

## **Cultivating a Culture of Appreciation**

**Emily Richards**

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November is the month where gratitude seems to be everywhere. Social media feeds are filled with memes and quotes about it. They say things like “Thankful. Grateful. Blessed.” on backgrounds bright with the colors of pumpkins or autumn leaves or fresh baked pies. Mass marketing emails contain headers like “What are you grateful for” and “Thankful for our loyal customers”. We are encouraged to keep a daily gratitude journal or challenge ourselves to make a post on social media every day for the month of November sharing something that we’re grateful for. This pressure to be filled with gratitude surrounds us.

And it can all feel a little hollow.

Especially for those among us who are struggling. Those who have lost a loved one and are facing the holidays without their presence, those who are struggling to make ends meet, who are isolated and alone, who are physically unwell, who do not have a safe place to live, who are suffering from oppression, violence, or abuse.

It can feel overwhelming and frustrating to be inundated with all of these messages telling us that we should be grateful.

And don’t get me wrong, I love gratitude. I decided at some point in the last couple of years to begin a spiritual practice of daily gratitude. I wasn’t writing it down or journaling, simply noticing something for which I was grateful each day. And pretty quickly I noticed that I wasn’t really into it. I would remember for a day or two and then forget in the busyness of life. And I began to wonder why this seemed so challenging for me, to consistently take a moment to be mindful of the many gifts in my life.

And I began to realize it’s because what I really needed, what I already do, and what actually brings me joy isn’t gratitude, but appreciation.

And you might be thinking, aren’t they the same thing? And sure, if you look up synonyms for gratitude the word appreciation is bound to come up. But there is this nuanced difference between the two.

Gratitude is about feeling thankful. In many ways gratitude is a solitary spiritual practice. But what I love is people. So many of the things that I find fulfilling have to do with others. And when we practice the act of appreciation it is more of an outward expression that involves something, or someone, outside of ourselves.

We FEEL gratitude. We SHOW appreciation.

And appreciation is something that we all need. Stephen Covey says “Next to physical survival, the greatest need of a human being is psychological survival - to be understood, to be validated, to be appreciated.”

Even the way that we use these words highlights how when we are talking about appreciation the focus shifts. I AM grateful for you. The statement itself is focused on the person expressing the feeling. I am. Compare this to, I appreciate you. Here appreciate is the verb, it is the action.

And what we need, both here in the community, but also out in the world, is more appreciation. A couple of weeks ago I shared a statement that came across my Facebook feed, and again my apologies that there was no attribution, that said “all unasked for advice is criticism.”

And criticism is the antithesis of appreciation.

I am going to be honest here and say that when I stepped into this position during the summer of 2020 appreciation was not what I felt from this community. It was pretty obvious at staff meetings that none of the staff was feeling very appreciated. And I can imagine that appreciation is what any of you were receiving in your lives that were full of anxiety and fear, full of having to learn new ways of doing things, sometimes poorly to begin with, new ways of existing. Full of unwanted change but devoid of connection.

What I experienced in that first year was what felt like an endless barrage of complaints about the services and things that were, or weren't happening here. The sound wasn't working. The videos weren't starting on time. The piano was out of tune. The book was too long. And why CAN'T we back in person yet?

And it's funny what we take away from our interactions with others.

Because I went back through and I looked at the comments from the videos of our services from 2020 into 2021 and you know what? They were, for the vast majority of them, lovely. They were kind and appreciative. But often that isn't what sticks with us. What stays with us are the criticisms.

I worked for many years for the movie theatre. I started at the concession stand in highschool, learned how to run the projectors, back when they still used film, became an assistant manager and then did marketing for the district. And this was very often a job that meant interacting with lots of people in a fairly short period of time. On really busy nights we could have over a thousand people come through the doors within the span of an hour.

And 999 of those interactions would be quick and easy. I would smile and say, Hello and welcome to Regal (which was Hoyts back when I started), they would tell me what movie, I would sell them tickets and say “enjoy your show.” And I was quick. I could easily get through a transaction in 30 seconds or less.

But then there would be those interactions, those one in a thousand interactions, that are so bad they ruin your entire day. That no matter how nice everyone is after, or before, all you can see and all you can hear is the echo of that anger, and criticism, that was directed at you.

Just one customer in a thousand. An individual who was probably dealing with challenges and stresses that I know nothing about and just needed things to be easy and, for whatever reason, they weren't. So all of that anxiety was then directed at me, or one of my coworkers. And that brief interaction changed the entire rest of the day. Sometimes the rest of the week.

As UUs, who pride ourselves on our intellect and on reasoned and rational thinking, it can be easy to be critical. Sometimes, we can even imagine that we are being helpful. We see something that we know could be better. Maybe we even have an idea about how it could be better. And isn't there always room for improvement? Are we not a people who hold up learning and transformation as an integral part of who we are?

Yes, we are. And, all unasked for advice is criticism.

I'm not saying we should be silent when we notice things that could be improved. I am inviting us to also notice everything that is just right. To stop and really see all of the individuals who contribute to every part of this community. And to appreciate the work and love and effort that goes into everything that we do.

Margaret Cousins says “Appreciation can make a day, even change a life. Your willingness to put it all into words is all that is necessary.”

Our willingness to put into words. To say out loud, I see this beauty that you have made, the care you put into it. And then to say, I appreciate you. And if, after that, you still want to offer a way it could be improved, to say, I see a way that this could be even more magnificent, so how can I help? How can I help?

Cultivating a culture of appreciation is something we all need to make a commitment to. It is something that we must do purposefully. We need to allow ourselves to notice the flaws and the missteps and react to them with grace. The same grace that we hope others will give us when we make mistakes.

Because believe me, when I make a mistake, when I stumble on a word, or sing a wrong note, I am very aware of it. I am, always, my own worst critic.

And I'm not saying that we should not be accountable for our actions. When harm is done, even unintentionally, it is a gift to be told so that we can come back into covenant with one another. But that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the need that we sometimes have to criticize the work that others are doing.

And really our own fear of making mistakes, of being imperfect, that's where this need to criticize others comes from. Janet, who is such a blessing to this community, talked last week about perfectionism and listening to our inner critic, and I don't know about all of you, but her words really resonated with me and my own struggles with perfectionism.

And undoubtedly there have been times in our lives, people in our lives, who did tell us that we weren't good enough. Parents, teachers, coaches, friends, bosses. And I can only imagine that, for the most part, the advice that was given, unasked for, the criticisms that were leveled against us were not done in malice. They were done in an effort to help us better ourselves. To motivate us to work harder. Achieve more. Be the best.

But in the end all this really does is teach us to criticize ourselves and others. And even when this kind of tough love succeeds at pushing someone to achieve it often comes at the cost of damage to our mental and emotional health.

What if instead of criticism we could offer one another support? What if we could accept that we all have different and varied gifts and celebrate one another for who we are? What if every interaction that we had started and ended with words of thanks? Not just this month, but all the time? What if we could move beyond just feeling gratitude to gifting it to those around us. William Arthur Ward said "Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it."

I invite all of you to join me in seeing what a spiritual practice based on appreciation can feel like. How it can change, not just your spiritual well-being, but the spiritual well-being of those around you too. Instead of saying thank you, try saying I appreciate you. Say it a lot. I do.

And the more you say it, the more you make it a part of your everyday life, the more that you will feel grateful.

I appreciate all of you. I appreciate you showing up here this morning. I appreciate the smiles, the warm words, the hugs, the work that you do, and the requests for help from me. I appreciate the cornbread and cider and everyone who helped make today run smoothly. I appreciate the people who brought chili to share. I appreciate the kids

upstairs and the parents who brought them here and the adults who are with them helping form community. I appreciate that I get to do this work, that I get to connect with you, and I appreciate how we all collectively care for one another.

I hope that you all choose to join me in this spiritual practice. Because through these acts of appreciation I am filled with gratitude, and you can be too.

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