

# “For All That Is Our Life”

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a sermon by Dan Lillie  
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## THE HYMN

*For all that is our life we sing our thanks and praise;  
for all life is a gift which we are called to use  
to build the common good and make our own days glad.*

This hymn is a favorite of mine. In only a few short verses, I think it so wonderfully captures the essence of gratitude in its fullness and complexity.

Gratitude is an orientation of the mind and heart that includes a willingness to show appreciation. It is an attitude that we can cultivate if we intentionally choose to do so.

And it really is in our best interest to learn how to cultivate a sense of gratitude, because it is our own lives that are made better when we practice it.

## POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

I first began to think seriously about gratitude when I took a Positive Psychology class in college. Before then, I had always thought of gratitude around Thanksgiving, when my turn would come during the blessing of our holiday meal to share what I was grateful for.

And, of course, I was aware of the sense of appreciation I felt when I would received something helpful or pleasant, or when someone’s kindness touched my life.

But when I took that Positive Psychology class, I gained a deeper understanding of the power and significance of gratitude. Positive Psychology seeks to understand human potential, well-being, and what makes us thrive; and so, it’s a field where the topic of gratitude has received a lot of attention.

The studies on gratitude show plenty of evidence that it improves many aspects of our lives, benefitting us physically, emotionally, and socially.

But I not only studied gratitude, I practiced it. My professor challenged the class with two gratitude assignments: to write gratitude letters, and to keep a gratitude journal.

And it was through these assignments, through these practices, that I discovered gratitude improves another aspect of my life. I learned that spiritually, gratitude is good for the soul.

## GRATITUDE IN OUR SPIRITUAL LIVES

Now, as far as I know, there is no scientific way to measure or test the well-being of a soul, so you'll just have to take my word on this. Now, before we talk about spiritual well-being, I want to say something about spirituality:

Spirituality, as I understand it, is about connecting, in two different directions: it's about inwardly connecting with our inner selves, often through contemplation and reflection; and it's about outwardly connecting to something greater than or beyond our individual selves.

And when it comes to our spiritual lives, gratitude is essential in making those connections. It nourishes us. Gratitude is the life-giving water to quench our sacred thirst.

Inwardly, gratitude is the antidote to our constant wanting, to the endless pursuit of our unrealized and unobtained desires. When we embrace an attitude of gratitude, we appreciate what we have rather than fixate on what we do not, and this can make us happy; or even better, it can help us find a sense of inner peace.

Outwardly, gratitude helps us connect to others and the world that we share. Spirituality is incredibly personal, but it is not entirely private. We know ourselves in relation to others, and so we grow as we encounter each other on our spiritual journeys. Gratitude helps us create relationships, forge the bonds of community, and find meaning and purpose in our lives through service to others and building the common good.

*For needs which others serve, for services we give,  
for work and its rewards, for hours of rest and love;  
we come with praise and thanks for all that is our life.*

In order to be at our spiritual best, we need to belong to a spiritual community. This doesn't mean that there's no place for individual spiritual practices or solitude. It means that, as important as it is to reflect inwardly and know ourselves, we cannot experience the wholeness of our humanity without others.

I find it interesting that this hymn says "our life", rather than "our lives". The plural "our" seems mismatched to the singular "life". This could just be a grammatical oversight, but I actually think it was intentional. I think that "our life" is referring to our (singular) shared communal life, and to the universal shared experience of being alive.

It is through our relationships that we live the most beautiful parts of being human: compassion, empathy, acceptance, justice, love- these dynamics exist in our shared, communal life.

## **THE SHADOW SIDE**

It is through gratitude and appreciation for one another that we are able to build relationships and communities, and so it is gratitude that makes it possible for us to experience the

wholeness of our humanity. Unfortunately, that wholeness also has a shadow side. Tragedy, suffering, and pain are also a part of the human experience.

*For sorrow we must bear, for failures, pain, and loss,  
for each new thing we learn, for fearful hours that pass:  
we come with praise and thanks for all that is our life.*

One of the reasons that I love this hymn is because it calls us to gratitude when life is going well, and when we are facing the tough stuff. It doesn't take some Pollyanna view that all is always right and good in the world. We know that isn't true.

Many of us are feeling the weight and tension of an increasingly divided nation. As we approach Election Day for the midterms on Tuesday, many of us are waiting with baited breath, as anxious as we are hopeful that this moment might hold an opportunity for something better. But in this heavy, fraught time when human rights are being challenged, identities are being threatened, and lives are being destroyed, hope can be hard to find.

### **ANTICIPATORY GRATITUDE**

And this is one way that gratitude can help us: we can have gratitude for things that haven't actually happened yet. I like to call this anticipatory gratitude.

Anticipatory grief is a real thing, so why not anticipatory gratitude? Why can't we be grateful for something in advance? And just as anticipatory grief is actual grief felt in the present moment for something that has yet to happen, anticipatory gratitude can be actual gratitude felt right now for something that hasn't happened yet.

And so, whether we call it anticipatory gratitude, or whether we call it hope, let's gather some appreciation for the future, for that which lies ahead, for the potential of tomorrow that will be born out of the impermanence of today. Let's take comfort (and dare I say, express our gratitude) that it will not always be like this; that this too shall pass. And that we will have some say in writing the next chapter.

### **A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE**

Rabbi Yakov Heber reflects on the power of anticipatory gratitude in the Jewish tradition. He writes, "By... thanking G-d in advance for the rain that [G-d] will bring, we gain Divine favor to send the rain. [There is] power [in] appreciating and thanking Hashem for all Hashem has done for us."

Now, it sounds like the Rabbi believes that expressing anticipatory gratitude for something that has not yet come (like his example of rain), does more than provide a reason to hope, but that it actually gains Divine favor, which helps make it happen. And I wonder, for us Religious Liberals in the room who have a theology that puts human agency front and center; I wonder

if anticipatory gratitude, truly felt and intentionally expressed, can be the catalyst we need, the motivation we require, to use our own power to actualize our potential?

Or, more simply put: for those of us who believe that we have to act if we want to see changes in the world, can anticipatory gratitude can be the kick-in-the-pants we need to do the hard work of making what we hope for, a reality? Can anticipatory gratitude be the attitude shift that helps us persevere through our difficult moments?

It can't hurt to try.

When we are dealing with difficult things, things that challenge us, things we didn't ask for and don't want- when we encounter these things, I think that gratitude can help us. I'm not saying that we should be grateful that this unwelcomed thing is happening, or that we should adopt an "everything happens for a reason" mentality.

I'm saying that we should acknowledge the difficult thing, admit that it's difficult and that we have to face it, and then remember to be grateful- not for the thing that we are facing, but for all the things that give us the strength to face it.

One thing I've learned about gratitude, is that if I look for things to be grateful for, they are always, without exception, there.

When I first started keeping that gratitude journal for my Positive Psychology class, I had a hard time coming up with things to list. But then, I became more practiced at noticing all the reasons in my life to be grateful. When I made a habit of looking for the blessings all around me, they soon became easy to find.

### **THE MAIN POINT OF GRATITUDE**

And so, amidst the difficult, challenging, and downright painful moments of our lives, the silver lining – at least for me – is that these moments serve as a reminder to return to gratitude; to remember that I have so much to be grateful for.

And while I may not be ready to say "thank you" for everything in my life, one of those things that I am forever and always grateful for, is beloved community. As disappointing, scary, or even painful as things might get, there is nothing I can imagine facing where knowing that someone has my back isn't helpful.

And so, I remember with gratitude that I am part of this community, and that this community is part of the living tradition of Unitarian Universalism. I remember that many people have come before us who have faced worse than we have, and lived to pass the mantle on to all of us. I remember that we have been through challenges together before, and we are stronger for it. And I remember that we have been through difficult elections before, and we are stronger for it.

For all of these things, I offer my abundant gratitude;

and for all that is yet-to-come, I offer my anticipatory gratitude: may it be the kick in the pants I need to make real the hope that I hold for us, and for this world that we share.