

Be Mice Elf

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 25 November 2007
Chip Roush

FIRST READING Chrystos is a Native American activist and writer. She was born in 1946 in San Francisco, to a Menominee father and a Lithuanian mother. She identifies as an “Urban Indian.” This poem was written to, and about, her niece. The word “Tia” means “aunt.”

Sunday night we're sitting around the table greasy with rice BBQ ribs & scattered peas
because your baby brother Manley is still learning spoons You're on my lap earnestly copying words I've
printed for you from the bottom up
Your delight & surprise at each
W or O finished
color my heart Leaning back in my arms your eyes are dark with happiness
I'm your Tia

with no children of my own Your fingers trace my name on my shirt which you copy
admiring the diamonds You shake your head seriously when I tell you they're only rhinestones You insist
clearly that they're diamonds
& they become so We laugh so hard at Manley the rice into the salad
Shyly
you say to me in a whisper

Manley will get OLD like me I remember when 5
was very old My fingers are orange from your Crayola marker
I don't want to wash I save the poem you made of the words I wrote for you very seriously
framing it in oak
for my kitchen
where it shines saying
Chrystos
like Rebecca
laughs birds
the colors I love you & oh how I do

SECOND READING Robert Fulghum was born in Waco, Texas, in 1937. He was an IBM salesman, and then a Unitarian Universalist minister. His first collection of essays, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, was published in 1986. He now lives in Seattle, and on the isle of Crete. This is adapted from his second collection, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*.

“There is a bench in the city where I live. Its structure is simple—three slabs of smooth gray granite, each six inches thick. The seat piece is sixteen inches wide by forty-two inches long. The two supporting legs are sixteen inches high. Having checked with the compass to be certain, I can tell you that the bench has been carefully aligned so that its long sides face east and west and its two ends point north and south.

This sturdy seat was placed with purpose on the highest ground on the highest hill in my city. So that when the sky is clear on a summer's morning, you can see almost sixty miles in three directions while sitting on the bench.

Chiseled into the edge of the bench are the words *West lies Puget Sound— East the might Cascades run free—*

North is the University— South, a great tree. All these things were loved by me. The words are an epitaph. The bench is, in fact, a tombstone in a cemetery. And I would take you there to sit if I could. You wouldn't feel uncomfortable sitting on it, I promise. You wouldn't even notice what it was at first. It's right on the edge of a paved lane that curves through the burial grounds, placed so that you are clearly invited to use it. The closest living thing is a dawn redwood tree, comforting in its great age and size—a stout and worthy companion.

The placement of this bench, the words on the edge, the consciousness of the view—all say that someone went to a lot of trouble to be useful in death. A parting gesture of quiet generosity has been made.

In over twenty-five years as a clergyman, I have been involved in hundreds of funerals—in the dying that went before and the burial that came after. There is an inevitable narcissism therein—a focus on self: what I want for MY funeral and what I want done with MY body and what I want for MY epitaph—a very human holding-on to identity as long as breath and granite last. The monuments left behind in the hallowed ground serve to separate the dead from the living and the dead from one another. For me, tombstones are markers of loneliness.

But this bench I speak of is another story. Unique. No name. No conventional epitaph. And no dates. Just an unspoken open invitation for anyone to sit and think. What marks this grave is the gift of silent companionship that bridges loneliness. In all the cemeteries I have visited around the world, I have seen nothing like it—and nothing so fine.

That bench has become a spiritual retreat for me over the years. And I know that I am not the only one to use it, for once I found a note taped under the bench. Not for me; for a young woman from a young man who was in love with her and wrote her careless poetry with great passion. (*No, I'm not sorry I snooped; and yes, I put it back as I found it; and no, I didn't hide in the bushes to see who came for the note. Secret lovers have enough to worry about as it is.*)

Twice I have shared the bench with strangers. I can't explain how we each knew the bench was important to the other and that company was welcome. We just knew, that's all. We sat in silence and went our ways.

And it was on that bench, the summer morning after my fiftieth birthday, that I came to the moment in life when one crosses over from the abstract intellectual knowledge that all human beings die to the active realization that I will die. Me. Fulghum. Will not be. Sooner or later.

Not only did I realize that I will die, but I walked away thinking, Well, it's okay.

I connect that moment of enlightenment with the peculiar sanctuary of the bench and whoever provided it. I accept the challenge of my unknown benefactor to also leave behind some gift for the living...

That bench will last hundreds of years. Many people will sit on it and think not of the name of its owner but of the nameless joys of this sweet life and the mystery of death and how utterly amazing it all is, and that somehow, sometimes, things are just as they should be."

SERMON How many of you have ever felt a similar epiphany, that sometimes things **are** just as they should be? How many of you are equally certain that sometimes, things are **not** as they should be? How many try to be grateful for both the things that are as they should be, and for the lessons which may appear in the things which are not?

Once upon a time, a woman named Sandra found herself at a florist's. Sandra's life was in turmoil. She felt like she was getting sick, and her parents were in declining health. Her husband's company had "threatened" to transfer his job to a new location. Their son seemed to be on drugs, and was resisting any effort to help. Sandra didn't really feel like buying any flowers, but she had wanted to get off the street, to wipe the tears from her eyes, so she ducked into the florist's.

Alas, the counter was at the very front of the shop, and the clerk asked if she could help. Sandra blurted out "no," and was a bit embarrassed when she continued, "In the last five months, everything that could go wrong has gone wrong." The clerk just nodded, and said, inexplicably, "I have the perfect arrangement for you."

Just then, someone else entered the shop, and the clerk excused herself to greet the new customer: "Hi, Barbara, let me get your order." The clerk walked back to a small workroom, then quickly reappeared, carrying an arrangement of greenery, bows, and what appeared to be long-stemmed thorny roses. Except the ends of the rose stems were neatly snipped: there were no flowers. "Do you want these in a box?" asked the clerk. Sandra watched - was this a joke? Who would want rose stems with no flowers! She waited for laughter, but neither woman laughed. "Yes, please," Barbara replied with an appreciative smile. "You'd think after three years of getting the special, I wouldn't be so moved by its significance, but I can feel it right here, all over again," and she gently tapped her chest.

After Barbara had paid and left, Sandra stammered, "Ah, that lady just left with ... uh ... she left with no flowers!" "That's right," said the clerk. "I cut off the flowers. That's the 'Special'. I call it the Thanksgiving Thorns Bouquet. Barbara came into the shop four years ago, feeling much as you do today," explained the clerk. "She thought she had very little to be thankful for. She had just lost her father to cancer; the family business was failing; her pregnant daughter's boyfriend had left; and she was facing major surgery.

"That same year I had lost my husband," continued the clerk. "For the first time in my life, I had to spend the holidays alone. I had no children, no husband, no family nearby, and too much debt to allow any travel."

"So what did you do?" asked Sandra.

"I learned to be thankful for thorns," answered the clerk quietly. "I've always appreciated the good things in my life and I never questioned why those good things happened to me, but when the bad stuff hit, I cried out, 'Why? Why me?!' It took time for me to learn that the difficult times are important to our growth. Now I appreciate the resilience and the strength I learned, and I find comfort in consoling others."

At that point, a man walked in the shop. "Hey, Phil!" the clerk greeted him, quickly grabbing a tissue-wrapped arrangement from the refrigerator. "My wife sent me in to get our usual Thanksgiving arrangement ... twelve thorny, long-stemmed stems!" laughed Phil. "Those are for your wife?" asked Sandra incredulously. "Do you mind telling me why she wants a bouquet that looks like that?" "Three years ago, my wife and I nearly divorced," Phil replied. "After forty years, we were in a real mess, but with perseverance and a little luck, we got through it. Jenny here told me she kept a vase of rose stems to remind her of what she learned from the thorny times, and that was good enough for me. I took home some of those stems. My wife and I decided to label each one for a specific 'problem' and give thanks for what that problem taught us." As Phil paid the clerk, he said to Sandra, "I highly recommend the Special!"

"Thank you for trying, but I can *not* be thankful for the thorns in my life" Sandra said to the clerk. "It's all too raw, too... fresh."

"Well," the clerk replied carefully, "my experience has shown me that the thorns make the roses more precious. Our lives are more meaningful because of the struggles we have to overcome. Of course I'm not glad that my husband died—I still miss him, every day—but I am glad to be the person I am now, and I appreciate all the good times we had, even more.

"My minister told me, 'the depth of your grief reveals the depth of your capacity to love.' I don't know you, but you are obviously suffering a lot. The thorn of your grief must be really sharp. And that must mean that you have a huge capacity to care. The bloom of your rose must be really beautiful."

At that point, Sandra let go of her tears. The two tracks down her cheeks became a deluge, as she sobbed out her sorrow. Finally, she looked up, and snuffled out, "Thank you. Thank you for...that. I will take a dozen long-stemmed thorns, please."

"I hoped you would," said the clerk gently. "I'll have them ready in a minute."

Sandra thanked her again, and when she asked the price, the clerk responded, "Nothing. Nothing but a promise to come back next year, or sooner if you'd like. The first year's arrangement is always on me."

When I talk about being grateful, for both the roses and the thorns in our lives, I do not necessarily mean that we are being grateful **TO** somebody—in particular, to some supernatural white-robed deity in the sky.

That may be a fine metaphor, and if it serves you, I affirm its use, and I resist the recent efforts of the religious right to expand their culture war from Christmas to Thanksgiving. Just as they urge their followers to hear the phrase "happy holidays" not as an inclusive wish for joy and peace to all people, but rather as an anti-Christian subversion of the one, true greeting, "Merry Christmas," some are now saying that Thanksgiving must be all and only about giving thanks to the only god they approve of.

This makes my teeth hurt.

Leaving aside the issue that it is not only wrong, but simply impossible, to regulate the names by which other people connect to what they find sacred, gratitude is a human emotion. Giving thanks is a mundane, glorious, fundamentally human activity. It requires no object, much less a supernatural one.

Thanksgiving, like worship, is a human expression about our shared life experience. The Anglo Saxon root of "worship" is "worthship"—considering and crafting things of worth. Worship is a human activity which questions, cries out for and exclaims what it is that we find of worth in our lives. The root of Thanksgiving is giving thanks—again, a human activity which expresses our human gladness for that which we find valuable. It may be directed to someone or something; for example, I am grateful *to Becky* for the delicious turkey she cooked last week; but it can also be a simple declaration about my emotional landscape: *I feel thankful*.

In our first reading, as the poet Chrystos reflects on her love for her niece, she may or may not be grateful **to** someone or something, but she is indeed grateful. And our second reading ended with Fulghum's gratitude for the "nameless joys of this sweet life and the mystery of death and how utterly amazing it all is."

Look around on this chancel—see all the photos and reminders of people and things for which we are grateful. See the candles of joy and concern burning, over there—again, reminders of those whom we love. Does it really matter which name we use, or if we use a name at all, to describe our thankfulness? Or might we just smile and reflect on all the good things in our lives?

Let the congregation say, "we feel thankful!"

To make this a little more concrete, allow me to name some of the moments from the past year for which I am thankful:

I am thankful for the patience in the driver(s) behind me who did not honk, or shout, or otherwise indicate impatience, as I have sat motionless at a stop sign trying to figure out where I am in my new city, or where I should be going.

I am thankful for the hematologist who knew enough about Unitarian Universalism to make intelligent jokes about our chosen faith.

For the blessed moment as a hospice patient exhausted herself paying me the courtesy of walking me to her door.

For the look in the family's eyes, as I name and bless and dedicate their child

For the sight of my grandmother and Mary Ann Force, standing in the church kitchen and looking each other straight in the eye, each of them four feet and ten inches of determination and love.

For flames shooting up around our backyard grill, as the wooden countertop around the grill caught fire. As my inlaws remind me, "it wouldn't burn if you didn't have it—so be thankful for what you have!"

For yellow leaves and orange berries sticking up out of the bright white snow.

I invite you to play along. Please consider something in your last year for which you are grateful. It might be a big deal, or just a small moment; it might be a joyous rose or the difficult lesson of a thorn. And if you are willing, find someone to swap stories with. You have every right to not participate—you may simply say "I prefer not to," and we will honor your choice. And if you want to participate, until the bell brings us back together, please share some thanksgiving. {sharing...bellsound}

One of the things for which I am most grateful is the freedom I have to be authentically myself. I live in a country with a fundamental right to self expression. I live in a state where the governor just signed an executive order mandating that all state positions will not discriminate against people with different gender identities or gender expressions— so that transgendered people can be who they are. I participate in a faith tradition which affirms the right of conscience, where we are each encouraged to follow our own spiritual paths.

The title of this morning's sermon comes from a song by Sly & the Family Stone, "Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)." After a number of late-60's hits, Sly and his family, like many others in the culture, were becoming disillusioned by their perceived failure to change the world with their optimistic songs. Now, I happen to believe that they *did* make a positive impact on the world; but they evidently expected to change the whole world overnight, and indeed, that did not happen. So they quit trying to be so relentlessly optimistic, and began making music with lyrics which were perhaps more realistic, and Sly started out by singing to their fans, thank you for letting me be myself again.

Like Sly Stone, I am grateful that we can be ourselves. Religious conservatism requires that people think alike. Creedal faiths require you to publicly state that you believe a certain set of doctrinal beliefs. We affirm that there are many paths up the mountain.

In this room this morning there might be Republicans and Democrats, Jews, Christians, Pagans, Religious Humanists, Atheists and Agnostics. There are people who are pro-choice, and people who are pro-life. Some feel the pull of something larger than ourselves; some are certain that no such thing exists. Some of us prefer to hear only classical music in church; some want jazz, and rock, and reggae and I bet some even want to hear some country and western. Some of us prefer our social justice work in the form of direct action, like feeding homeless people at Tuesday lunch, or in the Safe Harbor program; some prefer political advocacy, working with the League of Women Voters, or collecting petitions to end torture or discrimination. Some, of course, do both. Some of us prefer paper, and some plastic. (and some re-use their own canvas shopping bags). Some want us to build a wing on this building, and some want us to move downtown.

Many of us hold different, even seemingly contradictory, opinions, all at the same time. And on our good days, we are able to disagree with respect, and genuine interest about other peoples' opposing views. In our best moments, we are not fearful or defensive about our positions, but we can talk about, and explore, diverse religious thought. And all of this is *built into* our religious tradition.

With the freedom of the pulpit, I am allowed to say anything I feel appropriate; with the freedom of the pew, you are allowed to disagree with anything I say. My mother-in-law, while eating Thanksgiving dinner with her siblings, heard her sister talk about getting up early to go shopping on Friday. She chastised her decision, using my sermon from last week to disapprove of her choice. My father-in-law kicked her under the table, because in their Baptist tradition, the word of the preacher is law, and defines good and evil, sin and salvation. By contrast, at Reverend Kevin's Thanksgiving table, when somebody brought up shopping on Friday, there was a momentary hush, then people began talking about the sermon, and how it did or did not reflect their opinions, and whether it did or did not make sense in their particular situation to pursue the big sales on the day after Thanksgiving.

This Thanksgiving weekend, I feel thankful that we can be ourselves. I am grateful that I am part of a vibrant, diverse, growing congregation that explores and celebrates our differences. So may we be.