

Blessings
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Rev. Linda Simmons

Blessings

The modern English language term *bless* likely derives from the 1225 term *blessen*, which developed from the Old English *blædsian* meaning to make sacred or holy by a custom.

I think blessing for us as Unitarian Universalists can be a complicated notion theologically. Blessing usually infers receiving something through human givers that is beyond them, from god, and implies not only a giving of something good in the moment but a promise that the future will continue to be blessed in some way through the promises conveyed by the ritual of blessing by the same god.

Our baby blessing here is a version of the Christian blessing of baptism in which God removes original sin from a child and makes a covenant with that child to walk with them through life, offering them a life in which their sins will be forgiven.

As so many of us are atheist, agnostic, transcendentalist, humanist, Buddhist. Unitarian Universalists or naturalists what can blessing mean without a supernatural power that exists outside of human agency to remove what might condemn us or promise what can lift us up? Can it mean enough so that blessing still matters? I think it can and it does. In fact, I think blessings, those given and received by us humans, can and do save our lives.

I remember when I was a Reiki practitioner in a hospital just before going to divinity school. Our job as Reiki practitioners in this hospital was to put our hands on people in simple ways: their heads and shoulders and knees and feet and to play soft music and ask them to breathe fully. It was the first job I had ever had that required I just stop talking.

We were often called to the pre-op floor where people were of course very nervous. Because patients are dehydrated and anxious, their blood pressures would often be sky high and the nurses would often call us because they were struggling to get an IV in or wanted in general to calm the patient. So we would come in, turn off the lights, play some soft music and then lead someone on a short visualization and ask him or her to breath in and out deeply.

And slowly the blood pressure would decrease and the person would relax and the nurses could do their jobs with more ease.

Sometimes a person would not let the Reiki practitioner in. Some religions teach that Reiki is the devil's work. One woman from a religion that taught this allowed a

session to occur with great hesitation and said afterwards, “But if this is not the devil’s work, then how do you make someone feel so at ease and so at peace in so short a time?”

I remember my answer well, “How many times in your life are you with someone whose job it is to focus on you fully with the intention of bringing you peace?”

If that is what the devil does, then I am happy to have him or her as a co-worker!

John O’Donohue in his book *Benedictus: A Book of Blessings* writes,

“Our times are desperate for meaning and belonging. In the parched deserts of postmodernity, a blessing can be like a discovery of a fresh well. It would be lovely if we could rediscover our power to bless one another. I believe each of us can bless.

When a blessing is invoked, it changes the atmosphere. Some of the plentitude flows into our hearts from the invisible neighborhood of loving kindness. In the light of blessing, a person or situation becomes illuminated in a completely new way...a new window opens, in a dense darkness a path starts to glimmer, and into a broken heart healing falls like morning dew . . . Let us begin to learn to bless one another. Whenever you give a blessing, a blessing returns to enfold you.”¹

A blessing begins by showing up and noticing and connecting, really intentionally connecting. A blessing also asks for something to extend into the future like peace, or love, or protection, or hope, or well-being, or a grace-filled passing.

A blessing asks that blessings continue, that the condition of connectedness, of being seen, of seeing, of a silence that can finally hear oneself long enough to know that we have blessings to give and receive lasts long enough to heal us just a little bit from the bruises of our busy lives.

To be blessed and to bless does not require a belief in the supernatural, it requires a belief in each other, that we are worthy of this life and of this time together, that we are worthy of each other’s love and attention, that we are worthy of the promise that we will be here tomorrow for each other to the best of our ability and we will continue to show up in it all with all of our beautiful brokenness.

To bless and be blessed requires humility and a willingness to open ourselves to the vulnerability of living in our fragile humanity.

Rebecca Parker in her Poem, *Choose to Bless the World*, writes:

¹ John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), xiv, xv.

“Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—
can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind’s power,
The strength of the hands,
The reaches of the heart,
The gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting

Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
Bind up wounds,
Welcome the stranger,
Praise what is sacred,
Do the work of justice
Or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door,
Hoard bread,
Abandon the poor,
Obscure what is holy,
Comply with injustice
Or withhold love.

You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world.”

Choose to bless the world. It can be hard to know what that means in these times of so much violence and hatred and polarization and wrongs so deep that it hurts to look at them straight on. Black men and boys murdered, riots and police shot, round and round and round and guns and hatred and we need a peace conference with a great leader of non-violent communication- like Ghandi or Martin Luther King or women like Mother Theresa or Leymah Gbowee who helped stop the second Liberian civil war in 2003- presiding and we need to remember how to listen until we have heard each other and heard each other again and then to let us hear our humanity ringing out so that we can know that our fears and hopes and dreams and loves and goals belong to all of humankind. If we do not begin to bless those dreams in this humankind so that we all have a chance at attaining them with some measure of dignity, then god help humanity, then humans help humanity.

We must answer this question:
What will you do with our gifts?

Choose to bless the world.

In our tradition, the only ones who can ordain a minister are the congregation, a body of people who believe in the ordinate or the one about to be ordained. They do this by a laying on of hands. This happened with me at First Church in Boston in May of 2013. Some of you were there and participated in this blessing. Everyone present lays their hands on another and another and another and the last hands are laid on the ordinate and the presiding minister says a blessing. And it is through this act that the ordinate becomes a minister, through the blessing of the people, that blessing that says I see a minister in you and we are all in this together.

I felt that blessing. I feel it still.

Blessings save lives by saying I see you, you are worthy of being witnessed. I know so many stories from you about the blessings you give to so many. I have heard you tell me about picking up someone who needs a ride to the grocery store, or rescuing food for those who are hungry, one of you told me about a practice of writing poems each morning to your daughter who also writes you poems in exchange, I have heard you tell me about hymns you have written, gardens you have planted, stories you have told, dinners you have cooked, letters you have written to congressmen and women, phone calls you have made to those who in need of uplifting, songs you have sung for those who are sick or dying, solar energy you have installed to bless the air we breathe. I have heard about vigils you have attended and peace-making meetings you have organized. I have heard about shawls you have knit and lawns you have mowed for others.

As John O'Dohohue writes, blessing reminds us that no life is alone or unreachable.²

May we all learn the art of blessing and cultivate it as we would any art: with attention, with care, with love, with honest appreciation and in doing so my friends may our own blessings multiply in this our world that is so desperately in need of being blessed. Amen.

² Mara Dowdall, "Our Power to Bless" The First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington Vermont, February 7, 2010 <http://www.uusociety.org/sermons?s=104>