

Do It with Thanks: Thanksgiving 2009
Rev. Dr. Steven Epperson, UCV parish minister
October 11, 2009

ACT ONE

With gratitude, we welcome the arrival of autumn; it's been almost three weeks now. We bid autumn welcome not because we don't love summer. No, the gratitude arises from recognition of the fidelity of our earth to us, whether we deserve it or not. Its axis tilts. Season succeeds season. Darkness wells up ever earlier one evening at a time; a bite, a chill is in the air, corn stalks wither, colours reweave on nature's loom in the myriad hues of fall. Summer's end, autumn's advent: welcome Okanagan apples filling produce stalls; welcome clusters of grapes weighing heavy on back alley vines; welcome ripe pumpkins pebbling the fields near the bird sanctuary on Wenham Island. Signs of harvest home, of Thanksgiving, lay all around us.

Gratitude, that's what I'm feeling today, and harvest time; and with it the reckoning of blessings, of gifts carried, received, given; gifts in which we take deep delight. That's what I'm feeling and thinking this morning. We are the fruits of various experience, as well; growing, ripening, seasoned on the vine of life. And here we are gathered in this place, this hour; and it is good.

In gratitude for the season, and for the vine of life on which we are growing, ripening and bringing forth fruit, will you join with Joyce and me now in singing a Thanksgiving response: hymn #21 "For the Beauty of the Earth"

ACT TWO

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, I want to express my gratitude and love for libraries; can you join me? — those truly wild places; islands of treasure and adventure where I discovered *a whole world* and, step-by-step, my own unique place within its teeming richness.

We want to express our thanks to libraries *this Thanksgiving in particular*, because in this Province, our public libraries, our librarians, and library services are in peril. The revised provincial budget of September 1st cuts grants to our libraries by 22%. If the government goes ahead with these cuts, the result will be even more reductions in library hours, cuts in service, cuts to literacy programs, fewer acquisitions, and fewer on-line resources and subscriptions. In 2005, the government promised “five great goals for a golden decade,” the first of which was “to make BC the best educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent.” Well, the decade ain’t over yet. “Libraries are the memory of a literate society,” Canada’s Yann Martel reminds us. “Without libraries” [or with libraries crippled by cuts] a society has no future because it can’t pass on its knowledge.”

There are these two kids in my neighbourhood, friends about 8 or 9 years old. And there they were in the middle of the day, a weekday no less, just itching to get into the public library on Fraser Street. But the library was closed. The doors were locked. The lights turned off. And where were they hanging out, gazing with longing, and loitering with intent? — at the threshold of their public library whose doors were locked in the middle of the day because we don’t have the money to throw those doors open and tell those two pint-sized friends to walk in and explore to the delight of their hearts, mind, and soul. *A billion dollars for a convention centre at Coal*

Harbour and a 22% cut to our public libraries! It's enough to break my heart and drive me mad. This is no "golden decade" in BC; it's an age of stone.

And speaking of an age—I want to thank all the parents where I grew up, not so long ago and far away, who let us run wild. It may have looked like a residential neighbourhood to grown-ups, but for us, because they let us loose to run free, to make mistakes, scotch our knees, and negotiate on our own way through the rough and tumble, complex tribal rituals and practices that are the very stuff of childhood and youth—because of this and more, for all of us little squirts, it was a Wilderness, a wild place of adventure, discovery, and of growing up into the skin and marrow of our own lives.

And *my libraries* — thank god I was allowed to journey to them on my own throughout my life, and to wander to and fro and in them without adult supervision. Libraries are wild, glorious places. Two examples. One night — I think I was about fourteen and out on one of my unsupervised excursions to the Salt Lake City Public Library. I wandered up to the third floor and walked into the music collection: thousands of LP records lined the walls from floor to ceiling. Though I grew up in a house full of music—this was another world altogether; it was like the treasure trove of Ali Baba's cave. And so starting with Tomaso Albinoni's "Adagio for Organ and Strings" to Xenakis's "O-Mega for solo percussion," for four years I worked my way through that record collection with complete freedom and without a plan, other than to listen in on the music of this world. It was a priceless education.

Second example. It was 1979; I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, and working part-time in the 5million volume Regenstein Library. A delegation of librarians from the People Republic of China was visiting, and I was asked to accompany them on a tour. I will never forget, and will always treasure their stunned shock to see students, *mere students*, pikers

my age and younger, unchaperoned, wandering freely through the open stacks of that great library. These four Mao jacketed librarians had never seen an open stack library where patrons, as a matter of course, roam about through the untamed wilderness of a library, pulling down from the shelf and looking at whatever books caught their eye. It was a thrilling experience, and made me feel deeply grateful to have grown up in a free society.

Unsupervised free time. Libraries and neighbourhoods — sites for wilderness, for wildness, because parents cut us loose so that we could explore, play, have adventures, and grow up without them anxiously looking over our shoulders all the time. Think of it!--libraries as places for exploration and discovery, because all of us can set off into the unknown alone and walk directly into open stacks full of books and prodigious collections of music, and thus discover a world and our selves. *Please*, let's not close down the Wilderness of childhood and youth: write your MLA and Education Minister Margaret MacDiarmid (M-a-c-capitalD-i-a-r-m-i-d) and tell them we've got to stop cutting library hours, funding and services. And parents, take a deep breath—let your children wander out of sight from time to time so that they can indulge in the serious work of imaginatively goofing off along with kids their own age.

In gratitude for the season, and for the wild places of libraries and play, will you join with Joyce and me now in singing a Thanksgiving response: hymn #349 “We Gather Together.”

ACT THREE

Last, but not least, we come to Act Three of our Thanksgiving service, to celebrate this place and the people who bring it alive and make it work as well as it does. First of all, some very good news. I don't know if this is a loaves and fishes moment, but in spite of having our gaming grant application rejected, or because of it (?), and despite the current not-so-rosy economic environment, together we have: 1. exceeded this year's pledge drive campaign goal; 2. the monies we received last year actually exceeded what we had pledged to give; 3. someone out there, this year, contributed almost 300% of an already high pledge; and 4. which means, folks, that if we increased what we put in the basket during our weekly offering on Sundays — for example instead of a twoonie, put in a \$5 bill; or instead of a \$5, put in \$10 — if we do that *and* made a one-time open contribution or bequest to the congregation — let's say of \$100 or \$200, *then we could balance our budget this year.* This is something we have not done in I don't know how many years. This is a far cry from just a few years ago, when our annual budget deficit approached \$140,000.

What this means — can you feel it, imagine it!! From the bottom of my heart, I want to thank all of you for your generosity. Savour it for a moment. A balanced budget is within our reach. Contemplate it. Visualize it. Celebrate it. *And now, remember* that we are *so close!* Your generous spirit of giving is still essential to the continued well-being and effectiveness of our spiritual, ethical and compassionate community. Balancing our budget this year would be a milestone for this congregation, and an oh-so-fitting way to truly commemorate our centenary. May it be said of us, that we put our house in good financial order and paid our own way *beginning this year!*

Now let's take another step in this service of thanksgiving to celebrate the generosity and service of the members of our Refugee Committee. This past week, after months of on-the-ground preparation and planning, together with First Baptist Church on Burrard Street, with Mennonites in Chilliwack, Vancouver Quakers, and the South Burnaby Mosque, our Refugee Committee members successfully sponsored and welcomed to Canada Palestinian families that have been languishing in one of the world's most destitute refugee camps on the Syrian Iraqi border. Refugee Committee members helped to put together the necessary paperwork, and then secured an apartment that, under a tight deadline, they cleaned, scoured, and furnished just in time for a refugee family to move in. In my book, *this is real religion*; and we are so proud of the service and the accomplishments of our Refugee Committee members. Will Refugee Committee members please stand, so that we acknowledge and thank you?

Now we have come to the last Scene of Act Three of our Thanksgiving service.

With gratitude, we are mindful of this place: the buildings and grounds of the Unitarian Church at the corner of 49th and Oak; and of one person in particular who keeps this place working. Imagine with me, conjure up in your mind a procession: all of us moving through and in and out and around this campus and its buildings. First, look around this sanctuary. Consider the bricks and mortar, the doors and windows, the roof over our heads, the floor beneath our feet. Now walk with me outside into the courtyard; look at the sky above our heads, the arrangement of the buildings. Together, we process toward the parking lot, and then we pause and turn to the left: the grass is mowed, shrubs pruned; a coral bark maple, a lane of apple trees, and a flower and food bed planted and well-tended.

Now turn, and let's walk into Hewett Centre. The carpets have been cleaned, the linoleum floors mopped. The windows and sills have been wiped by hand. In washrooms,

there's soap, toilet paper, and hand towels in their dispensers. Volunteers prepare for our post-service coffee klatch and lunch in a clean, orderly kitchen. Now let us return together in our procession back through the portals and foyer and to our seats here in the sanctuary. Again, notice that the carpets have been vacuumed, the wooden floors dust mopped; chairs, pulpit, and chalice set in their places.

None of this happens by magic. With gratitude, we thank UCV members who donated money and time to secure this site, and who paid and worked to build and landscape it. We thank the contractors and workers, women and men, who raised these walls, landscaped the grounds, and furnished and adorned our buildings.

We thank our volunteer grounds and gardens crew. We thank our custodians: Gerald, Wente, and Christie—they clean, mop, vacuum, set up and take down chairs and tables day in and out so that we can enjoy gathering to this, our church home.

Above all, today, we express our appreciation and affection for our Head Custodian Stan Clarke. He is a treasure; and I hope we realize just how fortunate we are that he works here for and with us. Stan is the finest, hardest working, most pleasant custodian we could hope for. Stan turns 55 in a few weeks, and this season marks the twentieth anniversary of his custodianship of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. In recognition of his service to all of us, later this week, and on your behalf, I will be presenting to Stan this Certificate of Appreciation, and an all-congregation card that has been the rounds in the sanctuary today. If you haven't had a chance to sign it, I will be over in Hewett Centre with the card to make sure that you do....

And so now, we bring this Thanksgiving service to and end. And what a journey of gratitude it has been!: hymns of Thanksgiving, the Story of Bread, and meditative recognition of our professional ministers. Then in three movements, three acts, we considered the glory and

beauty of this season; the priceless treasure that awaits us by venturing forth into the wildness of our imperiled libraries and into the uncharted domain of children at play.

And then, we brought it all home, to this place: a generous congregation on the cusp of a true centenary milestone: a *balanced budget (halleluia!)*; our Refugee Committee making religion real by successfully sponsoring and welcoming a homeless, stateless family to our city. And then, at last, we journeyed with thanks through our own home here, and recognized the people, the time, the muscle and sweat—not the magic—that makes *real* the dream of a progressive, religious community housed in a good, well-cared for home.

Try to hold this all in your heart and mind and soul, for just a moment; for just a sweet and savory moment before the rest of the week with its demands and cares, its joys and responsibilities come flooding back in. Hold it with gratitude and thanks....

May the spirit of thanksgiving kindle our hearts and light up our minds today; and may we carry it with us to our homes, our work, in and through our lives as we go from this place, with thanks. So be it, amen.

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