

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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Grateful

In the winter of 1620, of the one hundred Pilgrims who had arrived on the Mayflower, fifty were felled by cold, starvation, and illness. That spring, the neighboring Wampanoag taught the survivors to plant and cultivate the native corn. The summer of 1621 was generous; by late November, Governor William Bradford wrote — as we sang today — the harvest was bountiful and the pilgrims were “safely gathered in, ere the winter storms begin.”

And though their suffering and their grief must have been terrible, instead of mourning, the survivors chose to celebrate with Chief Massasoit and 90 of his good people: Thanksgiving.

I am not romanticizing this story; in years to come, a genocide of Native Americans began that persists to this day. But I want to land squarely on that shining moment — amidst unfathomable loss, a moment of plenty and the impulse to share the wealth.

James Loewen is the author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. In an interview with *The New York Times*, he is quoted as saying about that shared harvest celebration, “We might as well take shards of fairness and idealism ... whenever we find them in our past, and recognize ... and give credit to them.”¹ While, rightfully, the Pilgrims would have been mourning their dead, somehow, they chose gratitude and generosity. When despair threatens, we can remember that joy is also possible, and be grateful.

Russian-born Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel said, “Gratitude emerges from the kingdom of the night.” Danish theologian and existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote, “It takes real courage to grieve, but it takes religious courage to rejoice.”

¹ Please see [nytimes.com/2017/11/21/us/thanksgiving-myths-fact-check.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/21/us/thanksgiving-myths-fact-check.html)

A short video just released by the Forest Hill Church in Charlotte opens on a couple lying in bed, individually wrapped in Christmas paper. Their children come into the room, also wrapped for Christmas. The father gets up, flicks a light switch covered in wrapping paper, and heads into the bathroom, where the shower is wrapped and the faucets are decorated with silver, red, and green bows. His breakfast is served in a Christmas gift box, his briefcase and car keys are gift wrapped, and he steps out of the house in gift wrapped shoes to find his car wrapped entirely in red paper. He's exuberant — ecstatic: A family! Electricity! Running water! Food! A job! Shoes! A car!

We already have so much
for which to be grateful —
well before the halls are decked
and the deluge of holiday gifts
comes pouring in.²

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My colleague Barbara Merritt writes, “In India recently, someone asked my spiritual teacher a question: ‘What is the worst karma a person can undergo here on earth?’

“What [a] question!” she continues. “How would you answer it: ... ‘What is the greatest difficulty? The harshest circumstances?’

“A few responses ... came to my mind.... The list seems endless,” she says.

“I was astonished by my teacher’s reply. He [said], ... ‘The worst karma is to be ungrateful.

“‘If you suffer from ingratitude, then it won’t matter what blessings and goodness are in your life; you won’t be capable of receiving [them]. In contrast, if you are grateful, then even in the most challenging of circumstances, you will be able to recognize the many gifts that you are receiving.’”³

My colleague of blessed memory, Father Henri Nouwen, wrote, “To be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy, but to be grateful for all

² Please see charlottestories.com/local-charlotte-church-released-christmas-video-thats-going-viral-4-million-views/

³ Rev. Barbara Merritt, *Gratitude*. Please see questformeaning.org/quest-article/gratitude-may-2011/

of our lives — the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures ... — that requires hard spiritual work.... We are ... grateful ... when we can say thank you to all that has brought us to the present moment.”⁴

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Do we duly note what’s *not* on the banquet table, noting absence rather than presence? Do we take gifts for granted, or do we somehow think we deserve them?⁵

Garrison Keillor tells the story of a grandmother who’s walking on the beach with her five-year-old grandson when, suddenly, a rogue wave washes over the child and carries him out to sea. The woman screams, shaking her fist at the sky and demanding that G*d return the innocent child. And just then, a second wave comes barreling in ... and deposits the child, unharmed, at her feet. She gathers him into her arms, looks back up at the sky, and says,

“This child had a hat!”

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Here’s Father Nouwen again: “... We have to count our blessings. We have to celebrate life. We have to be grateful for the simple gifts — being alive, ... being loved, ... being called to love and serve....”⁶ These are lovely directives, but the truth is, we don’t have to be grateful. It’s just that, if we are, the world is going to be better for it.

Gratitude is about so much more than our own happiness. Think for a moment about sitting in traffic, and the people who wave their thanks to you when you let them in. Now think about the people who won’t let you in. How do we respond to them? How does the world respond to them?

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Unitarian Universalist writer Becky Brooks writes, “We woke one morning to find that someone had broken into [our] garage. We picked our way through the space, storage tubs strewn about, ready to make a list of what was missing. It took us a while to figure out what they had taken. The well-stocked tool box was there, whole and intact. My bicycle was there (it turned out to be the only bicycle I’ve ever owned that *wasn’t* stolen). Our car was untouched.

⁴ Father Henri Nouwen, “The Spiritual Work of Gratitude (January 12)” in *Bread for the Journey*, 1997

⁵ Rev. Barbara Merritt, *op cit*

⁶ Nouwen, *op cit*

“At the end of the day, we looked at the list: two wool sweaters and a tent. Digging down deeper into one of the boxes, we discovered the tent poles they had missed. They took two wool sweaters and *half* a tent. Someone was suffering a misfortune here, but it wasn’t us.

“There was really only one option. We cleaned up the mess, closed the garage, and laid the tent poles gently on the sidewalk. They were gone by nightfall. I can only hope they found their proper home.”⁷

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Here comes the science:

“When the brain feels gratitude, the ... ventral and dorsal medial pre-frontal cortex ... are activated.... When [our] thinking shifts from negative to positive, there’s a surge of ... dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin: [the ‘feel good’ neurochemicals]....”

“Gratitude is powerful,” writes journalist Karen Young. “... Research has shown that [gratitude can strengthen our] immune systems, lower our blood pressure, [improve our sleep and our waking. We’ll] be more alert and more generous, compassionate, and happier.... Gratitude can ... increase resilience, ... and reduce stress and depression.... [The more grateful we are,] the greater [our] capacity for [feelings of connection and closeness and] joy.”⁸

Psychology professor Antonia Damasia writes, “Gratitude builds on itself. We know the brain changes with experience, so the more that gratitude is practiced, the more the brain learns to tune in to the positive things in the world. This isn’t something that tends to come naturally. We humans have a negativity bias, which means that we’re wired to notice threats in the environment. This is a good thing — it’s kept us alive since the beginning....

“But ... we also want to be happy. When there’s too much ... focus on the negative, gratitude can be a way to nurture a more positive focus, and teach the brain to spend” less time on despair and more time on joy.

⁷ from Becky Brooks, *Blessed Curses, Cursed Blessings*. Please see uua.org/braverwiser/blessed-curses-cursed-blessings

⁸ Please see heysigmund.com/the-science-of-gratitude/

“With the brain primed to notice the negatives, we need not only to teach it to tune in to the positive, but also to hold those positives for long enough to have an effect. Our default position is to let the good slide off us fairly quickly, so we need to be deliberate about holding onto it ... long enough to change the brain.” Gratitude takes practice.⁹

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Some of you knew Arlington Street’s Art Shirk, a brilliant, thoughtful, generous man who chaired our Prudential Committee. When he was still quite young, he was diagnosed with the same genetic lung disease that had killed his brother. When he entered hospice care at home, Art wrote, “[At] times, I find myself ... caught by suffering: physical pain, emotional despair, or mental anguish.... I close my eyes and enter what seems like a very dark basement with only a flashlight, and I begin to search around. Mostly, I encounter the elements of my suffering: my physical discomfort, emotional pain, and my mental maze. So I keep searching.

“At some point, I can suddenly see a glimmer of light in some corner and I move toward it. I discover something that is *not* suffering, but is *another* part of me. I breathe into it and shine my light there. I try to open the crack more.

“As I do, I find that the light gets brighter and the space gets larger, and if I persist, it becomes bright enough to remind me that I am also Spirit and Life and Light. I let that awareness grow until it seems to have the upper hand. The suffering is still present, but ... I am guided by a more essential love-based me....

“Finally, I notice more and more that we are, right now, living in paradise. I have always been searching for it in some way, and now I discover that it has been right in front of me all this time. Everywhere I look — every tree, every cloud, ... every body of water, every reflection of light, ... every human face ... seems to me to be a miracle. If we open our eyes and senses and witness the world around us, it is easy know that we are a part of an awe-inspiring miracle, no matter how long we have to live.¹⁰

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Beloved spiritual companions,

May we give ourselves to the hard, spiritual work of gratitude.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Please see gratefulness.org/grateful-living/surrender-art-living-loving-dying-without-training-wheels/

May we strengthen our capacity
for generosity, connection, and closeness,
and say *thank you* to all that has brought us
to this very moment

When despair threatens,
may we remember joy.

May we be grateful.