



December 2019 Monthly Theme

BLESSING

the practice of Noticing

The intention of the themed year is to help Unitarian Universalists build a robust spiritual and ethical vocabulary. The themes are points of departure for religious liberals seeking to think, speak and act theologically, prophetically and prayerfully. The themes reclaim religious language, casting old terms in a new key to deepen spiritual grounding and sharpen moral reasoning. More at: wbuuc.org/themes or sign up for a circle at wbuuc.org/classes.

QUESTIONS

How do you bestow a blessing on others? How is blessing bestowed upon you?

When was the last time you blessed something/someone? What/who was it?

Has there ever been a period of time that has passed without you noticing?

QUOTATIONS

Our real blessings often appear to us in the shape of pains, losses and disappointments; but let us have patience and we soon shall see them in their proper figures. —Joseph Addison

Blessings sometimes show up in unrecognizable disguises. —Janette Oke

At some point in life the world's beauty becomes enough. You don't need to photograph, paint, or even remember it. It is enough. —Toni Morrison

Feast your eyes, astounded by what you've been given. —Peter Mayer, lyric fragment

POETRY

Noticing by William Stafford

Crumbs on my plate at the last
looks at me. On my tongue like a snowflake
it melts for a while—and splendor discovers
itself in this world out of such quiet things.
Those times, anything breathed on or thought
About, even for an instant, is bread.
At the corner just below the streetlight
there's a branch twisted by the wind. Surrounded

by darkness, hardly surviving, that branch
waits to wave in its yellow cone
when anyone passes and looks up. For years
it lives by such notice, eyes and the sun.
Strange—things neglected begin to appeal
to a part inside us. It is called the soul.
These times, it lives on less and less.

Continued →

blessing the boats by

Lucille Clifton

may the tide
that is entering even now
the lip of our understanding
carry you out
beyond the face of fear
may you kiss
the wind then turn from it
certain that it will
love your back may you
open your eyes to water
water waving forever
and may you in your
innocence
sail through this to that

Ode to My Socks by Pablo
Neruda

Maru Mori brought me
a pair
of socks
which she knitted herself
with her shepherd's
hands,
two socks as soft
as rabbits.
I slipped my feet
into them
as though into
two
cases
knitted
with threads of
twilight
and goatskin.

Violent socks,
my feet were
two fish made
of wool,
two long sharks
sea-blue, shot
through
by one golden thread,
two immense blackbirds,
two cannons:
my feet
were honored
in this way
by
these
heavenly
socks.

They were
so handsome
for the first time
my feet seemed to me
unacceptable
like two decrepit
firemen, firemen
unworthy
of that woven
fire,
of those glowing
socks.

Nevertheless
I resisted
the sharp temptation
to save them somewhere
as schoolboys
keep
fireflies,

as learned men
collect
sacred texts,
I resisted
the mad impulse
to put them
into a golden
cage
and each day give them
birdseed
and pieces of pink melon.
Like explorers
in the jungle who hand
over the very rare
green deer
to the spit
and eat it
with remorse,
I stretched out
my feet
and pulled on
the magnificent
socks
and then my shoes.

The moral
of my ode is this:
beauty is twice
beauty
and what is good is doubly
good
when it is a matter of two
socks
made of wool
in winter

READINGS & EXCERPTS

Love What You Love (an article from Braver/Wiser - UUA blog) by Rev. Erika Hewitt

"[L]et the soft animal of your body love what it loves." —Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese"

On August 29, 2018, Roger Cooper (@RogerC137) tweeted plaintively:

"Could we, without relentlessly criticizing, let people have their pumpkin spice, and avacado toast, and their fandoms, and their D&D, and their too-early-Halloween-decorations, and whatever little harmless things in which they've manage to find a tiny shriveled flower of joy?"

To date, more than 332,400 people have liked this tweet. I did. I'm in favor of allowing people their "tiny shriveled flower of joy" —what I imagine as small hearth fires that we each build to keep our spirits warm in a cold world.

Surprise: it didn't take long for the Twitterverse to pile on Mr. Cooper for spelling "avocado" wrong (...and yes, there's a second typo). He patiently thanked his critics for "helping me to know that I've made a mistake," declining to point out the irony in his suffering the very type of relentless criticism whose moratorium he'd been pleading for. (His follow-up tweet: "We're all just trying to survive.")

Who among us doesn't know that critique, criticism, and assessment are norms of our culture? I'm not talking about affectionate teasing between friends; I mean withering comments and performative boredom looking for an audience. "Oh, is sportsball happening?" asks one person, knowing their friends are thrilled by the World Series nail-biter. "Ugh. You can't listen to Christmas music yet," moans another, as some of us are already weighing when to put out our light-up Christmas llamas. (You read that correctly: I have two. Their names are Biff and Nestor.)

It makes us feel powerful to be in the judge's seat, I suppose, and some of us are wired to be the outlier, the nay-sayer. But there are days when the culture of knee-jerk critique makes me sad. I notice lately that I hold my small, harmless pleasures close, lest an online friend spit into the small hearth fire that I've tended into a reliable source of warmth.

For my part, I'm trying to practice non-judgment about how you, me, and all of us choose to warm ourselves. Who cares if your harmless pleasure bores or disinterests me? We're all imperfect, and the world can be such a barbed place. We're also merciful—or can be. We can be cheerleaders for simple joys (even when we don't share them) and compassionate about the fact that we're all just trying to survive.

by **Rabbi Jill Zimmerman** (ravjill.com)

Noticing blessings is a profound spiritual practice that can be an antidote to despair. In even the darkest night, a pinprick of light illuminates. Upon waking, one's attention may be called to all the aches and pain; notice what's not hurting. When you lose someone special, call to mind all that you learned from her. This is a practice & it serves us well in times of struggle. Rebbe Nachman teaches "find a little bit of good."

Being grateful is a spiritual practice. Brains science confirms what our ancestors knew – saying "thank you" and "I'm grateful" is good for us. It's a *practice* – meaning, we often forget to do it. We need reminders. We need to know more about how to pay attention to what is around us. We need each other to help us see bigger when we are in a narrow place. We need to practice gratitude in community... Practicing thankfulness is not about ignoring the reality of painful times. It's about enlarging our view, expanding our lens, so that it includes all that is good in the picture.

From a blog by Noe Venable noevenable.com

I didn't take up the practice of nightly prayers as a child. I might have liked to, I think. But in my childhood home, which was culturally Jewish, we were also atheists, so I could never quite figure out whom to address.

Now, all these years later, a lot has changed. My life's path has led me through exploring many of the world's spiritual traditions, through both academic study and personal practices. Now, after many years of searching, learning, and inner work, I have come to feel a deep personal connection to divine love that is the guiding force behind all I do.

As a mother, I want to help create the space for my children to also find their own sense of connection to the great love that exists in this world for them to draw on.

So I've grounded our lives in daily practices that help keep spirituality real and alive for them, and for myself.

Last week, I shared one of these daily practices – mealtime blessings. Today, I want to share another gratitude practice. It's our family's version of nighttime prayers. We do this right before bed. The children have finished their evening romping. Jammies are on, teeth are brushed, stories have been read, and only the nightlight is on.

After all the hustle and bustle of the day, we are quiet and together. As we are all lying there in the dark, I take a moment to list all the things I'm grateful for in that moment.

“Dear Spirit, thank you for these two precious children. Thank you for our health. Thank you for the sun and water. Thank you for the dreams that will come to nourish us tonight. Thank you for grammy and grampa, and all the strength that helps us do the things we love.”

Peregrine, who is newly two, usually follows suit with a list of her favorite animals. “Thank you for the giraffes. Thank you for the snakes. Thank you for the koala bears, (which she pronounces “K'lah.”)

Ember, who is newly five, is usually quietly introspective. But if we are ever slow to get to this moment, he asks for it.

“Can we do our thank yous?” comes his soft voice in the dark. And when we begin, he snuggles in close and listens. It takes only a moment, but I think this is the most nourishing moment of our day.

And if you are looking for ways to bring more mindful togetherness into your family life, I know no better place to begin.

One note – in this, as in all things, children are best served when we don't ask them to perform. Children at this age learn through modeling. So don't ask them to do it, just do it yourself.

And stay present with and to them while you say what is in your heart.

If you don't have a sense of God or Spirit in your life, that's okay too. You can thank life itself. Thank the Earth. Thank the wind. Thank the water. Thank whatever people or powers you can identify that have brought goodness and love into your life.

It is less important whom we address, and more important that we open the space for gratitude as a practice. Because a gratitude practice will transform you, pure and simple.

Gratitude opens the door for us to notice our blessings, and in noticing, to more deeply receive them.

But it's more than this, too. In establishing a daily practice like this, you are not just bringing a beautiful moment of connection to your family. You are also opening a door for your children to join you on a path of spiritual discovery.

They may not grow up thinking like you. But regardless of what they come to believe, they'll have learned from you the importance of making the space to think about it.

We are all connected. Not just to each other, but to the earth. Not just to the earth, but to an infinite well of love and strength that is there for us to draw on. Sometimes, we just need to make a little space to remember.

Faith in Action: Noticing and Celebrating Choices (from UUA.org)

Pay attention in the coming days to all of the opportunities you have to make choices. Note how you draw on your faith as you make choices in your everyday life. Ask yourself questions such as "Why did I choose, or not choose, to donate my time or money to a particular cause or person?" and "Why did I choose, or not choose, to engage in a particular activity?" Celebrate the ways in which your Unitarian Universalist faith informs your choices!

From Eric Langshur/Nate Klemperer (www.mindfulness.org)

"Notice-Shift-Rewire"

Notice: Become aware of where your attention is directed. In most cases, you will likely find that your attention is scattered – involved in the ordinary mental habit that psychologists call "mind wandering."

Shift: Redirect your attention to the present moment. You can do this by bringing your attention to any object of focus, the breath, sounds around you, sensations in your body or even something to feel grateful for.

Rewire: Take just 15 to 30 seconds to really savor this experience and to reinforce the shift you just made at the level of neurobiology.

MUSIC

Sufi Blessing

May the blessings of life be upon you
And May peace abide with you
May love's presence illuminate your heart
Now and forever more.

Green by Peter Mayer

When winter's gray is on the sky
Rust upon the leaves that lie
Red on the last few berries clinging
Brown on the branch where the bitter wind's
singing
Even when white obscures the scene
Still, in winter, there is green

Waving defiant pine tree boughs
Cedar needles, stubborn and proud

Hiding inside the seeds of summer
And deep in the root where it sleeps under cover
Patiently waiting there unseen
In the winter, there is green

Death may raise its voice today
O, but Life will have its say
Speaking in lovers and in children
In poets' pens and philosophers' visions
Life is a planet's daring dream

Earth's devotion, spoken in green
So keep it in your winter store
Hang its garland 'round the door
Grant to your heart its hopeful promise
Fashion a wreath for its blessing upon us
Winter brings browns and grays indeed
But when it comes, remember green

THEMES FOR 2019/20

September	CURIOSITY	The Practice of Opening
October	CHURCH	The Practice of Gathering
November	COMMUNION	The Practice of Offering
December	BLESSING	The Practice of Noticing
January	RESILIENCE	The Practice of Trusting
February	AWAKENING	The Practice of Letting in Light
March	ATTENTION	The Practice of Centering
April	IMPERMANENCE	The Practice of Transforming
May	IMPERFECTION	The Practice of Shining
June/Summer	MYTHOLOGY	The Practice of Shaping Our Stories