

BLESSING

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THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH ON NANTUCKET ISLAND

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I'm delighted to be here in this beautiful historic church and this remarkable sanctuary. I know from talking with Rev. Simmons that you are an old church that nevertheless embodies new ideas. You are embedded in history but focused on the here and now. I like to visit a congregation's website before I come to get a feel for the place. I loved the concise statement you use to describe yourselves: "*Nantucket's home of liberal religion, learning, music, and ideas!*" That's a place I'd like to attend!

I'm from the United Church of Christ, a Christian denomination on the liberal end of the spectrum so I'm comfortable here. In fact, there's an old joke that claims UCC stands for "Unitarians Considering Christ."

I like what I see here; especially the number of social concerns that dominate your life together. You are a people determined to be of service and I commend you for living your principles.

My husband Joe and I are excited to be spending the week on the Island thanks to Linda and Gary's hospitality. They are a great team.

### CONFERRING BLESSINGS

Linda mentioned that last Sunday she also preached on "blessing." Two sermons in a row ... this must be a worthwhile topic. Let me pick up where she left off and add my perspective.

When I shop at the Trader Joe's on Memorial Drive in Cambridge, I head right for the Rasta check-out guy. With his big crocheted hat and his wide smile, he always sends the customers off with a little gift. "You have a blessed day now." If the store was out of your favorite key lime pie or you were a little down that day, you left a little less grumpy because you had been blessed.

The writer, Barbara Brown Taylor is an advocate for the spiritual discipline of pronouncing blessings. She begins with an exercise in blessing objects. The essence of blessing, she claims, is that it requires us to truly regard the object of our blessing. The discipline of "paying attention" leads to gratitude for that particular thing – to recognizing the holiness of it. I like that. At the very core of blessing, lies gratitude. Here's what she writes about blessing a stick.

*The stick has its own story. ... What purpose did this stick serve? Did a bird sit on it? Did it bear leaves that sheltered the ground from the hottest summer sun? At the very least, it participated in the deep mystery of drawing water from the ground, defying the law of gravity to deliver moisture to its leaves. ... Put it back where you found it and it will turn back into earth again. Dust to dust and ashes to ashes. Will you say a blessing first? No one can hear you, so you may say whatever you like.*

*“Bless you, stick, for being you.”*

*“Blessed are you, o stick, for turning dirt and sun into wood.”*

*“Blessed is the beauty of nature for stopping me in my tracks.”*

In her practice of blessing, Taylor begins from a position of love and respect—even awe.

*“Start throwing blessings around and chances are you will start noticing all kinds of things you never noticed before. ... The next time you are at the airport, try blessing the people sitting at the departure gate.... See that mother trying to contain her explosive two-year old? See the block-faced boy with the huge belly? Even if you cannot know for sure what is going on with them, you can still give a care. ... Pronounce a silent blessing and pay attention to what happens in the air between you and that other person. ... “*

## **BECOMING A CONDUIT OF POWER AND LOVE**

I’m especially interested in cultivating the *practice* of blessing because there seems to be so much in the air right now that mitigates against an attitude of blessing. The definition of blessing I want to claim is this: **A blessing is a solemn wish imploring happiness upon another; it is the act of pronouncing a benediction that promotes their prosperity and welfare.**

In his memoir, *The Search for God at Harvard*, Ari Goldberg writes about his terribly unhappy childhood. But he remembers the respite from the recriminations and bickering as the Sabbath candles were lit.

“We were transformed into a happy, picture-book family. My father returned from the synagogue, and we lined up in front of him for the Sabbath blessing, the eldest first, and then me.

. . . Bending down to reach us, my father cradled our heads between his strong hands as he recited the blessing, “May God bless you and keep you and give you peace.” My father, who worked hard all week managing and selling real estate, became our rabbi and cantor on Friday night.” Goldberg still remembers those blessings as an island of peace and hope in a chaotic time.

That is an example of a direct, hands-on, physically felt blessing that carries great meaning, similar to the infant blessing you performed as a congregation last week. Similar to the benediction you receive from your pastor every Sunday. It makes us feel loved, noticed, attended to. But I'd also like to talk about being a bless-er, developing an attitude of blessing, of imploring happiness upon another; desiring their prosperity and welfare.

A recent New Yorker cartoon pictures a yoga studio. The instructor intones, "And now I want you to send out peaceful, loving thoughts to all beings on the planet who have exactly the same political, economic, and religious beliefs that you do."

### **BLESSING IN THE FACE OF MALICE -- "BLESS, DO NOT CURSE"**

No, that's not where I want to go with this. .... I do not think adherence to any faith is necessary for a person to confer blessings, but I'm a Christian and I come at this practice of blessing from a Christian perspective. One of the core teaching of our faith is "love your enemies."

In our scripture, this is expanded to include the language of blessing: "bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you." At least sixteen times in the New Testament, Christians are compelled to counteract negativity or hate with blessing. Sixteen times!! We are told to *bless* in return for spite and malice. And yet, it seems that Christians may be the least likely to implore happiness, prosperity, and welfare upon people with whom they don't agree. So many of us are judgmental and even cruel. And look at me, being judgmental of my fellow Christians; those narrow-minded Fundamentalists. But I'm no better.

One of my blessing challenges is maintaining an attitude of blessing on the road. Like recognizing divinity in the guy who cuts me off or tailgates. How often do I send out a good will blessing to him instead of my usual gesture of "You jerk!" Bless and curse not; says the Bible. This simple practice of assuming an attitude of blessing does not come easy to me. I'm in too much of a hurry, I'm too self-righteous (I would never drive like that and I always signal a lane change!), and I am not detached. These little infractions against my personal space set me off. So you can imagine my reaction to politicians or policies that actually deeply affect my life or the people I care about. Very far from blessing.

Yet I chose this topic because I think it is a significant way that we can counteract the atmosphere of hate, negativity, polarization that prevails in our culture right now. Political rhetoric is encouraging us to condemn, blame, find fault ... the exact opposite of blessing.

## **A TAKE-AWAY – WILL YOU BLESS SOMEONE THIS WEEK?**

A friend of mine cultivates this practice in his own life and with his children. He lives and breathes blessings. Every time his family hears a fire engine, police, or ambulance siren, they rub their hands together to generate warmth and then they hold them up in blessing for the people those vehicles are rescuing, and for the EMTs, the police, the firefighters. Somewhere, someone is in trouble. They send out love and hope to them.

Will you be practice blessing this week? Send silent messages of good will to people you don't know, maybe even specifically to people who annoy you. Or perhaps whisper a spoken blessing over a child or spouse, send an email message to a friend, raise a hand in appreciation to the sun, meditate on the newspaper sending thoughts of hope and safety to suffering refugees.

As Barbara Brown Taylor says, "The world needs you to do this because there is a real shortage of people willing to [stop] wherever they are and recognize .. holiness."

**BENEDICTION:** At the end of the service, we practiced this discipline by facing one another across the aisle, raising our hands in the posture of blessing, and pronouncing these words of benediction upon each other.

Right:        May there come across the waters  
                  A path of yellow moonlight  
                  To bring you safely home.

Left:         May the nourishment of the earth be yours,  
                  May the clarity of light be yours,

Right:        May the fluency of the ocean be yours,  
                  May the protection of the ancestors be yours.

All:          And so may a slow wind work these words of love  
                  around us, an invisible cloak to mind our lives.

~ *From "Beannacht" by John O'Donahue*