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### World of blessings: Ways at mealtime to put thanks into Thanksgiving

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As families and friends gather for Thanksgiving Day meals around the Valley, many will elect to read passages of prayers, poems or blessings that help give the occasion meaning. For some today, a traditional prayer will express thankfulness. Others will pick up poems, or enact meaningful family rituals.

However families choose to commence their Thanksgiving Day meals, this remains a special kind of holiday.

Spiritual leaders and thinkers from across the Valley offered ideas this week on ways to make the most of the day's enduring theme - gratitude.

Prayer, they say, offers comfort and a renewed connection to religious devotion. A local writer says she likes poetry's power of reaching mind and heart through vivid and expressive language. Others say a holiday ritual - including meal preparations and the act of gathering together with loved ones - can be imbued with new significance if done with mindfulness and intention.

All suggest that to truly realize thanksgiving, we must remember the human bond of suffering and remain open to needs of others.

"Thanksgiving exists in every culture and every religion," said Philip Zaleski, a Smith College professor of religion and co-author, with his wife, Carol, of "Prayer: A History."

"It is a natural response to the universe for being alive," Zaleski said.

The Zaleskis' book considers the history of prayer across a variety of faiths. It presents stories of lives transformed by prayer and describes the art and literature it motivated people to create.

The Rev. Alison Wohler of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst affirms Zaleski's claim that gratitude is a common part of human experience. "Being grateful is one of the most basic, universal things we do," she said. "The universe could have gone another way. We feel a general gratitude for living, for being aware of living."

Say a prayer

The common notion of the Thanksgiving holiday goes back to the kinds of graces found in Judaism and Christianity, said Zaleski.

For the religious, feelings of thanksgiving and gratitude have often inspired prayers to God, who "gives meaning to experiences." "Every religion has its own set of prayers," said Zaleski. Some prayers are meant to give thanks for food.

Yechiel Lander, rabbi emeritus of Jewish Community of Amherst, calls thanksgiving a central theme of Judaism, which is expressed all the time. Gratitude for all that has been given to us by God appears throughout the Jewish liturgies. In fact, Jewish tradition sets aside specific holidays of thanksgiving, including Succot, which falls in October after the High Holidays.

The Rev. John Gawienowski of Our Lady of Annunciation in Florence said the secular Thanksgiving holiday "is very congruent with the way Catholics are accustomed to worshipping."

He explained that the word Eucharist is Greek for Thanksgiving. "So every time we have Mass, it's a kind of Thanksgiving celebration," he said.

"Taking a special day to thank God for food and family, that's a part of our spirituality too," said Gawienowski. Thanksgiving is an end-of-the-year celebration in which we thank God for the blessings of the harvest and for having enough to eat, he said. "We realize those don't come automatically; they are gifts."

Zaleski, himself a Catholic, said his family will say the traditional prayer, "Bless us, oh Lord," at Thanksgiving. "Traditional prayers have lasted over the centuries because they're so good," he said. "They're so well composed and so effective."

Those who don't believe in God may find meaning in certain ideas or states of being, added Zaleski. "Beauty can be a source of meaning - or truth," he said. Some may be thankful for things like comfort, shelter, safety, food, health or the ability to bear illness with fortitude.

Wohler said she is a nontheist. "We are not grateful to something," she said, "we are not grateful to an entity." For Wohler, "prayer gives us the opportunity to open our minds and hearts to the important things we often don't allow ourselves to think or feel."

When Wohler is asked to say grace, she expresses "gratitude for the beautiful day, food prepared with love, for the relationships that make us the people we are. May we be eternally grateful."

## Poetry and ritual

Through the centuries, feelings of gratitude have also inspired poetry. "There are some wonderful poems of thanksgiving and praise that folks can use who aren't in a particular religious tradition," said Amherst poet and author Pat Schneider.

Schneider has a forthcoming book, "How the Light Gets In: Writing as a Spiritual Practice."

"This book is a personal exploration of how writing can, in fact, be one's spiritual practice," she said in an email. In Schneider's view, the act of writing "can be a way to meditate, to plumb the depths of human experience, to heal remembered wounds, to come to a state of gratitude. It is all of that for me."

Poetry explores universal themes felt by us all in a particular and individualized ways. Regardless of whether we are writers ourselves, to recite a poem is to connect with the poet's original inspiration. Reading a poem invites the opportunity to expand our consciousness.

Schneider's list of favorite holiday poems includes the following: "Vegetable Love," by Barbara Crooker;

"Grace," by Raffael Jesus Gonzales; "Thanks," by W.S. Merwin; and "Thanksgiving" by local poet Martin Espada. "My very favorite one is 'Blessing the Boats,' by Lucile Clifton," said Schneider. "It's really a blessing to another person."

In addition to or in place of prayer and poetry, many groups find significance in nonreligious rituals at Thanksgiving. This reporter's aunt, Patricia Fontaine, started a tradition several years ago that the family continues today. We go around the dinner table and each of us calls out one thing we are thankful for.

Maggie Oman Shannon, a former Smith College student and author of books on prayer such as "The Way We Pray: Celebrating Spirit From Around the World," has a similar practice. In an email, she said that she will launch a new ritual at Thanksgiving this year.

"I bought a beautiful wooden bowl, which comes with a small bag of wooden acorns and leaves," she writes. Members of Oman Shannon's family will hold an acorn or leaf, and express their gratitude for a particular blessing. "With each passing year, those little acorns and leaves will hold more and more stories of blessings received." The acorns provide "a visual reminder of the many ways each of us has been and continues to be blessed!"

"This practice could be adapted," adds Oman Shannon. "Real acorns and leaves found on a post-Thanksgiving dinner walk," for example, could be used in place of the wooden ones.

Arinna Weisman, founding teacher of Easthampton's Insight Meditation Center of Pioneer Valley, will carry out a similar ritual this Thanksgiving. She said that as part of her holiday celebration, her group goes around a circle and gives thanks.

But as a Buddhist, Weisman said that the vision is to be "in thanksgiving all the time." For her, Buddhism lays out a valuable path for that.

The real practice for Buddhists, said Weisman, is to live in the present moment. "We are training the mind to be present in meditation." With present-moment awareness comes a particular kind of knowing. "There is something in that knowing that opens the mind to thanksgiving."

The practice is ongoing, said Weisman, "and not oriented to a holiday." But she acknowledges that Thanksgiving provides a wonderful opportunity to practice.

Wohler too sees the potentiality in awareness and intention. With these qualities in mind, the task of preparing for the meal and the meal itself can be filled with meaning. "I take out my china and think of my grandmother," said Wohler. "I'm grateful for loved ones and loved ones lost."

Intention "gives things a significance," said Wohler. In preparing the Thanksgiving meal, one might start by "not thinking of setting the table as a chore, setting the table as your history. Bring your whole family to the table, even the ones who aren't there. One could think of that as sacred or holy."

Consider less fortunate

The opportunity to be with the ones we love may also stir feelings of compassion for the less fortunate, or for those who may be spending the holiday alone. Gawienowski said that as we give thanks "for the physical things we need, food, family, and shelter," we may also "recognize not everyone in the world has them."

According to Wohler, "an important part of being grateful is having humility because there are so many people for whom life is more difficult."

Schneider's own personal experiences stir a kind of gratitude that follows empathy: "I grew up a child in a tenement in St. Louis where social services brought a basket every Thanksgiving," said Schneider.

"There was no celebration of anything like Thanksgiving for me. The creation of holidays for my children has been hugely important to me. But I can't forget that behind the windows of those less fortunate, there are children who have none of the privileges we have," she said. "To be fully conscious is to be fully human," Schneider added. To be conscious of others and to the situations that need mending "doesn't have to diminish our holiday joy." Rather, it can help us be more grateful for what we have and inspire us "to work to change the world in the way it needs to be changed."

Lander said that it is not enough to say thank you to God for the things we have, it is also important to express gratitude through actions. One way to give thanks, said the rabbi, "is what we call `tzedaka,' which is translated as charity, also justice. And a component of justice is acting upon the teaching of our tradition in the care of other people."

Weisman also expressed the importance of not covering up suffering or turning a blind eye to the needs of others. "When we acknowledge the places that aren't working," she said, "we have the possibility to become active allies in healing those situations."

When we open to suffering, "we allow thanksgiving and love to root in us more deeply. Our suffering and others' suffering opens us to our own love and blessing."

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