

Thank Whom, or What?

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Jeffrey L. Tate

Opening Words: *from Rev. William Henry Channing. Mid-1800s*

To live content with small means,
to seek elegance rather than luxury,
and refinement rather than fashion,
to be seek to be worthy, not merely respectable,
and to seek to be wealthy in goodness, not just rich in money,
to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly,
to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages with open
heart,
to bear all cheerfully,
to do all bravely,
to await occasions, and never rush,
in a word, to let the *spiritual*, unbidden and unconscious,
grow up through the common,
this is to be my symphony.

Homily: "Thank Whom or What?" by Jeff Tate

We are entering the season of "Thanksgiving," a time to reflect upon, and to be grateful for, our material, interpersonal, and mental blessings; that is, grateful for our physical well-being and comforts; grateful for our loving-caring relationships with family

and friends; grateful for our mental health, our education, and our intellect. Thanksgiving is about *gratitude*: appreciation in acknowledgment of the benefits that we enjoy.

Psychological studies have identified three major components of gratitude: gratitude towards other people, gratitude towards the world in general, and a lack of resentment for what you don't have. Gratitude has been shown to have one of the strongest links with mental health of any character trait. Studies suggested that people who are more grateful have higher levels of well-being. Grateful people are happier, less depressed, less stressed, and more satisfied with their lives and their social relationships. Grateful people also have higher levels of personal growth, purpose in life, and self acceptance. Grateful people have more positive ways of coping with the difficulties they experience in life; they are more likely to grow from challenging experiences. Grateful people sleep better, and this seems to be because they think less negative and more positive thoughts just before going to sleep. Gratitude also correlates with economic generosity. Finally, it has been found that writing a letter about, or daily journaling about, the things for which we are grateful increases our mental well-being.

Gratitude is a key aspect of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: in those traditions their gratitude is to God as the giver of all existence and especially of all good in the world. And this *religious* form of gratitude does also correlate with feelings of happiness and hope.

But traditional *religious* gratitude is something that many of us Unitarian Universalists have rejected. In fact, the second psychological component of gratitude, gratitude toward the world in general, is something that makes many Unitarian Universalists uncomfortable. After all, most of us don't believe in supernatural forces

guiding our fate, and if our existence is just the result of physical and evolutionary forces, then our life situation, no matter how favored, seems to be the result of our winning the toss of a coin. We can feel happy about winning the coin-toss and so having many benefits in life, but does it make sense to feel gratitude toward the coin, a non-living piece of metal?

So when we review the three components of gratitude, we UUs can easily feel gratitude towards other *people*, and we can work on minimizing the *resentment* we feel about what we don't have, but is there anything that we can do about feeling gratitude toward the *world* in general, towards the universe, the cosmos? Well, let's see.

Personally, I have an awareness of my *connection* to the "ground," the basic "material" of the world—that universal matter-energy mixture from which and within which every *thing* is created, that fundamental "stuff" from which I am organized into a being and develop my individual characteristics. I am a development of the basic fabric of the universe; from conception to death I am a flowing *process* in and of that cosmic foundational material. No scientist can rationally dispute that.

As humans, being this "process" of the basic cosmic matter, we can discern two aspects of ourselves: mental and physical; that is, subjective and objective, or mind and body. How these *two* aspects of our *one* being are developed from the same basic matter-energy mixture no one yet knows; but we have no reason to think that mind and body are not two aspects of the *one* natural stuff of the universe. Nothing about us need be *super-natural*.

I have a strong awareness of my being *one* with and continuous with the overall process of the *development* of the basic stuff of the universe from the Big Bang to

Beethoven and beyond: I am a small organized eddy in that flowing river that is the cosmos—as is this chalice flame right now. Amazingly, I am one small part of the universe that has become *conscious* and *perceptive*. That’s what each of us is: a bit of the universe organized into consciousness. *We are the universe become aware of itself*.

Again, no scientist can rationally disagree.

My sense of individualized oneness with the universe, and my sense of kinship with other similar beings—we are after all siblings born of the same cosmos—that sense of kinship generates within me feelings of care and for the whole cosmic process of development, and care and compassion for my fellow beings as other conscious parts of that process: humans who are other swirling eddies of consciousness in this same big cosmic river.

Within the history of the *human* species, I and many others see the evolution of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness: we have at least 5000 years of *progress* in the arts, in science, and especially in *morality*: the gradual strengthening of *compassion* relative to aggression in controlling human behaviors; that is, human cultures have become gradually more morally advanced. That progress in Beauty, Truth and Goodness is a thread running through all of human history. Again, I don’t think any well-informed student of the human sciences can rationally disagree with that statement. Yes, this progress is true in spite of the many manifestations of ugliness, falsity, and badness still with us in the world. After all, the majority of life on this planet is still one-celled organisms. But that doesn’t mean that life itself hasn’t progressed over the past 3.5 billion years.

My sense of oneness with this *progressive* evolution, of my being a *development into consciousness* of this cosmic progress, creates for me an *obligation* (that is, a compelling ideal) to be a positive force in the furtherance of this progress (after all, a manifestation of that evolutionary progress is what I am in my essence; it's what we all are). My sense of oneness with this *progressive* evolution, creates for me an obligation to be a positive force for progress in my small daily actions and in my overall life plan—including my own personal furtherance of beauty, truth, and goodness as best I can. Do I consistently adhere to this obligation? Of course not—but it remains my guiding ideal; as I suspect it is the guiding ideal for each of you, more, or less, consciously.

Consequently, my sense of care and obligation (based on my sense of kinship with the overall progress of the universe and my kinship with other beings) generates an *ultimate purpose* for my life: the purpose of developing myself and my world in furtherance of the progress of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness. This is an organizing principle for my life plans. That overarching goal creates a sense of inner harmony among the various conflicting forces in my mind which thereby are attuned to the same ideal. Carrying out that life plan creates a tremendous sense of personal fulfillment. This ultimate life purpose eliminates any existential concern about the meaninglessness of life or the futility all human existence.

For *traditional* theists, this progressive and creative power of the universe is a *superhuman personality*—the traditional image of God. For *modernist* secularists, the fundamental power of the universe is physical and biochemical. Within non-traditional *postmodern* spirituality, the creative power of the universe is, metaphorically, a *force* in all things that includes *development toward progress*. Which of those interpretations

each of us holds is largely a function of our particular life history of Nature and Nurture—our capacities and opportunities.

On Thanksgiving Day, in the company of those with a *variety* of traditional, secularist, and postmodern beliefs, I will not have a problem with any of these interpretations. I hope that among your family and friends who have different beliefs than you do, that you also won't have a problem with *their* individual interpretation of the fundamental mystery of the power of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness. As we've known since the writings of the preeminent philosopher Immanuel Kant, in the 1780s, *all* of our statements about the Ultimate *have to be* metaphor and poetry—but those statements are still *true* when seen from a high enough perspective. (Robert Frost's poems are metaphor and fiction; yet each one is also expressing the truth. Two roads didn't *actually* have to diverge in a yellow wood for it to be true that the type of road in life that we've taken makes all the difference.)

Who, or What, is responsible for the *progress* we've seen in the last 13.5 billion years? Who, or What, has created in each of us *perception* of, and an *attraction* to, beauty, truth, and goodness? Is the most elemental nature of the Universe a "Who" with some sort of *intentionality* toward progress, or is it a "What" with just a blind *trajectory* toward progress? I don't know and I can guarantee you, neither does anyone else.

At this point in my 30-odd years of studying the matter, I think that when, and if, humans finally do comprehend the true nature of the creative universe, then neither the pronouns *Who* nor *What* will apply. We do not yet have the word or the concept that will apply. If we eventually do have the concepts to correctly name and know the essence of the universe, then it will be because, finally, human consciousness will have evolved far

enough to *directly know* that essence in ourselves and in the world immediately around us. Then, through us humans, the Universe will *know* what it is.

But regardless of concepts or terminology: for that cosmic progress of ever-improving beauty, truth, and goodness I am thankful. For my being a *self-aware* development of the universe, I am thankful. For my being of a species with the emotional development to experience *joy* in existence, I am thankful. For being of a species with the ability to see and comprehend the world, I am thankful.

I am *thankful to* something or someone because winning that coin-toss of fate determining the nature of our existence was not accidental. Rather, the coin-toss was *fixed in our favor* to live lives of progress, and of the fulfillment of our basic nature. Who, or What, fixed that cosmic coin-toss in our favor, I don't know and neither does anyone else. Was it fixed in our favor by some cosmic *intention*, or by just blind cosmic *trajectory*; I don't know—but to Whatever or Whomever, I am thankful.

May each of us be *fully* grateful in all three ways: thankful to the people who have nurtured us; may we harbor little resentment for what we do not have; and may we be thankful to the *creativity of the universe*, however we name that creativity—from the God of religion to the quantum vacuum of physics—may we be thankful for the ultimate meaning and purpose of our existence.

Happy Thanksgiving.

Jeffrey Tate