

Ipswich Unitarians

“FOR THE BLESSINGS OF THE FIELD”: THE NEED TO GIVE THANKS

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At the Harvest Festival service we make a symbolic offering of the fruits of the earth. We do so in order to give thanks for the food we eat, the clothes we wear, and the beauty that feeds our spirits throughout the year. We don't offer them because God needs them, as the divine voice in Psalm 50 (vv. 9-12) makes clear:

*I take no young bull from your farmstead,
no he-goat from your folds;
for all the living creatures of the forest are mine
and the animals in their thousands on my hills.
I know every bird on those mountains;
the teeming life of the plains is my care.*

*If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it are mine.'*

No, we offer them and give thanks for them because *we* need to. We need to acknowledge our debt to God, to the eternal Creative Process, for all that life is and all that sustains and enriches it. We need to acknowledge our utter dependence on the bounty of the earth for even a moment of existence. We need to remind ourselves of this relationship if we are to survive as a species and not turn this beautiful and fruitful planet into a dying, polluted, and plastic-strewn wasteland – where verdant forests and sparkling, living seas are nothing but a memory.

It is the failure to be thankful, the failure to be humble, the failure to curb our greed that has brought the world to the onset of an unprecedented crisis. But it is a rekindling of our gratitude, an abdication of our arrogance, and a determination to live within our planetary means that could yet avert the worst of this crisis – and allow us to bequeath to our descendants and successors a world at least as glorious, as fruitful, and as blessed with the beauty and variety of living things as the one we inherited.

To see our food, clothes and other products of field and forest, earth and ocean, as gracious gifts; to cherish them and use them sparingly and wisely; to be more conscious of their true worth rather than how cheaply the supermarkets are selling them; to care rather more about the impact our lifestyles have on the natural environment and on other people: all this amounts to viewing the harvest of the earth from a spiritual perspective, in which gratitude, humility and generosity play a rather more prominent part than they do at present.

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In our so-called ‘consumer society’, it is a scandal just how much food is wasted and never actually ‘consumed’! How much is bought at rock-bottom prices, sold off in two- and three-for-one offers, and then thrown away because it was never really needed, and because of arbitrary ‘sell-by’ and ‘eat-by’ dates! Cheap food comes at a price – paid for by hard-pressed farmers and exploited workers, by overworked soil and over-fished seas, just so rival supermarket chains can virtually give food away to people who don’t need it and may never eat it.

When people win a harvest from the soil, when they must struggle against drought and blight and storm, then that harvest is a time of true celebration; of relief, of gratitude that there will be food to eat and a little extra money for luxuries in the year ahead. But when we are divorced from the realities of winning the harvest; when we demand as of right what is, in fact, a privilege and a gift; when we don’t care who or what suffers just so long as we can live in grotesque plenty, then we no longer celebrate the harvest. Thanksgiving in church, chapel and meeting-house is replaced by loading up supermarket trolleys on Sunday mornings with never a thought of prayer or praise.

But this can’t go on indefinitely. Sooner or later, the earth will refuse our demands. Indeed, it is already doing so in areas devastated by drought and famine. And these areas are spreading as the climate is changed, as sea-levels rise, and as forests are felled, stripping the land of its protective green blanket. People are already fleeing the expanding deserts, the inundated islands and coastal plains, and they are knocking on our doors for refuge.

And it’s not just human beings who are in trouble. The whole web of life is under increasing strain, and many a wonderful and unique species of animal and plant is being driven to the brink of extinction – and over it – as the direct result of our apparent inability to live humbly, sustainably and gratefully on this miracle of a planet.

But I don’t want to strike too gloomy a note! We are, after all, here to *celebrate* the harvest! We are here to give thanks for the food and drink that not only keeps us alive but also gives us a great deal of pleasure in the process; to give thanks for the human labour and ingenuity that still manages to feed us and most of the world; to give thanks for those places of natural and semi-natural beauty that delight our senses and refresh our spirits through the changing seasons. We are here to give thanks for nature’s variety, intricacy and splendour, while remaining conscious that nature doesn’t just exist for our convenience – and can destroy as easily as it creates.

We are here to celebrate the human fellowship that has always accompanied the harvest and the sharing of its fruits in meals made holy by the love that they make manifest. We are here to say that the harvest is not for ourselves alone, not for our

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selfishness and greed, but for everyone. And if everyone is not yet sharing it then we must find ways to ensure that they do. Even now, in a world of six billion people, no one *need* go hungry.

And we are here to remember the words of the Psalmist, giving voice to the Divine: ‘...the world and all that is in it are mine.’ That is, the world belongs to God, to the Eternal Process, and to future generations. It is not our property to dispose of as we will. We are its stewards – for a little while – and for that privilege and its undeserved reward we should be truly grateful. And if we were, then maybe we would be better stewards than we are, and the world a happier place than it is.

When our Unitarian forbear, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, was teaching children here in Suffolk two-hundred-and-thirty years ago, she was concerned to teach them about the natural world and their place in it. And she had no qualms about telling them to whom they owed their debt of gratitude. She writes:

*Every field is an open book; every painted flower hath a lesson written on its leaves.
Every murmuring brook hath a tongue; a voice is in every whispering wind.
They all speak of him who made them; they tell us he is very good.
We cannot see God for he is invisible; but we can see his works, and worship his footsteps in the
green sod.
They that know the most, will praise God best; but which of us can number half his works?’*
(‘Hymn IX’, ‘Hymns in Prose for Children’)

Barbauld taught her young pupils that the earth is a sacred place; that, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins a century later, ‘it is charged with the grandeur of God.’ And she also related their own growth and development to the processes of the natural world. She writes.

*Instruction is the food of the mind; it is like the dew and the rain and the rich soil. As the soil
and the rain and the dew cause the tree to swell and put forth its tender shoots, so do books and
study and discourse feed the mind, and make it unfold its hidden powers.’*
(‘Hymn X’, ‘Hymns in Prose for Children’)

She taught her pupils – who, in Suffolk, were boys of ‘infant’ and ‘primary’ age – and her very much wider readership, what a rich harvest they contained within themselves:

*Reverence therefore your own mind; receive the nurture of instruction, that the man within you
may grow and flourish.
You cannot guess how excellent he may become.’*
(‘Hymn X’)

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The harvest, then, is about human potential too – intellectual and spiritual – and it is in the nurture and reaping of that harvest that the prospect of a better world lies. It is with a combination of ingenuity and reverence that we can turn things around and offer our children’s children an earth as glorious and as hospitable as we could wish it to be.

Besides her, *‘Hymns in Prose for Children’*, Anna Laetitia Barbauld also wrote poetic hymns that were sung in Unitarian churches for the next hundred years and more. One of them is particularly appropriate for a harvest thanksgiving service, and with some verses from it I will close.

*For the blessings of the field,
For the stores the gardens yield,
For the vine’s exalted juice,
For the generous olive’s use:*

*Flocks that whiten all the plain,
Yellow sheaves of ripen’d grain;
Clouds that drop their fatt’ning dews,
Suns that temperate warmth diffuse:*

*All that spring with bounteous hand
Scatters o’er the smiling land:
All that liberal autumn pours
From her rich o’er flowing stores:*

*These to thee, my God, we owe:
Source whence all our blessings flow;
And for these, my soul shall raise
Grateful vows and solemn praise.’*

(‘Hymn II’, ‘Poems’)

May it be so!

Note: *‘Hymns in Prose for Children’*, first published in 1781 and reprinted many times in Britain and America over the next 120 years, also appeared in an English-language Indian edition, and was translated into French, Italian, Spanish, German and Hungarian. Admirers included Mary Wollstonescraft, Thomas DeQuincey, Harriet Martineau and William B. O. Peabody. The influence of *‘Hymns’* optimistic theology has been traced in the work of Coleridge, Blake and Dickens.

‘Poems’ was first published in 1773 with a revised edition in 1792 (reprinted in facsimile by Woodstock Books in 1993). Several of the *‘Poems’*, along with, *‘Hymns in Prose for Children’*, appear in, *‘Anna Laetitia Barbauld: Selected Poetry and Prose’* (editors, William McCarthy & Elizabeth Kraft, Broadview Literary Texts, 2002).