



North Shore Unitarian Church
... discover meaning together

370 Mathers Avenue,
West Vancouver, V7S 1H3 BC
Tel: 604.926.1621 www.nsuc.ca

A sermon by The Rev. Stephen Atkinson, Minister

November 16, 2008

LIVING IN GRATITUDE

I hope some of you remember Hayley Mills or have heard of her; she was the Dakota Fanning of my childhood era: an amazingly talented child actor. Although she was born some years before me, we kind of grew up together; she tended to play feisty girls who stood up to adults and taught them lessons. Early on there was *The Trouble with Angels* and *The Parent Trap*. Somewhere in there was *The Chalk Garden*, a more adult film I didn't see till years later. By the time I was in high school and movies became dating opportunities, she had gained the right to be a sexual person onscreen and starred in a film, *The Family Way*, which from the title you can deduce had a more mature theme.

The film, *Pollyanna*, was one of Hayley Mills' greatest roles – at least in my opinion. The character, Pollyanna, is an orphan who never feels sorry for herself; her parents had been poor missionaries in the West Indies, but they'd taught her to be glad about even the smallest pleasures. Once orphaned, she comes to live with an aunt who is rich, but nevertheless stubborn and bitter. Pollyanna chooses to love her anyway and to be appreciative of her generosity. As Pollyanna gets to know people in the town, many of them unhappy, she carries her parents' message: there is always something to be glad about.

An old hypochondriac, Mrs. Snow, played wonderfully by Agnes Moorehead, keeps to her bed, constantly thinking of death. Pollyanna shows Mrs. Snow how to make rainbows with prisms hung in the window; she also brings her quilting squares so she can contribute to the town bazaar to raise funds for a new orphanage. When Mrs. Snow claims to be too weak to sew, Pollyanna, in a rare fit of temper, confronts her fakery and tells her she should be glad just to be alive, instead of planning her funeral all the time. After Pollyanna storms out, Mrs. Snow picks up the squares and asks for her sewing kit. Later, she actually works at the bazaar dishing out heaping bowls of ice cream. That's the kind of effect Pollyanna had, charming and innocently shaming people into feeling better.

Bit by bit, Pollyanna's optimism in the face of every problem changes the whole town. When forbidden by her to attend the bazaar, she sneaks out her third story window and down a tree; she has an essential part to play in the town pageant as the middle piece of the flag and has a solo to sing in "America the Beautiful!" Afterwards, trying to climb back in her window, Pollyanna falls, literally off the roof and figuratively into her own slough of despond; her legs are paralyzed. Now, those whose lives she has changed come to give her back her own medicine: they help her

to be glad again, first by helping her be glad for them. Pollyanna's interventions with a number of characters have changed their lives and brought about a number of happy developments: an engagement here; an adoption there, not to mention Mrs. Snow's miraculous recovery. All these people come to help Pollyanna feel some hope of recovering. Even her sour aunt is converted as Pollyanna is carried off for surgery in Baltimore. By then, there isn't a dry eye in the house. A while ago, when I saw it on TV again for the first time in decades, I, a wisened-up, post-midlife-crisis, seen-and-heard-it-all guy, loved it all over again.

In fact, I loved it in a whole new way because this time I re-interpreted all the gladness the film refers to; instead of thinking it's just looking on the bright side, I realized that it was gratitude. This took the film to a deeper level. I didn't really know about gratitude as a child; I knew you should say thank you at appropriate times, and I certainly felt very grateful from time to time – but I didn't understand the power and value of gratitude. I only really learned that much later from real people who had figuratively 'fallen off the roof' into literal despondence: I met these broken, joyous souls at 12 Step Meetings.

You see, addiction, whether to a substance, activity or person, is a state of being out of touch with both gratitude and reality. Most of you have heard of "hitting bottom", the moment when someone says, "I have a problem that is out of control and it's ruining my life." This common experience is widely known. What earthlings, that is, people not in the Programs, not ever having a whiff of needing one; what earthlings don't usually hear about is "the gratitude cry."

At some point, usually during the first year, when the substance or the person is out of your system, you're going to meetings and you've got your sponsor, things start getting better but still aren't good enough. That's how it was for me. At around nine months in, I looked at my new life and thought, "Is this all there is?" I was far from satisfied with me or my life. I was afraid that I was never again going to feel joy, or dance till my legs were rubbery, or fall in love. I looked back with horror at how dark and lonely life had been, but also with wistfulness that, sometime *way* back then, I had felt 'really' alive. But not anymore. I was feeling sorry for myself and asking, "Is this all my life is going to be?"

And then, in my case, suddenly I knew that the answer was no. I could no more imagine how much better things might be for me in the future as I could have, a year earlier, predicted all the unthinkable changes that had occurred in just that one year. What made me think such changes would stop? Or that, if more were to come, that I knew they'd be disappointing or inadequate? No, I realized that there was much more ahead for me than there was behind. And I felt relief; in fact, relief poured into me.

And then I had my gratitude cry. I cried like an utterly lost child who was just found. I cried like the prodigal son who has discovered there is still a home where love remains. I cried in gratitude. And that gratitude opened me up.

This story, in a million variations, is told over and over again, and, I must be honest, not only by people in recovery. There are so many ways in which any of us can lose track. We can be assaulted or damaged by the death of a thousand cuts – all the tiny ways that make us lose hope; experiences that gradually dry up our character or distort our perspective. Sometimes it is massive events like divorce, disability or death that swamp us with black feeling. There are few of us that don't have our naturally rosy worldview shaded at some point.

It is not at all uncommon for the kind of relief I felt to be triggered by a personal spiritual experience, but at times like these our relationships with other people become most vital, if only just to know that we aren't crazy. Most of the time, we find this reassurance through connections; it might be the foundation of our families; or the safety nets of our friends; or the outreaching arms of our church – but at these times it is usually people who help us survive. At some point, the hope, perspective or experience of those around us will start cutting through the dark, and we come to realize that our lives may have changed, but they are neither finished nor lost; in fact, in the end often they are richer.

In the reading we heard this morning, Holly Bridges Elliott, in her book, *Beholding God in Many Faces*, describes a moment of grace that happened to her in the course of a normal day. We don't have to be in crisis; sometimes we're just renewed. Holly's making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for her children when something makes her stop and just look around. At that moment, she sees the whole room become luminous and "alive with movement," as she puts it. Everything seems to be pulsing and vibrant, like light waves. Joy swells inside her, and she is filled with gratitude. The ordinary is momentarily miraculous, even the water flowing from the tap. Her children suddenly seem to be "eternal beings of infinite singularity and complexity." She knows that one day in the future, she will come to "apprehend [them] in their splendid fullness."¹

Elliott describes a moment in which utter gratitude breaks through the trance of activity, thought and disconnection in which most of us live through most of our lives. There is just too much to do, to concentrate on, to tire ourselves with; where is the space for a moment of complete perception like hers? Most of the time, we just cannot do it. That is why this is "grace": an unexpected, unsought and undeserved gift that changes her and the world – she feels called to write it, and we who read it are inspired to see through the mundane. Even if we don't see light waves, we feel gratitude. And if we *practice* that, then the world is made new.

My gratitude brings me into that new world. It shifts aside questions, doubts and fears, and tells me that, at least for today, I am released. When we live in gratitude, we live with openness to our full heart. In connection with the richness that every day, dreary or brilliant, is steeped with. We live vibrantly. And, practicing gratitude, we will live out our "splendid fullness." We want that. To live with our full

heart. Richly. That's living spiritually, isn't it? But, if we think it through, we might have to admit that we *don't* want that.

If we live completely, embracing each day, we wave a red flag at fate. "Here I am! Open to the moment! Ready for anything!" Be prepared. Just like there's no 'up' without 'down', there is no gratitude without its absence. We've all faced moments of loss or hopelessness, and we will again, but knowing that and *opening* ourselves to it are two different things. It's not possible to live fully without confronting the abyss. Some of us tumble down into it, afraid for the falling to stop because we fear we won't survive the landing. But, somehow, we do. Others descend on purpose, driven to climb down, deeper and darker because something in there has to be found or retrieved. However we end up on *that* bottom, we sit in a daze for a moment, an hour, a year. "How can I go on? Is this all there is? What does this mean?" These are real questions, and the answers must come from a much deeper place than Pollyanna's Glad Game. And that deeper place is found on the bedrock of gratitude.

At the end of my first year in seminary, I received a call from the first real love of my life, Jean. He was the partner who had treated me best and let me down least. For decades after breaking up, we remained unique friends. His friendship always reminded me that I was lovable every time I forgot. His call was to tell me he had been diagnosed with lung cancer and brain metastases, and it came just as I was about to start a chaplaincy internship for the summer. I'd signed a contract and there was no time off for three months. Even a quick visit to Quebec City from Chicago was very difficult, and Jean insisted that I *not* come; he had become very anxious overall and would have been unable not to worry about *me* if I were there. Though it may sound strange, our friendship was so solid that I knew he was right; a whirlwind visit would be burdensome for him, as it was impractical for me. We didn't even need to talk because we both understood everything. So I neither saw him, nor did I have time – or I guess *make* time – all that summer to grieve.

I got the news that Jean had died just as second year seminary was about to begin; I'd been expecting it, so I felt no reaction at that moment. The next morning, when I was praying, I found myself feeling grateful for his huge influence in my life and for his enormous love. And triggered by this gratitude, I finally cried. I cried the grief that I had no space to feel before. I cried in sympathy with Jean's large and loving family and his spouse, Daniel. But I also cried in gratitude that he brought so much joy and love to the world, and he had died at peace and grateful for his life.

I was struck with that connection between grief and gratitude, as though one opened the way for the other. I realized that to acknowledge what is lost and to feel grief is just one step away from seeing what remains and to feel grateful. They go hand in hand.

Unitarian-Universalism, in my view, is an absolute commitment to reality. I borrow that phrase from the recovery programs. An absolute commitment to reality.

Of course, we debate what reality *is*. Our blessing is that we don't have to agree on *that*. But, we tend to agree that we must be committed to it. Our spirituality is largely focused on reality. Our faith defines nothing about any other world, any other plane of existence. Though we are free to believe in things we cannot know in rational, physical terms, our principles do *not* free us to ignore this world. What happens here is our spiritual concern, our religious commitment. Our blinders must be off and our focus on our hands and feet: what we are doing and where we are. And how we can be there for other people and even for the world. We strive to *see* the abyss all around us in this imperfect world and to bridge it, or fill it in, or climb down it with a rope ladder. But, we *see* it.

If we are committed to seeing the abyss in the *world* and to doing something about it, we must be committed to seeing it in *ourselves* and to doing something about it. Glad Games about how well we're doing, how *good* we are will not carry us far and will not let us be of real use to the world. *BUT*: it is important to find a Pollyanna spirit of gratitude within ourselves. That part of us that falls off the roof, grieves and then wakes up to see the whole reality. There are disappointments waiting behind every success. There are blessings all around us hidden in the pain.

At least for today, we can choose to see light waves. To stand in awe that water comes out of a tap. To shine in our splendid fullness. And for that, let us, with eyes wide open and limbs braced for the work, be ever grateful.

¹ Brussat, Frederic and Mary. *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*. Simon and Schuster, New York: 1996. 505.