Gratitude: Attentiveness, Wonder, Joy

Introduction

These virtues are linked in that attentiveness is a trait that opens us up to a sense of wonder and, occasionally if we are lucky, to joy. Together, they are among the reasons that we feel grateful to have this chance to be alive.

UU minister Galen Guengerich offers this perspective on the importance of gratitude:

While obedience, love, and even submission each play a vital role in the life of faith, my current conviction is that our defining discipline should be gratitude. In the same way that Judaism is defined by obedience, Christianity by love, and Islam by submission, I believe that Unitarian Universalism should be defined by gratitude.

Shared readings of quotes, poems, songs, etc., with time for comments

Attentiveness

“Ten times a day something happens to me like this - some strengthening throb of amazement - some good sweet empathic ping and swell. This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.”
-- Mary Oliver

Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it. -- Mary Oliver

This is an interesting planet. It deserves all the attention you can give it. -- Marilynne Robinson, in Gilead

What I wish for now is no longer happiness but simply awareness. -- Albert Camus

One way to open your eyes is to ask yourself, "What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?" -- Rachel Carson

Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.
-- Simone Weil

Anyone can love a rose, but it takes a lot to love a leaf. It's ordinary to love the beautiful, but it's beautiful to love the ordinary. -- Unknown

Remember, you have two lives. You get your second life when you realize you have only one. -- Frank Liddy
The whole world is a series of miracles, but we’re so used to them that we call them everyday things. -- Hans Christian Andersen

**Wonder**

To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their primitive forms - this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religion. -- Albert Einstein

Look at your feet. You are standing in the sky. When we think of the sky, we tend to look up, but the sky actually begins at the earth. -- Diane Ackerman

It began in mystery and it will end in mystery, but what a rare and beautiful country lies in between. - Diane Ackerman

Life's splendor forever lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off. It is there, though, not hostile, not reluctant, not deaf. If you summon it by the right word, by its right name, it will come. -- Franz Kafka

To be astonished is one of the surest ways of not growing old too quickly. -- Colette

**Joy**

Don't ask yourself what the world needs, ask yourself what makes you come alive, and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive. -- Howard Thurman

In my own worst seasons I've come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And then another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And another: the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon. Until I learned to be in love with my life again. Like a stroke victim retraining new parts of the brain to grasp lost skills, I have taught myself joy, over and over again. -- Barbara Kingsolver

Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts. -- Wendell Berry

**Gratitude**

“I want to let this lesson sink deep into me. Celebrate being alive, drawing breath, celebrate that you are achingly sad today and that it will pass. It is good to be able to feel feelings. Celebrate that there was a love so big and good that it hurt to lose it. That there was a time so sweet that you ache, remembering it…. Honor the ache of your heart and the tears falling. Life is mostly ordinary time. Ordinary time shot through with light and pain and love.” -- Meg Barnhouse, from *Joy in Ordinary Time*
Poems

Otherwise
Jane Kenyon - 1947-1995

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.
At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

WHEN I AM AMONG THE TREES
by Mary Oliver

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.
I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.
Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, “Stay awhile.”
The light flows from their branches.
And they call again, “It’s simple,” they say,
“and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine.”

The Peace of Wild Things
by Wendell Berry

When despair grows in me
and I wake in the middle of the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Invitation by Brian Andreas
It is not what you first think
There is no effort of will,
No firm resolve in the face
of this thing called living.
There is only paying attention
to the quiet each morning
as you hold your cup
in the cool air
and then that moment
you choose to spread your love
like a cloth upon the table
and invite the whole day in again.

Messenger
By Mary Oliver

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,
which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,
which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.

**Not Yet** -- Jane Hirschfield

Morning of buttered toast;
of coffee, sweetened, with milk.

Out the window,
snow-spruces step from their cobwebs.
Flurry of chickadees, feeding then gone.
A single cardinal stipples an empty branch—
one maple leaf lifted back.

I turn my blessings like photographs into the light;
over my shoulder the god of Not-Yet looks on:

*Not-yet-dead, not-yet-lost, not-yet-taken.*
*Not-yet-shattered, not-yet-sectioned,*
*not-yet-strewn.*

Ample litany, sparing nothing I hate or love,
*not-yet-silenced, not-yet-fractured; not-yet-

*Not-yet-not.*
I move my ear a little closer to that humming figure,  
I ask him only to stay.

**Shared experiences**

*Time to share reactions, thoughts, understandings, experiences, etc. related to these virtues.*

Some seeds:  
What tools, techniques, or practices do you use to maintain attentiveness?  
Do you know people who seem to notice things and ask questions that you hadn’t noticed or thought of? Are you one of those people?  
Is “joy” a rarity? What emotions are not-quite-joy, but important to nurture?  
Can you share any experiences of joy, or not-quite-joy?  
How to reconcile “gratitude” with the existence of misfortune and suffering?

**More group discussion**

Why are these virtues important?  
Why are they hard to live into?  
Where can we improve in our own lives?