

Gratitude and Grief

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

November 9, 2025

Reflection on the Theme – Emily Layfield

Gratitude has picked up a lot of baggage over the years. In a culture that so often wants to avoid reckoning with emotionally hard things, gratitude can be wielded as a cudgel — the “at least you still have your health” or “focus on the positive” or “keep a gratitude journal” kind of advice. Often these are well-meaning wishes for someone to stop suffering, but they can make it seem like pain isn’t okay — like we need to apply gratitude to the wound as a quick remedy so we can get back to being positive enough to be fit for company.

It’s not that gratitude itself is at fault. Most anything good, taken to extremes, can get toxic. As I’ve been reflecting on this idea the last few weeks, I think what I’ve come to is that for me at least, gratitude can be a welcome addition to times of sorrow or struggle but not a replacement. I can find more peace when I can see the silver lining of a cloud, but not if I pretend the cloud is all lining and no rain. When I’ve lived through undeservedly bad things, things I shouldn’t have had to endure, being able to say that they were bad and undeserved and unfair and also that I learned and grew and am grateful for having done so brings me peace. But it doesn’t work if I only say one half or the other. For me, gratitude is not a “but” but an “and”.

Letting feelings be complicated and contradictory and bittersweet creates spaciousness. It allows me to show up for others and for myself with more presence and curiosity. When there’s no rush to replace that complexity with gratitude alone, there’s more room for gratitude to enter.

Grief © by Rev. Mary Gear

I have a vivid memory of driving past a small creek and marshy area in Salem, OR near where I used to live. I regularly drove this patch of road and would often see a pair of wild geese hanging out there, eating the grass, drinking the fresh water, sometimes just resting. Geese mate for life, and I saw this pair year after year. One year, I saw some goslings.

The memory of these geese that is forever etched in my mind is a hard one. One day as I drove by, I saw one of the geese on the side of the road: it looked like it had been hit by a car, broken wings and body. Standing next to this broken body was its mate, seemingly bearing witness to this death, this loss. I don’t know what it was thinking or feeling, but I wanted to howl; I pulled over and I wept.

Animal researchers have learned that geese grieve and in ways that we humans would recognize; they stay in the shelter of mutual grief, shelter area where their mate died, they hang their heads as if sad, they withdraw and isolate, observing a period of mourning, they make loud honks or other vocalizations, their version of howling.

I love the image of grief as a wild animal that moves into my house, that I learn to live with, and that invites me to the back stoop to howl. Perhaps you can relate to that image, too.

In his book, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, Psychologist Francis Weller outlined five gates that invite us to the field of grief. No matter which gate we enter, we find ourselves in the vast terrain of grief where others are as well. Grief is communal, an experience shared by all of us, and by other animals, too. We enter the field of grief through many gates, sometimes by choice as when we decide to leave a job or relationship or move, and sometime by circumstance as when we encounter illness or death.

The first of Weller's gates I'll mention is "The sorrows of the world." We enter this gate when we mourn the destruction of our environment and the loss of life as a result. We enter this gate when we acknowledge the many places of war in the world and the effect on the people and the land. We enter this gate when we mourn the destruction of a social safety net, the detention of humans under inhumane conditions, and the dismantling of the democratic process.

There's plenty to howl about these days as our hearts are broken by the daily news.

A second of Weller's gates is the one we are most familiar with: Everything we love we will lose. This is the paradox of love and loss and the pain of living; we mourn because we love.

Weller writes:

Losing someone or something we love brings us into the shelter of our mutual grief. Grief and love are sisters, woven together from the beginning. Their kinship reminds us that there is no love that does not contain loss and no loss that is not a reminder of the love we carry for what we once held close. Alone and together, death and loss affect us all.

Many of us have losses in our personal lives and in our communities, loss of loved ones, loss of jobs, loss of routines and familiar places. I'm aware that your minister, Kathryn, told you of her retirement next year. In our lives we have plenty of invitations to grieve and to howl.

As a society, we do not grieve well. We might acknowledge a loss, and we tend to rush the process of mourning. If we are lucky, those of us working get a few days off to mourn the loss of a loved one. We get worried if someone seems sad for too long or seems too emotional. And we are uncomfortable with the grief and emotion of others, causing many of us to grieve in isolation.

Weller writes:

Grief is subversive, undermining our society's quiet agreement that we will behave and be in control of our emotions. It is an act of protest that declares our refusal to live numb and small. There is something feral about grief, something essentially outside the ordained and sanctioned behaviors of our culture.

Grief is alive, wild, untamed; it cannot be domesticated. We move in jangled, unsettled, and riotous ways when grief takes hold of us. It is truly an emotion that rises from soul.

I think of grief as a spiritual practice that invites us to connect with other living things and with what we love. Grief asks us to open our hearts and share our deepest longings.

We are now in a time of collective mourning, although some deny this reality; we had barely come through a global pandemic with extraordinary losses across the globe, when we were plunged into chaos and destruction at a national level.

And we lack many ways to grieve together as a community or as a nation. I think this is one of the functions of the political rallies across the country now: sharing our grief and lamentation and casting a vision for a better world.

Within our lamentation comes a sense of longing, yearning for something better.

Longing for a world with more hope and less despair;

Longing for more compassion and fewer hungry bodies.

Longing for a life of more connection and less divisiveness.

Longing for a government that quells hate and violence, rather than generates it.

Longing for a nation that acknowledges its injustices and works to make them right.

Longing for peace and stability for those suffering in war.

Longing for a sense of the common good with each of us doing what is ours to do.

Longing for enough for everyone.

Longing for companions to give us courage, that we might be the people these times require.

Folk singer Carrie Newcomer tells the story from the Great Plains where she lives. She says that, in the winter, farmers tie a rope from their house to the barn to help them get back and forth in the white outs, snowstorms so big and powerful that they can get lost in their own back yard.

I appreciate that image and find comfort in it as we enter into the sacred ground of grief. Community is the lifeline, the tether, that helps us return to the land of the living when we have been in grief either by choice or by circumstances. There is no cure for sorrow, only our lifeline, the comforting love and care of those closest to us.

It is in a faith community such as this that we can share our grief and harness the energy of our collective longing to create the world we wish for.

Gratitude © by Rev. Mary Gear

As we approach the Thanksgiving holiday, I find myself reflecting on the complexity of the day at this moment in history. I was taught a story of Thanksgiving which was of happy Native people and white pilgrims sharing a bountiful meal together. Perhaps you were taught this story too. There is very little truth in the story that I was told.

The true historical origin of Thanksgiving is that it was declared a national holiday by President Abraham Lincoln in the waning days of the Civil War as a boost to citizens whose spirits were weary and who were

grieving so many losses. Lincoln declared this day to help us remember that amidst grief, there is room for gratitude.

Lincoln wasn't alone in believing that we must always do both together, grief and gratitude, so that our hearts are strong for the journey.

In our reading, Joanna Macy notes that gratitude steadies us in rough waters and kindles our resilience. Dr. Joanna Macy, was an Eco-philosopher, a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology. Although she died this past July, she remains a respected voice in the movements for peace, justice, and ecology.

Macy wrote:

In times of turmoil and danger, gratitude helps to steady and ground us. It brings us into presence, and our full presence is perhaps the best offering we can make to our world.

Macy suggests that gratitude can quiet our frantic minds and bring us into the present moment, preparing us for what comes next.

In her book, *Active Hope*, Macy offers a model of reconnection and transformation that has four steps.

She calls this "The Work that Reconnects" which she says "helps people discover and experience their innate connections with each other and the self-healing powers of the web of life, transforming despair and overwhelm into inspired, collaborative action."

The first step in this transformation is the practice of gratitude. This might seem impossible in times such as these, and yet it is essential. It's the foundation, the grounding that helps us move forward. We become more fully present and emotionally grounded in preparation for the next phase.

What could we find to be grateful for now?

We could be grateful for the earth that produces the food we eat.

Grateful for the hands that grow it, tend it, deliver it, and prepare it.

Grateful for the warmth of the sun and shelter from the cold & rain.

Grateful for those who work to heal our sickness.

Grateful for our families-birth and chosen--and for friends.

Grateful for one another and the opportunity to begin again in love to address our differences and mend our relationships.

Grateful for this community.

Grateful for the gift of life itself.

With this grounding of gratitude, we move to "Honoring Our Pain for the World;" grief. When we experience our grief, we can connect to others with compassion, which means "to suffer with." Honoring our pain opens us up to our love, courage, longing, imagination and sense of justice.

The next step in Macy's spiral is to "Seeing with New Eyes." When we connect with gratitude and grief, we can sense how intimately and completely we are related to all that is, the interdependent web of life. Then we can begin to understand our own power to change.

The final step is "Going Forth" where we move into the actions that call each of us, according to our situation, gifts, and limitations, to work with others whenever possible toward a vision of care and justice. This often means moving into the unknown, the mystery of what is possible, and there is no guarantee of success. Even when we don't succeed, we can be grateful for the chance we took and the lessons we learned.

Macy says that we can move through this spiral again and again, each time gaining new insights, boosting our resilience and strengthening our resolve to act on behalf of all life. In Macy's model, gratitude is not just appreciating what is in our lives; it's the foundation for changing ourselves and our world.

Just as love and grief are intertwined, so are gratitude and grief. This connection was in the sweet story that Ashley told of a loved one sharing their wisdom. It was in Emily's thoughtful reflection when she said:

...gratitude can be a welcome addition to times of sorrow or struggle but not a replacement. Letting feelings be complicated and contradictory and bittersweet creates spaciousness. When there's no rush to replace that complexity with gratitude alone, there's more room for gratitude to enter.

This suggests one more "G" word to mention in the complex intertwining of grief and gratitude, and that's guilt, which can show up in so many ways. Sometimes when we grieve, we are told that we have no reason to do so, we should be grateful instead, as if being grateful can erase the grief or that we can only feel one or the other, not both.

And, sometimes when we feel gratitude, we can feel guilty for the abundance in our lives. Sometimes gratitude moves us to face our privilege, like being white in a time of ICE detentions or being financially secure in a time of government shutdown. While it's helpful to notice our privilege, feeling guilty for them helps no one. What we can do is use our privilege for the benefit of all and for justice, like when those of us who are white accompany those who are detained, or when those of us who have enough help our neighbors in need. Like those of us who are safe helping create safe places for those who are threatened. Like those of us who are able, showing up for protests and proclaiming the reality of what is happening right now. Free the energy trapped by guilt to fuel compassion and justice.

This month, as you engage with the spiritual practice of Cultivating Gratitude, I invite you to consider what you are grieving and who you can mourn with; name what you are grateful for and how that can support your transformation and resilience; and consider if guilt shows up in this complexity and how you might free it. In this time of turmoil and danger, the world needs our grounded presence and collaborative action. May you be rooted and resilient in the days and weeks ahead.