a panicked state of needing to say something on-the-spot to a complete stranger. I continued on past them trying to convey “it’s all good” with my big smile—“it’s all good, I just liked your hat! No pressure!”

But saying thank you, cultivating gratitude in our children is a value, it is that important—to say “thank you” is an indication of understanding, of politeness, of receiving well, of having humility and gracefulness, of appreciating that we rely on each other, that no one of us is arrogant enough to think we can do things all by ourselves. When we express gratitude to one another we are acknowledging and honoring each other as gifts in our lives. We are agreeing that we rely on each other for all the things that make our lives not just possible, but beautiful: joy, laughter, understanding, sympathy, companionship, love.

So let us be fiercely grateful, together. May we look around and realize that we are blessed with everything that we need, already. And, motivated by our fierce gratitude, may we give energetically from our abundance so that we can all experience this joy, this love, this harvest, this beautiful, complicated world, together. May it be so.

## BENEDICTION

The act of being grateful for what *is*, instead of what we wish could be, requires determination, perseverance, and recommitment, over-and-over again. Let us help one another walk our paths, and step forward together, letting go of resentment or disappointment, renewed by our fierce thankfulness. May it be so. Go in love, and go in peace.