

## ABSENCE OF LIMIT

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
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Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday—not because it’s such an extraordinary event, but for precisely the opposite reason. Thanksgiving invites us to celebrate the stuff of everyday life: family and friends, shelter, and the harvest. At its best, Thanksgiving is a festival of gratitude. If Unitarian Universalists are the gratitude people, as I believe we are, then Thanksgiving is our holiday.

During the winter of 1621, more than half of the hundred-plus settlers in the Plymouth colony had succumbed to disease and cold, sometimes dying at the rate of two or three a day. But over the following summer, the growing season had been generous; and the settlers had confidence that they would bury fewer of their number during the winter to come. Remembering their sons and daughters and parents and friends who had died, the settlers gathered on what came to be called the first Thanksgiving to give thanks. As the poet Derek Walcott puts it, their business and duty was to speak of the light’s bounty on familiar things: family and friends, shelter, and the harvest.

The story of Thanksgiving is more complicated than that, of course. In John Steinbeck’s essay *America and Americans*, he recognizes that the first settlers worked for this land, fought for it, and died for it. But, he says, they also stole and cheated and double-crossed for it. Theft of land from Native Americans was commonplace, as was the enslavement of non-Europeans, especially those brought here from Africa against their will. Even so, Steinbeck says, over time “we became more alike than we were different—a new society; not great, but fitted by our very faults for greatness, *E Pluribus Unum*”: from many, one.

One nation from many people. One dream from many hopes. One goal from many labors. One feast from many sources. Here’s the principle: if you pay careful attention to one thing, your attention should eventually expand to everything.

For example, what happens if you pay careful attention to pumpkin pie? You should soon become aware that a single slice of pie—a feast on a plate—comes to you from many people, and many labors, and many sources. A single-parent mother of three in Jamaica shelled the nutmeg. A teenage boy in the Dominican Republic chopped the sugar cane. A quarter-million dollar combine in Kansas harvested the wheat. A cow on a corporate-owned farm in Pennsylvania gave the milk. The rain watered the pumpkin patch, and the sun warmed it, and the breeze cooled it. The gravity of the Milky Way galaxy gently holds the sun in place. The rest of the universe, in its turn, makes the Milky Way possible and keeps it viable.

I admit that, for me at least, it’s easier just to eat the pie than it is to focus on who and what made it possible. We often overlook the story behind our experience. This is why gratitude is a discipline. We have to learn it, and practice it, and teach it. If you pay careful attention to one thing, your attention should eventually expand to pay attention to everything connected to it—which is everything.

This realization led the poet William Blake to write of the ability—

To see the world in a grain of sand,  
And Heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour.

Most people tend to think of infinity as an impossibly big number and eternity as an impossibly long time. Neither is the case. Eternity is the absence of time, and infinity is the absence of a largest number. One mathematician describes infinity as a floorless room without walls or a ceiling. Aristotle puts it more precisely: “The essence of the infinite is...the absence of limit.”

The absence of limit: why would you want to hold such a thing in the palm of your hand? Why not? The absence of limit sounds like the founding creed of Western culture. Anything is possible. Not only that, everything is possible. The hallmark of our society is the conviction that there should be no limit to the extent of our freedom, or the range of our opportunities, or the vastness of our wealth. To some extent, we’ve made good on this conviction. Those of us who live in this nation today are, on average, among the most fortunate people ever to walk upon planet Earth.

So why aren’t we happier about it? Compared to almost all of our human ancestors, we are surrounded by a wealth of freedom and opportunity and prosperity. Gregg Easterbrook calls our current situation the progress paradox: often when life gets better, people feel worse. Easterbrook asks, “Why do capitalism and liberal democracy, both of which justify themselves on the grounds that they produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number, leave so much dissatisfaction in their wake?”

Despite our current economic troubles, life today is better than it once was, at least for most of us. The late paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould said, during a presentation here at All Souls, that he could not imagine anyone whose life was dominated by nostalgia for the old days. In centuries past, he pointed out, a man and woman would have a dozen children knowing that fewer than half of those born would live to see their sixteenth birthday. Not to mention that women had little control over their own bodies.

Compared to then, Americans today enjoy relatively high levels of income, standards of health care, and opportunities for leisure. The typical American house has five rooms for a typical American household of two-and-a-half people. On average, we have two rooms of our own. But our level of happiness has not risen with our standard of living.

Richard Layard of the London School of Economics believes our expectation that a higher standard of living will yield more happiness is misguided. Overall, he says, higher incomes do not lead to greater happiness. The main reason they do not, according to Layard, is that we continually find ourselves on a happiness treadmill. Once we get used to air conditioning, for example, having air conditioning no longer makes us happy. Once we get used to surfing the Internet, surfing the Internet no longer makes us happy. Furthermore, says Layard, being aware of other people with higher incomes makes us unhappy. In fact, studies show that lowering other people’s incomes would make us just as happy as raising our own.

Maybe the problem is that we are looking for happiness in all the wrong places, which is where Blake’s poem comes to the rescue. I don’t know how many times I’ve read those few lines, but the number is very large. They are lovely lines, easy to quote

and even easier to dismiss. World in sand, heaven in flower, infinity in hand, eternity in hour: yadda, yadda; yadda, yadda. It all sounds quite divine—a perfect preface to a perfect Thanksgiving.

Here's the problem: I never paid any attention to the next few lines of the poem. They tell the rest of the story, and it's not pretty—like the back story of the first Thanksgiving. Here are the lines:

A robin redbreast in a cage  
Puts all heaven in a rage...  
A dog starv'd at its master's gate  
Predicts the ruin of the state...  
The beggar's rags, fluttering in air,  
Does to rags the heavens tear...  
One mite wrung from the lab'rer's hands  
Shall buy and sell the miser's lands;  
Or, if protected from on high,  
Does that whole nation sell and buy.

But wait, I hear you asking, what do caged birds and starving dogs have to do with happiness, or the extortion of laborers and the corruption of government have to do with infinity as the founding creed of the West? Good question: I'm glad you asked.

Blake titled his poem "Auguries of Innocence." An augury is a foretelling. The word innocent was originally not a moral term but a medical one: it means uninjured or unharmed. The poem foretells how we can remain unharmed by human wickedness. On these terms, innocence is a state of blessedness, even happiness. We could justifiably re-title the poem "Herald of Happiness." What you need to be happy in life, Blake says, is not infinite wealth or infinite possessions; rather, you need to be infinitely attentive to whatever is before you—to what you hold in your hand.

If you want to be happy, begin by paying attention. When you do, you'll see that the one thing in front of you is the result of an infinitely long chain of causes and consequences that extends out to infinity and back to eternity. Sometimes the one thing we see makes us grateful for everything that made it possible. At other times, however, the one thing fills us with shame, or anger, or sadness. Often, our experience will be a blend of joy and woe.

Later in the poem, Blake writes:

Joy and woe are woven fine,  
Clothing for the soul divine;  
Under every grief and pine  
Runs a joy with silken twine.

Blake wrote "Auguries of Innocence" in 1860, but the poem could have been written today. These may in some ways be the best of times, but in others they seem the worst. Anywhere you look, you can see desire that has devolved into greed, cooperation that has metastasized into corruption, and freedom that has putrefied into narcissism. If you pay attention to one thing, you should find yourself paying attention to everything—

which inevitably means confronting the painful truth about the wickedness of humanity and the indifference of nature.

Whether you are looking at a flower or a beggar, Blake says, you are looking at a chain of causes and consequences that ultimate includes everyone and everything. One joy from many sources. One woe from many causes.

Also this: one Galen Guengerich—from many people, and many labors, and many sources. I am wholly dependent on the people and the world around me for everything I need. The first principle of existence is utter dependence. The discipline of gratitude urges me to acknowledge my dependence.

The ethic of gratitude, in turn, ensures that my wellbeing does not cause the people and the world around me to suffer unduly. The turkey I eat on Thanksgiving should be one that was raised humanely. My clothing and my tennis shoes should not be made by eight-year-old children. The delivery man who brings take-out Chinese to my door should know, by the generosity of my tip, that I care about his wellbeing. And so on—ad infinitum: to infinity. There should be no limit to the depth of my gratitude or the extent of my concern.

As I look across our nation and around the world this Thanksgiving season, I'm keenly aware of my good fortune. The food I have to eat is more than ample, and my home is more than adequate shelter. My daughter is healthy and happy. I have a wonderful wife, whom I love fiercely and who loves me back. I've been blessed to serve this marvelous congregation for 18 years. I have extraordinary colleagues here, and trusted friends. Our life together is good. We have everywhere to go.

Thanksgiving is the time when we remind ourselves that we have been given everything. For what is good, we express our gratitude. What is not, we vow to change. As Blake says, "We were made for joy and woe / and when this we rightly know / safely through the world we go."

Stay safe. And Happy Thanksgiving!