

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 29 January, 2012

Count Your Blessings!

Just as I'm tearing across the Public Garden, running late to a meeting, an obviously agitated gentleman approaches me, anguish clouding his face. "The squirrels, the squirrels!" he says. "There aren't enough acorns for the squirrels."

I stop.

"You're worried about the squirrels," I say. He nods, and begins to cry like a small child.

"Would you like to feed them?" I ask. He stops crying.

I open my briefcase. I offer him a Lara bar and an orange. "Do you think they'll like these?"

"No, no!" he cries. "Acorns!"

I think. "How about getting them some peanuts?"

He brightens. "Peanuts," he nods thoughtfully.

"I have money!" he exclaims, triumphant. "I'm going for peanuts right now! I have to hurry! Goodbye!" And he's off, trotting towards Newbury Street where, g*d willing, he'll find some peanuts.

*

This entire interaction took one minute. I was not late. And for hours, I felt happy – grateful – to have been stopped in my tracks, and – as we say in Buddhism – *given the view* by someone who, though limited in his own capacities, was busying himself caring for other living beings; happy and grateful for the grace-filled opportunity, in turn, to be of some small use.

I want to reflect with you this morning on the connection between happiness and gratitude, gratitude and happiness, by talking a little bit about – here's a leap; hang on – making lists.

Most of us make some kind of to-do lists. It turns out our working memory can retain only seven to nine things at once; when we write something down, we remove it from the queue, making room for somethings else. Sometimes mine end up where they belong; sometimes they creep onto the dreaded “little pieces of paper” – I am, in fact, not above lists on paper napkins. They're all always useful . . . when I remember to look at them. There are uncounted studies of lists and list-makers, all concluding that to-do lists can help us to focus our energy, find more free time, exercise more often, and even feel happier, overall. To-do lists can help us to set more ambitious goals and achieve our goals, and happy people, as it turns out, are those who pursue goals.¹

But there's a kind of list-making that, while it may sound frivolous, is of tremendous benefit. Let's reflect for just a moment on gratitude lists.

The old adage tells us to count our blessings, and it turns out it's a good idea for more than our spiritual well-being. The research on gratitude lists is at least as compelling as to-do list studies. “A lack of gratitude can lead to self-destructive behavior such as envy, reduced motivation, lethargy, sloth, and lack of creativity.”² No one can really explain it, but people who keep gratitude lists exercise an average of 80 minutes more per week.³ Children who are taught a gratitude practice demonstrate “higher levels of alertness, attentiveness, enthusiasm, determination, and energy.”⁴

And at the University of Miami and Cal Davis, studies concluded that these apparently magical lists can help us feel better – more optimistic – about life, experience fewer symptoms of physical pain and illness, and sleep better. There's also a theory that feeling grateful makes us more receptive to, well, receiving.⁵

Perhaps the best news of all is that the time we take to make the list itself is all that's required; simply giving gratitude enough time out of our day to make a list – which is, apparently, enough time to take our brains into a positive neurochemical state,

1 Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD, *The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want*

2 Mark Sichel and Alicia L. Cervini, *Gratitude List*, at psybersquare.com

3 *To Do Lists: Do They Help or Hurt?* at mypanera.panerabread.com

4 Olivia Rosewood, *Please Meditate: Make a Gratitude List*, at huffintonpost.com

5 Valerie Reiss, *The Ultimate Gratitude List*, at beliefnet.com

whatever that means – will enable us to enjoy [these] benefits.⁶

*

If you have no idea to begin the spiritual practice of making a gratitude list, begin with Robert Frost. Here's *Dust of Snow*.

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.⁷

I love to imagine the brooding poet slouching moodily through the woods. Crow – the trickster – shakes the branch and sends a little snow down onto his head. Wake up! Come into the present! This may seem quirky, but this poem hasn't been published and re-published for the past 89 years for its quirkiness. Benedictine Brother David Steindl-Rast writes, “An interruption like this could make [us] angry if [we] insisted on staying preoccupied with [our] problems. But – surprise! – the cold spray makes [us] snap out of [ourselves], and . . . bingo! A saving change of mood.... When [the poet] claims that the crow's [antics] 'saved' a part of a day he had rued, . . . he means this in the full sense of a redeeming change of heart....

“If this ever happened to you, the key for understanding a casual chain of great consequence is in your hand[s]: any change in attitude changes the way one sees the world, and this, in turn, changes the way [we act].”⁸

*

I collect stories under the heading *Surprised by Joy* – great stuff for gratitude lists! Many of us here knew and loved Dan Cheever, whose memorial service last month filled this sanctuary with family and admirers on the day before what would have been his 95th birthday. His youngest daughter, my friend Holly, gave me permission to share this e-mail with you. You'll hear her refer to her sister, Olivia, as well as to a rather obscure piece of music⁹ that the peerless Molly Wood learned to play just for the

6 Olivia Rosewood, *op cit*

7 From *New Hampshire*, 1923 (written and published)

8 Brother David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B., *A Vision for the World*, originally published as a contribution to the 2006 *Vision Project*

9 Edvard Grieg, *Wedding Day at Trolldhaugen*, Op. 65, No. 6

memorial service. Also, you'll figure out that Holly is a vet. But that's as far as anything I can imagine any of us figuring out about this. Think gratitude list. Here you go:

Dear Kim,

I have some stories to share with you from the two weeks after Dad's death.

First, *one week to the minute* after Dad [died] . . . Olivia was walking near the practice rooms at Longy School of Music, . . . and she heard a student playing *Wedding Day at Troldhaugen*, which is NEVER played, and which neither of us has heard since the '50s, when Dad played it for us at bedtime.

Secondly, Dad always used to say, *Dogs always did like me!* as my dogs leaned against him in his chair, looking fondly at him. So two weeks after his death . . . , my big ol' hound dog, Merlin, was euthanized, since, having been 100 percent normal that morning . . . – normal blood work two weeks earlier etc., etc. – he suddenly went into shock from a ruptured, unsuspected cancer on his liver . . . and once I rushed him to my clinic and we saw what had happened with an ultrasound, I gave him the euthanasia injection and then looked at my watch..... [two weeks] . . . TO THE MINUTE....

I guess they felt [– Dad and Merlin – that] they would be ideal comrades on the Next Great Adventure.

*

Holly is grieving both her father and Merlin, but these out-of-the-ordinary experiences – first, a sense of her father's presence; and then that he had, indeed, opened the door, as it were, to let out the dog – brought her both comfort and joy. When Holly's youngest daughter was admitted to medical school this week, her first thought was, “Wait 'til Dad hears!” And her second thought, I'm quite certain, was, “O yes, he already knows.” *Put it on the gratitude list!*

And here's the latest addition to the file:

This past week was young – only 2:00 on Monday afternoon, actually – and I had already spent time with members of four different families in the congregation who are suddenly faced with the impending deaths of their parents: hardly joyful. Dan Hardenbergh was next in my schedule, and, as always, my mind went to his wife, Mary Ann, who sustained a devastating brain injury in a fall three years ago, and to Dan's faithful attention to her at Brighton House.

Dan has given me permission to tell you this: Basically, he opened with, “I have something to tell you, and it's all your fault.” This is hardly the vehicle one would conjure for good news.

But Dan had come to surprise me with joy. “You told me to get involved with people in some activity I like,” he began. “So, you know, I did that a while ago – I started playing bridge again.

“And you told me to get involved in a group for people who are dealing with some of what I've dealt with in this situation with Mary Ann. So I did that, too – my regular weekly meeting, which is so terrific.

“And you told me to find a companion, to love again.” I looked at Dan, still so boyish and optimistic, even in the full face of the past years of hell. He smiled. “So I did. I met her at a dinner party on December 22nd – my Christmas angel. We've been almost inseparable this past month. I'm happy. And I'm so grateful.”

Would that we were all so good at doing our spiritual homework! This morning, on behalf of this congregation that cherishes Dan, I welcome Dan's companion, Dianne O'Connell. Frankly, I'm delighted to take the blame! *Put it on the gratitude list!*

Beloved spiritual companions,

May we be stopped in our tracks, and given the opportunity to be of use.

May we count our blessings,

giving gratitude enough time out of our day to make a list to say thank you. *Thank you.*

May we save the day – day upon day – by choosing a redeeming change of heart:

Any change can change everything.

Let's listen for the music we love, and open to the mysteries of death and life.

May we be surprised by joy.