

*Thanksgiving Leftovers***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on November 22, 2020**

I have a problem. A problem I've kept hidden from you. Over the years I've sought help from my family, my friends, and professionals with no success. The weight of it bears down on me and I know that by telling you I will set myself free. I'm not proud of it, but while eating a meal I think about what the next meal will be. There. I said it. Yes, I'm consumed by when my next meal will be and what it will be as I stuff my gullet with the meal in front of me. This time of year is particularly hard to abstain from these thoughts. Thanksgiving Day is approaching when we typically have the grandest meal of the year. I'm already thinking about the day after. Not for the shopping, but I'm already thinking about the Thanksgiving leftovers. It's a sickness, an Achilles heel, perhaps even the second deadly sin, gluttony.

Everything seems to taste better the next day. It is soooo good on Thursday, why wouldn't we want such ecstasy on Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday too? Think of it. Leftover turkey pasta bake, turkey quiche, turkey and rice soup, sweet potato soup, enchiladas, sandwiches, frittatas, curries, pot pies, spoon breads, chili, cranberry turnovers, hash, turkey and stuffing tacos, paninis, quesadillas, turkey gumbo...I'm feeling faint. I'm spinning. I found a website that added up the calories from that delicious stuff, and the exercise necessary to burn it off. How much walking would you need to do for a turkey sandwich, some stuffing, some mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, and a piece of apple pie with ice cream? Over 13 miles! Add some gravy, and you're up to nearly 15 miles! I don't know about you, but I don't have the time to walk 15 miles after a meal! Do you see my problem?

Although many meals provide leftovers, only Thanksgiving has ennobled uneaten food to a grand tradition and memory-laden ritual. What was served warm from the oven is now served cold from the refrigerator or steaming from the microwave.. Why? I love knowing when I have a great meal, I can have more the next day and that often, the next day the flavors are richer and more satisfying, but no ordinary snack or meal of leftovers matches the qualities of Thanksgiving leftovers. Thanksgiving leftovers have a hidden ingredient. They are flavored and warmed with memories of feelings. But, let's go behind and beyond the sensory delight of leftovers. The abundance of heart that lives in a yearly meal that celebrates with gratitude the interdependence among family, friends, the earth and the spirit makes the Thanksgiving leftovers so extra special.

I find behind all cultural and personal habits and patterns of living I find a spiritual connection, metaphor or lesson, even Thanksgiving leftovers. The mundane reveals the meaningful. Thanksgiving is an indication of the heart. It's not all about our wants and our needs. It is about gratitude. There are two levels of gratitude. Let's call them the lower level and the upper level. Unfortunately—and I admit I'm in this category—we kind of dwell in the lower level. That's where we see intermittent spurts of goodness. Some big blessing comes along and we say, "Thank you" to God or the universe. But living on that level of gratitude only shows that we are self-regarding, and that we miss the total perspective of goodness. The upper level, the higher

level, is consistently being thankful, in the good and the bad, believing that all things will work out for good. I admit I have a long way to go on this one! Take for example, Corrie ten Boom who was sent to a prison camp for hiding Jews from the Nazis. There, her sister said they should thank God for everything in their barracks. Corrie refused to give thanks for the fleas that infested their bedding, but later she found out that those fleas kept the guards from entering the barracks and she was saved from abuse. So, she said, "Thank you, Lord, for the fleas!" That's some upper level gratitude.

In the course of my day, my week, or my year I am living and responding to life. I engage in events and encounters. I am a participant. I am eating the meal the day it is prepared and served. The "leftover" experience moves me from participant to re-collector and reviewer. I get to bring the events and encounters together and look at and taste them all over again from a new and deeper perspective. When your soul hungers for another experience of meaning that has mellowed into truth, a feeling that now reflects an incandescent beauty or a deed that thunders with goodness, go to the cupboard of your soul where the leftovers are remembered and have a feast of self-awareness. And forgive me for a balancing perspective. Sometimes a thought, a feeling or a deed that was so delicious when first experienced has gotten moldy, soured, or turned bad. That's a sign that it's time to purge the memory cupboard. Don't be like my Aunt Linda who in 1979 literally poisoned family members by offering a dinner of leftovers that had been off.

I'm going to go ahead and acknowledge the giant turkey in the room, Thanksgiving might be the pits for some of this year. As her majesty the queen once said, "It has been an annus horribilius. This horrible year has brought us to our knees, has isolated us, created fear within us, has left people hungry, unemployed, sick, and cast into the unknown. We are grieving loss. Many of the values, traditions, and messages associated with the day, like warmth, comfort, gratitude, and family togetherness, can feel in direct conflict with a grieving person's actual reality. If you are feeling the loss, you probably know what I mean by this. Though you may be hesitant to admit it, you're amongst grief-friends, and it's okay to admit that you're feeling just a little (or a lot) less grateful than you've felt in years past. Yes, despite all the grand festivities, the *'30-Days of Thankfulness'* challenges on Facebook, we may not be able to muster gratitude.

It's typical for grieving people to feel apathy towards some of the experiences that used to bring them joy. This is not a deliberate choice anyone makes, grief just changes the way life looks and feels. Sadly, this loss of joy may feel like a secondary loss to many, especially if you feel out of touch with things you previously cherished, like holidays and special days. You'd love to feel those old familiar and enthusiastic holiday feelings, but instead, it feels like you're standing alone out in the cold, watching through a window while everyone else enjoys the warmth and togetherness of the holiday season past.

With all the uplifting and nostalgic holiday messaging, no one would blame you for feeling left out. Many people feel like the holidays are only for happy people and those who are sad either need to shape up or ship out. However, I'm here to refute this notion. Your invitation to the holidays isn't revoked simply because you don't embody holiday cheer. I know many of you experiencing the heavy thoughts and distressing emotions of our time may be thinking about scrapping Thanksgiving all together. you're just feeling anything but grateful. If it's an absent

sense of gratitude that's making you feel cut-off from Thanksgiving, I want to offer a thought. Just as the holidays aren't only for happy people, neither is gratitude. You don't have to choose between your losses or feeling grateful.

As I've said in the past, you can feel two things at once. In fact, grief is fertile ground for experiencing conflicting emotions. So here's my not at all groundbreaking advice: Try to have a balanced outlook towards gratitude this Thanksgiving. Why is this suggestion important? Because, frankly, it stinks to feel alienated, isolated, left out, and disconnected, especially during the holidays. Look, we know the world has robbed you of something so incredibly precious, and so it is *beyond annoying for* me to come along and tell you to be grateful. Also, I just finished telling you it's okay to *not* feel grateful. I know, and I don't offer this suggestion lightly. Finding gratitude may feel like a stretch, but hear me out.

As we acknowledged, finding something to be grateful for doesn't minimize or erase the difficult thoughts, memories, and emotions you are experiencing. It may simply help to balance your outlook a little. Balancing your outlook is important. Losses like the ones we are experiencing can make us feel cheated, angry, self-focused, bitter, lonely, isolated, resentful, guilty, sad, anxious, worried, or depressed. What we fail to realize is that, over time, negativity can have a large impact on our overall worldview. We may feel as though our lives are globally awful, people are globally awful, we ourselves are globally awful, and believe that these realities will never change. Even though Thanksgiving *will* feel different this year, actively seeking gratitude can be an empowering way to reclaim a part of the holiday for yourself.

Finding gratitude doesn't have to be complicated. It's simple, actually. All you have to do is pay attention to your thoughts and when you catch yourself feeling really negative and pessimistic, think to yourself, "*Yes, AND I also have X to be grateful for.*" I have confidence that you can find *something* to be grateful for, like a hot cup of coffee, a happy memory, a song you like, your dog, your cat, green bean casserole – you get the picture. Even if you don't want to make a habit of this whole gratitude thing, just give it a try through Thanksgiving. "Unlike freedom, gratitude is a uniquely religious virtue," writes my colleague the Rev. Galen Guengerich. "Why is this? A sense of awe and a sense of obligation, religion's basic impulses, are both experiences of transcendence, of being part of something much larger than ourselves," he says.

Grateful living brings in place of greed: sharing; in place of oppression: respect; in place of violence: peace. Who does not long for a world of sharing, mutual respect, and peace?" I'm hoping by now you are connecting these thoughts to our principles, to the ways in which we have agreed to walk together. From ancient times through modern social science and research, gratitude has been distinguished as a desirable human quality with the function for making life better for oneself and for others. So, it is with a grateful heart that we are Unitarian Universalists. Let us raise up the virtue of gratitude. Let us understand that we can save ourselves. Let this season wake our hearts and minds and guide us on our journey toward wholeness and to be bold enough to embrace the practice of gratitude.

May it be so