

# *What We Count On*

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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10 October, 2021



Looking Glass Pond © 2021 Sarah Wert

Last week I mentioned that, leading up to seminary, I started reading a certain book. Today, I won't get into the specifics of the book, other than to say that I re-read it again into my first year of seminary and brought it out wherever I might have a bite to eat or wherever I might have some time to sit around.

And one of those places was a greasy-spoon around the corner from the university. They had all-day breakfast, including a "student special", and I found it convenient that it was less than a five-minute walk to most of my classes.

Suffice it to say that I came around there a few times per week. It didn't take long before the server began to ask me if I'd have "the usual". And I found it unexpectedly comforting that I had someone who would ask me that question.

It didn't take much longer until I could simply walk into the diner, plunk myself down on a seat, open my book, and – when I looked up a few minutes later – there would be a warm cup of coffee, right next to a plate, with the right number eggs, done the way I liked them, with my favourite sides, and my preferred bread done how I needed it to be done.

Now, I haven't gone into any of the specifics of my breakfast preferences... but you know who knew all those details? My regular server. She knew the specs without flaw. I came to *count* on it.

There are times when a pattern like this might seem, or feel, like a rut... a stubborn monotony that could use livening up. But during those school years, juggling a heavy course load, and a shifting work

schedule, that breakfast student special was a welcome anchor to my week. I knew that, whether it was early in the morning, or late in the afternoon, I could walk in and find a meal. I knew what it would cost, how much it would feed me, how much I'd enjoy it, and who would serve it to me, without even having to ask – we'd save our words for chitchat instead. I could count on it.

There were other unexpected details that I started counting on... as much as I fancied myself a regular, I learned that there were higher calibre regulars. Even though this diner categorically did not take reservations, there was always one booth with a “reserved” sign on it between 11am and 1pm, for the lady that lived upstairs and who *always* ate lunch there. The diner could count on her being there, and they reserved her place. I once made the mistake of sitting on the “forbidden booth” during lunchtime, and my server politely explained the situation, as she offered me another seat, before going to get me “the usual”.

Of course, in life, there are very few absolutes. Some things *did* change. Occasionally, my regular server might have been off duty and I'd have to spell out my usual order. A couple times, I did have to give the server a heads-up that I was in the mood for something different that particular day. At least once, inflation crept in, and the student special had a slightly different price tag – still a good deal, but the dollar amount was higher than when I first started going there.

One day, I noticed that the “reserved” sign was nowhere to be seen during lunchtime, and my regular server assured me that, yes, I could go sit on the “forbidden booth” – turns out the regular lady had moved out to a different condo.

Eventually, *I* moved out, as I followed my calling and took a ministerial internship in another city. What we count on will change along with our circumstances and our needs.

Noticing these things that we count on – even if only for stretches at a time – is part of the practice of gratitude that can enrich our lives by

replenishing our “wellness accounts”. And if we do our housekeeping, at least every so often, we might find that we are richer than we thought. And in Canada, this weekend is just one of those times when we intentionally set ourselves out to do just that.

We spoke last week about the housekeeping that comes with taking account of our stories and our histories. This includes taking a sincere look at our lives as they are, affirmations and painful moments alike, so that we may have a better sense of who we are, how we might be more of who we *think* we are, who we want to be, and *how* we want to be.

An honest account – or at least, as honest as we can make it – is key to making real progress for ourselves, our communities, and all our relations. And failing to do this can land us in trouble.

It so happens that Canadian Thanksgiving tends to land around the same time as the somewhat newly-established Indigenous Peoples Day in the United States, on October 11 this year. This is around the date that was originally observed as the anniversary of the Christopher Columbus landing in the Caribbean in 1492... a date which symbolizes the beginning of colonialism in the Americas, and which, until recently, was widely called “Columbus Day” in the United States.

Of course, U.S. Thanksgiving falls later in the year, and its story has also been mythologized in a way that depicts a rather incomplete and inaccurate account of colonialism in North America.

Here, we just had a newly-established National Day for Truth and Reconciliation last month. So, this is a time in both countries, when we can also make and renew intentions toward a more wholesome understanding and awareness of our history, in the journey toward truth, toward healing, toward reconciliation. That’s part of remaining accountable to each other and all our relations.

We have *also* talked about how giving thanks – acts of gratitude – can be a kind of accountability. As it, too, is an exercise in deepening awareness.

In much the same way that some of the more difficult parts of our stories can sometimes be glossed over when we record our stories in a certain way – hindering us from really taking stock of our reality – it can also be true that we sometimes forget to keep track of those things that sustain us, that can keep us going, that can bring joy into our lives. And losing track of these can also get us into trouble.

Now, when exercising gratitude, it can be tempting to proceed as if blessings and curses were “assets” and “liabilities” in a regular “ledger” account, where one of each would cancel the other out... making it some kind of game in which the left and right columns fight each other out to see if we can stay in the black, lest we find ourselves in the red.

But a more helpful practice of gratitude might be in taking a slightly different logic. Rather than tallying up our problems, and see if counting our blessings can “cancel” out our “deficits”, a more radical thanksgiving might look, not at ignoring or forgetting our issues, and rather seek clarity and awareness in what can sustain us through them.

As we’ve discussed, ignoring or forgetting our issues – our “liabilities” – can land us in trouble, and stall real improvements. Naming these, in fact, can be quite liberating... sometimes, that’s all we need when we seek out a listening ear, or a shoulder to cry on.

A radical gratitude, in turn, does not call us to skip over these “liabilities”, and rather look at what *else* we have with us, alongside everything else that is in our lives. This is to say, taking stock of our “wellness account” – the “assets” that can keep us company, maybe even get us through the tough times.

What these are, the things that we count on, can be very personal. Very often, people will name... *people* as their assets – friends, family,

communities. What we count on can also be *places* – home, the places you live in, the neighbourhood, the local place where you might be a regular. What we count on can be *activities*, sports or exercise, comfort watching favourite shows or movies... *relaxing*, when possible, can be one of those anchors that we count on. What we count on can even be *things* – a dear keepsake, an heirloom, a photo, a memento.

My friends, in this community, we count on each other. Sometimes, things might look a bit different, as circumstances and needs change. The people that have served our church change from time to time, lay and ordained. The way we gather, the way we stay connected, the way we do worship, the way we do church – these have shifted and will continue to shift.

My friends, we may count on one another, even as each of us and our community continues to face challenges and struggles. My friends, we may exercise the practice of radical gratitude, not by overlooking or ignoring whatever painful or unpleasant experiences we have, but by counting on all that which carries us through all of it, and by celebrating that which we care to honour. Radical gratitude offers us not a way to “outcount our deficits” but a practice toward being more deeply aware of what is with us.

My friends, so may we be graced.

In Solidarity, in Love, in Gratitude

Amen

*Suggested Hymns:***Opening Hymn #67 We Sing Now Together**

~)-| Words: Edwin T. Buehrer, 1894-1969, alt © UUA

Music: Adrian Valerius's *Netherlandtsch Gedenckclanck*, 1626,

arr. by Edward Kremser, 1838-1914

KREMSER

**Hymn #70 Heap High the Farmer's Wintry Hoard**

Words: John Greenleaf Whittier 1807-1892

Music: American folk melody, arr. by Annabel Morris Buchanan, 1899-1983, © 1938, renewed 1966 J.

Fischer & Bros. Co.,

harm. By Charles H. Webb, 1933- , © 1989 J. Fischer & Bros. Co.

LAND OF REST

**Closing Hymn #71 In the Spring with Plow and Harrow**

~)-| Words: John Andrew Storey, 1935-1997

~)-| Music: David Dawson, 1939

HEATON