

GIVING THANKS

Rev. Daniel Costley, 16 November 2014

We are at the time of Thanksgiving. A time to give thanks. A time perhaps to reflect on the wonder and importance of the natural world, and the glories of our sustaining surroundings. A time to say thank you. And a time to reflect on our approach to this world and all that makes it special.

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Now, what many of you don't know, is that visiting preachers here are given a special list of things you might try to avoid. And one of those things is constant reference to cultural or national issues or events that will not be recognised by a multi-national congregation.

And that really is good advice. So, I have had to spend some time with the Encyclopedia Googleanica - or Google as it's generally known, to find something that can be understood by a wide range of people.

And I found it – and I'm so grateful I did.

One of our family's delights this year – one of those moments when we all came together at a regular time and place – was to watch the latest episode of the Great British Bake Off.

A challenge where a group of, I think, 10 original contestants are whittled down to just 3 to take on the challenge to become, supposedly, Britain's best baker.

Now in Britain, the religious connection here is that the judges are Mary Berry and Paul Hollywood. And for millions across the world, earthly judgement both by Mary and by Paul has a resonance oh so deep.

Over the last two years, this has become addictive viewing in our household. The skill is astonishing, and the expectations rise each week. As you look back on contestants that have fallen by the wayside, you begin to realise that the judges – Paul and Mary – do now what they are going. Some of those early fallers seem perhaps less likely to have coped with the cakes, loaves, doughnuts and patisserie that have defined the last few episodes.

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This has become an international phenomenon. Here in France it is known as *Le Meilleur Pâtissier*. In Belgium, there is *De Meester Bakker*. In Germany *Das Grosse Backen*. *Den Store Bagedyst* in Denmark, and the rather obvious *The American Baking Competition* over the Atlantic.

So, I hope, this is something that perhaps some of you may know about and, I hope, have found to be as addictive as I have.

For those that don't watch, or still have have no idea what I am on about, Great British Bake-Off began with, I think, 10 contestants who are put through their paces on baking challenges set them. They are to make, for example, 36 perfect doughnuts, or a strange german layer cake, or 24 imaginatively shaped and perfectly crisp biscuits. No soggy bottoms are allowed in the cakes and scones rounds. Nor the pies.

Except it is not, of course, that simple. The winner is not necessarily the one who makes the best tasting food. Or the best presented. Or the closest to the recipe. Nor is it the contestant with the most original idea.

It is instead a blend of all those things. It is all of them, yet as a single piece. The winner, put simply, is the one that adds the most to the way they bake.

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Thanksgiving, the end of the summer and the Harvest, as we approach the darker months ahead, is a time when we might reflect on our own approach to food and the amazing things this Universe can provide. A time to reflect also on the added value that we can bring to the basics that are provided to us.

This is simply part of a great cycle. It is neither the beginning nor the end of our journeys. It is instead a marker on the way, a time to take stock, and even make stock, on our path.

We are all part of this world and, if we treat it properly, this world is able to provide for us. If we are prepared to play our part, to work in harmony with the natural world, we are to be rewarded with sustenance and beauty. We are particularly fortunate in this country as we really are able to grow and deliver a wide range of foods – and drought and blight are far less common than in other parts of the world.

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Yet we can become quite blasé about it all. We can sometimes find ourselves buried in the routine of accepting all this wonder as our right. We can all too often find ourselves failing to appreciate. Failing to give back. Failing to treat this planet and the amazing things it provides, with the love and generosity it deserves.

This transition time provides an opportunity to give thanks. To take a step back and be grateful for the wonderful aspects to our lives, and the support we might receive from this amazing planet, this awesome universe. Some gratitude, some love, and a commitment to working in harmony.

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In our first reading – Meg Barnhouse’s piece on Baking with Attitude, we heard the story of the poorly produced loaf. The heavy, hard and hideous production that came from loaves prepared without love or thought.

Meg was like some of the early contestants on Bake Off. Followed the recipe carefully, but that was about it. In some instances not even that. Felt they knew better and took short-cuts or ill-thought alternative approaches.

Meg’s task had been from her spirituality group. Meg was trying to make bread into which she had kneaded her ‘gladness and delight’.

But that was not quite how it worked out. Trying to squeeze the making of these loaves into a far too small a space of time, and interspersed with preparing food for the family, our intrepid baker resorts to some very slapdash, angry and ill-thought methods of making her bread.

Filled with gladness and delight? No, of course not. By following the mere basics of the recipe two loaves were produced. However, the lack of care, of love and of focus led to a wasted time after all. It would be have been almost a productive to not bother making them at all.

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So what was missing. What is that fabulous ingredient that might have made all the difference?

I suspect it is the same ingredient that has been used by all the successful bakers on Bake Off so far.

It is, of course, love. It is working with a loving attachment to the process, to the product. Just as Meg’s loaves were a tragic representation of baking, a world where we attempt to make, to grow, to manage. Without love this just doesn’t complete.

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Thomas Moore was, I believe, referring to this also in our second reading.

This was not necessarily about baking, I grant you that. However, it was about sensing the Holy in all we do.

Moore spoke of the need of a sensual approach to the world. To feel it, not just to use it.

Of particular interest to me was the part where we heard Moore’s theory that we have, as a human race, separated the physical world from the spiritual one. We have become too focused on the product – and how we measure it – than the way in which it is produced and the way we connect, as makers, to a less material realm as we create.

Moore does not doubt that there is still a hunger for things spiritual. He cites churches and spirituality groups as being places for these things. Yet his

concern is not that these things are not in our lives, it is instead that we have separated them from our appreciation of the physical and material. It is becoming far less common to combine a spiritual and sensual approach to life, with the practicalities of living it.

Even though the link between them may indeed bring benefit.

Just as Meg Barnhouse failed to bring the lessons of her spirituality group to the making of loaves, we too can be guilty of keeping love and care away from the basics in life. Of leaving it all to a Sunday morning, or a candle-filled meditation group.

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Thanksgiving is a time to reflect on this. A time to remember just how fortunate we are. And how we must ensure we do not squander the bounty that is set before us. How we might more fully appreciate that which we reap at this time. Recognising that the more love we sow, the greater the harvest.

But at this time of year, Harvest can all too often be seen as the end of a process. It is not. This is simply the stage in the cycle of the year where we gather in the results of earlier endeavours. But it is not the end. It is just the beginning of the next part of our cycle. From here we store the produce to sustain us for the coming lean months. We start to prepare the ground for the next year's growth, and we look to use our food to create meals and, frankly, life for the future.

This is mirrored in so many aspects of our human world too. The birth of a child is a similar moment – all be it a far greater cycle than the annual one for Harvest and for food. We have all been, at one stage, the 'end' of one element of production. We finished our time inside. And this was another beginning.

Now, we could just say "they're born now. Let's just follow the instructions and let them get on with it".

But we don't. Do we?

Instead, we know that to fill a child's growing years with love. To bring parent-like and supportive love to that child will make that life better. That love and engagement will help a child to develop in far better ways. We know this to be true. And that is one of the great wonder and lessons we can learn.

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Paul McCartney once sang

"and in the end, the love you take, is equal to the love you make."

These were the final words on the final track on the last album recorded by the Beatles. One hell of a way to finish. But not the end of course. Successful careers followed. This was just one moment in the cycle.

But, 'the love you take is equal to the love you make.'

Great words. Just as Meg Barnhouse's loaves contained no love in preparation at all, so the results were so clearly loveless.

And the winning ingredient for our Great British Bakers is not the recipe. It is instead the immersion of the contestants in the process. The utilisation of the senses and the input of love and care into their bakes.

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In the ideas of Thomas Moore, this is a demonstration of the need to bring our senses, and a sensual love of the world, back into the every day. To recognise the holy in the world around us. To avoid the temptation to put non-material matters into a box on Sundays.

This time of Thanksgiving can remind us of the wonders of this natural world. As a living part of it, it is surely our responsibility to treat it with love and respect. And that means bringing love and care to all that we do. To act in full, mindful appreciation of the difference our love will make to this planet is crucial.

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As Unitarians and Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists, we recognise that each of us has different gifts, and that each and every person in this world is, in some way, connected to every other.

But not just people. We also recognise that this is just one world. We and the planet on which we depend are so deeply connected that, without the provision of love and respect, we are unlikely to get much back. The love we take is surely equal to the love we make.

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A time of thanksgiving and gratitude. Yet also a time to commit to the future.

As our thanks today, let us commit to bring love to the world in all we do, all we say and all we bake.