

Everyday Miracles – Sunday, November 27, 2011

Appreciating Thanksgiving - Erica Bartlett

I haven't always appreciated Thanksgiving. In fact, during the years when my body-mass index was far higher than recommended, I positively hated it. The societal encouragement to indulge in gluttony was like torture because I knew it was only for other people; anyone my size should deprive themselves as much as possible, as we were supposed to do every day. It emphasized all the issues I faced with food and made the holiday full of guilt and shame and very little in the way of enjoyment.

Only in more recent years have I been able to truly understand and embrace Thanksgiving. Not so much the story of the Pilgrims, but the simpler and older tale of the wonder of food itself. Only now do I appreciate the fundamental and miraculous ability of a tiny seed to grow into something that will nourish other life.

Letting myself truly imagine this, I can now approach the holiday with a deeply humble spirit. Surveying the feast spread out each year, I am no longer conflicted about whether or not I should partake of it. Instead, I simply appreciate the bounty and everything that went into creating it, and I eat as much as I need and want, savoring each bite. Creaminess of mashed potatoes, tartness underlying the cranberry sauce, bursting kernels of corn, juicy bites of turkey, warm golden-brown rolls spread with butter that melts into every nook and cranny, savory-turned-sweet pumpkin pie with freshly whipped cream.

Even better, this has also freed me to delight in the companionship of my family and friends. Sharing that meal, and all the others I eat throughout the year, I am no longer separate and ashamed. Instead, I can embrace the holiday wholeheartedly. And that truly feels like a miracle.

Lesson for All Ages

Reflections: On Reflections - Rick Kimball

Looking into the mirror one morning recently, I realized that I was seeing the largest miracle of all: Life. Human life. “In our sameness, our oneness, in our very being, we are miracle,” I observed. My thought felt profound, and I smiled. I should have stopped there. But oh no. I had to get personal. I smiled at the mirror again, more smugly this time. Then I winked. “Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall, who is the miraclest of all?” I asked. To my surprise, the mirror responded.

Mirror: It’s not you.

Rick: Not me? Why not? And if not me, who?

Mirror: What do you think this is, Snow White? It’s not, and I haven’t got all day to pat your ego.

Rick: But I need to know who’s miraclest of all!

Mirror: No names. You’re not handing out poisoned apples because of me. But I will tell you this: You’ve got a bad case of varicose vanity. You talk about miracle, but you refuse to be humbled by its glory. You turn it into a competition instead.

Rick: That’s my miracle mind at work.

Mirror: That’s your ego at work. And if you lose the competition you just set up, that same ego is going to Google science and say there’s no such thing as miracle.

Rick: But Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall, who is the miraclest one of all? I really have to know!

Mirror: Okay, I’ll play your silly game and tell you this much more. The miraclest people of all are those who truly see and appreciate miracle without using it to jack up their own self-esteem.

Rick: People like who?

Mirror: Oh no. You’re not tricking me into naming names. But look around your congregation. Some of those people are there. You can see it in their faces, their quiet, accepting, contented faces.

Rick: How do you know about them? The only faces you ever see are Tirrell’s and mine.

Mirror: Mirrors talk to each other, you know.

Rick: Mirrors talk to each other? Give me a break!

Mirror: STOP RIGHT THERE! NEVER EVER TALK TO A MIRROR ABOUT BREAKS!

Rick: Oh right. I remember. Break a mirror and it’s seven years’ bad luck. Sort of a negative miracle.

Mirror: There’s no such thing as a negative miracle, and it’s not seven years

of bad luck if you break a mirror. It's a seven-year curse.

Rick: Oh come on.

Mirror: Try it and see. But I don't advise it. Break one mirror, and all the other mirrors will find out. Then every time you look at any one of them it's good-bye self-esteem. You can't take seven years of that. You'll be a crumpled wreck in three or four months

Rick: Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall, that sound's awful. So how can I get to appreciate miracles more?

Mirror: Sounds like a personal problem to me. But go think about it somewhere else. I've got other things to do.

Rick: All you have to do is sit here on the wall all day.

Mirror: Your wife is coming in next, and I need to think about what I'm going to tell her. She has her own reflections to worry about.

Rick: You talk to Tirrell, too?

Mirror: We've been talking for years. And yesterday she asked me how to get you to brush your hair better.

Rick: Are you serious?

Mirror: She said that getting your hair under control would be a true miracle.

Rick: What are you going to tell her, Mirror, Mirror on the Wall? (*Waits in silence, then puts mirror down.*) But the mirror said nothing more. I was left to think about miracles on my own. That's why I came today, to hear what others have to say about the subject. This much I have already figured out: Everybody who speaks will reflect different perspectives, different ideas, because everyone here is unique. That's a wonderful part of the miracle of everyday life, and the miracle of this congregation.

What Is A Miracle Anyway? - Lenora Trussell

I wasn't going to write something for this service because I don't really have a grasp of what a miracle is. I was staying quieter than usual as I was the self appointed scribe of the planning meeting for today's service. Rick Kimball does not like it when I decide to sit on the bench, so he nudges me. Actually I probably would not write anything if Rick didn't light a fire under me from time to time. He asked me if I had any insights on miracles and death. My scribe duties took over and I was not able to ponder my response to his question at the time.

If there is a miracle of birth then it only seems fair that in that great

circle of life there should also be a miracle of death. Circles offer us the opportunity for equality, geometrically speaking of course. Every point on the circle is equidistant from the center. That for some reason smacks of equality, don't you think?

I woke up with a vision a few Sunday's ago. I was walking on stones on a shallow riverbed trying not to get my shoes wet. Stepping from stone to stone looking enough ahead to glean a path to the other side, sometimes moving smoothly from stone to stone, and sometimes running into a lack of stones with proximity for my gait. The decision to jump and risk falling, or to turn around to find another path, or to step into the water in order to make it safely to the next stone are all options to getting to the other side. None of these choices are wrong or right. We all make the best decisions we can to get from one side to the other. We all make it to the other side; that's the rule. Some of us get our feet wet in the process. Some of us end up with scrapes, bruises, sprains, or even a broken bone or two, and some of us show up on the other side with dry soles.

Where is the miracle in that? It was just a vision I sometimes have after Rick lights a fire. Somehow we all start out on one shore and we head to the riverbank on the other shore. Is the miracle merely just showing up at the river? Or is the miracle at the pondering of each step? Is the miracle getting to the other side? As a devout UU, I continue to question.

In most years over the past forty, I have gone South to have a reunion with college friends. I realized on my recent trip that we all did not have much of a relationship with each other in college; some of us more than others. I still don't have much in common with the other five women. What I realized was that we all had significant relationships with Sudy, who died in a car accident forty years ago. While we don't talk about it much, Sudy's death brought us all together and the grief has held us together all these years. I believe that if Sudy had not died, we would not all continue to be in touch with each other for the past four decades. I treasure my relationship with these women.

Is that a miracle? All things being equal and honoring the circle of life, if birth can be a miracle so can death. Perhaps it depends on what we make of the events that influence our path.

So Rick, thanks for rekindling my light that no doubt had fallen in the river. You inspired me to once again talk about something that I know very little about.

First Winter - by Mark Chinsky

The animals only know that something is up.

The trees explode with rapturous beauty – reds and golds that dance
and then fall in their time.

In some paradox of change, the branches that lifted their leaves aloft
as if they were weightless

now falter in a kind of defeat when they are finally freed of them,
loss pressing on them like stones.

Desolation is a trick of nature:

the ground picked clean as pones,
gone hard with forgetfulness.

What the young animals do not know

is that their first winter will not be their last,
that the green will come again.

They see everything disappearing,
abundance slipping away subtly, insidiously –
the way breath leaves the body at the end –
and they think they are done for.

Pricking up their ears in apprehension, they sail,
fleet as commas, after the last leaf or berry.

They have not lived enough

to see the earth remember itself
after the midnight stillness of winter
or to know that such vast emptiness can yield
a single petal, cupped like a hand,
testifying to the sun.

Transformed by Love – John Howard

Last month I had the pleasure of spending time with a friend Peter from the west coast whom I have known for almost 40 years but whom I hadn't seen for quite a while. He had never met my partner Steve, and I hadn't yet met his partner Lalo, and it was high time we changed that situation. It was on Columbus Day weekend and they came up to the island with my sister and her husband to help close the cottage. We had dinner at the Chebeague Inn Saturday night, they spent the night with us in Gray, came to church Sunday morning, and were on their way for some foliage viewing, back to New York, and then back to Santa Barbara.

We recently had a service on friendship, and this visit certainly fit that topic, as I consider the special value of long time friends. But it also shows me a kind of every-day miracle as well, which is the miracle of two people growing together and altering each other for the better in a committed relationship. In the short time we were together I felt an upwelling of joy in seeing the rightness of these two people for each other. As I say, I've known Peter for a long time and am aware of both his endearing qualities and his irritating ones. This weekend I felt that the wild essence of Peter had become, if anything, more distilled and joyful, while at the same time the rough edges were smoother and he seemed more at peace with himself. And I could even sense a way in which Lalo's practical and calm nature was being challenged and tweaked by Peter's playfulness.

David Brooks, the columnist, wrote a piece for the New York Times in November 2003 he titled "The Power Of Marriage" in which he argued that

conservatives should support and encourage same-sex couples to marry because, “marriage makes us better than we deserve to be. Even in the chores of daily life, married couples find themselves, over the years, coming closer together...reorganizing and deepening each other’s lives.”

With so many writing about marriage in crisis, and with our own experiences of love gone wrong, these everyday miracles restore my hope. The relationship that blossoms later in life is often very beautiful to behold. People you thought would never get it right, after several failed attempts, can surprise everyone by landing in just the right place with just the right person. But just as beautiful is the marriage that began with high-school sweethearts and lasts a lifetime. Examples of both are in our own community. They are in fact commonplace and easy to overlook, which is what today’s theme is really about. We can choose to see and celebrate the quiet magic and mystery in “ordinary” life.

Our mission statement has a lot of good things going for it, but what gets my attention right up front is the “transforming lives” part. Who doesn’t have something about themselves that they’d really like to change? The trouble is, we too often try to shame ourselves into changing. It takes love to change. Perhaps it has to start with acceptance first. With love and acceptance change isn’t really even necessary, or at least not the drastic change we had in mind. More the slight reorganization, the mellowing I saw in Peter, or the humor I’m discovering in myself, thanks to my partner’s compassionate, relentless teasing. So today I give thanks for the every-day miracle and mystery of thriving as two people together. It helps me to believe that there’s a higher order and purpose beyond my understanding that wants love to blossom wherever it can.