

## AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE—NO MATTER WHAT!

November 11, 2012

The late, great Rev. Clark Dewey Wells tells the story of a time his three and a half year old son taught him a valuable lesson. The Rev. Wells was a large man, in presence and persona. He pastored a large church and built a well-earned reputation as a literate, interesting and challenging preacher. His family and friends kept him busy, and he was a bit of a *bon vivant*.

It was a warm summer evening, and the small gathering had enjoyed supper, accompanied by beverages. They moved inside to relax in the air conditioning. They were interrupted by the young boy, speaking in excited tones. “Come, Daddy, come. You need to see this.”

Daddy was slow to move, and the young one grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the door. Outside, the stars were just emerging, one especially bright one dominating the horizon. The young one stamped his foot, and demanded of his father. “Daddy, you be glad at that star!”

Clarke continues the story: “I will not forget the incident of his perfect words. It was one of those rare moments when you get everything you need for the good of your soul—reprimand, disclosure and blessing. It was especially good for me, that surprising moment, because I am one who responds automatically and negatively to the usual exhortations to pause-and-be-more-appreciative-of-life-unquote. Fortunately I was caught grandly off guard.”

This is my first messages today: Be glad at that star, and that full moon, and the few trees still showing color, and the coming new snow. Yes, do pause and be more of appreciative of life. Be appreciative of the beauty and complex arrangement of life on this planet, for despite scientific excitement about the possibility of life on Mars, and some of the outer planets, we are also learning that the kind of life we represent is rare, extremely rare in this universe. Although I would love to think that we are not the only representative of sentient life, we have yet to find our far, far, distant cousins. And they may have come and gone on a distant planet yet to be discovered, let alone visited. You be glad at that star, and at the wonder and delicate balance of our planetary home.

I had to start planning this service well before the events of last Tuesday. At that time I did not know whether the majority of this congregation would be in despair or rejoicing—with decorum, out of consideration for their friends whose chosen candidates and issues had lost in the great exercise of democracy we call democracy. I decided the basic message would remain the title —“An Attitude of Gratitude—No Matter What!” It was good for me to keep this in mind as I watched the returns and gathered with my

Progressive Women's Caucus on Wednesday. I needed to remember that life continues on the Wednesday after Tuesday elections—and that it is good. For this I am grateful.

Let me confess that it was much easier for me to write under the present circumstances than it would have been had Tuesday's results been different.

Thus, in addition to being grateful for this planet and its varied life forms, I encourage you to be grateful that we live in a land that practices democracy. Let me quickly add that democracy does not mean the same as capitalism. I think that too often Americans conflate the governance system of democracy with the capitalist economic system that is also a feature of our society. While I have some critiques of our current democratic processes, they are minor in comparison to late rampant capitalism.

For democracy, we must be grateful, even as we work to implement it in a fair and just manner. And on this Sunday following the election, we can feel gratitude that, while there were flaws, it worked. Some people are happy, some are most certainly not. Most of us have mixed feelings; we are happy that X was elected, but sad that Y was not. Or, we are happy that Proposition 75 was defeated and sad that Proposition 82 was not. This is a feature of democracy. We don't always get what we want, but a few years later we have another opportunity. I am very grateful that I live in a nation that is governed under a democratic system.

However, and this is a big however: this democratic nation with its enormous capitalist system is only possible because the Euro-Americans who were our ancestors depopulated the enormously fertile land they found when they crossed the Atlantic Ocean.

We tell ourselves stories about these first white settlers in Turtle Island, as the people who lived here call North America. We learn about the Pilgrims and Puritans, who came here for religious freedom and dreamed of building the great city on a hill that would be a beacon of Christianity to the whole world.

We conveniently forget the early Spanish explorers who raped, tortured and murdered great numbers of Native Americans. The diseases they brought with them, to which most of them were immune brought death and destruction to the people they encountered. Entire nations were wiped out. Anglos were not without stain in this matter. Lord Amherst sent smallpox infected blankets to a village that was standing in the way of *progress* thus effectively clearing the way for Anglo penetration of the *New Land*, and others followed his lead.

The people who came here from Europe considered themselves good, ethical folks. They punished thieves severely in their native lands. They did not intentionally come here to commit crimes.

They were within the law as they understood it. And the laws relating to this *New World* were based on the Doctrine of Discovery.

Many of you may not be familiar with this Doctrine, which is the basis of many of our current laws relating to treaty rights, including rights to water and minerals in Native American lands. It dates from the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century, and is rooted “in a Papal Decree issued by Pope Nicholas V in 1452 that specifically sanctioned and promoted the conquest, colonization, and exploitation of non-Christian territories and peoples. Hundreds of years of decisions and laws continuing right up to our own time can ultimately be traced back to the Doctrine of Discovery—laws that invalidate or ignore the rights, sovereignty, and humanity of indigenous peoples in the United States and around the world.” (UUA website, Social Justice)

At our General Assembly last June in Phoenix, our delegates voted to repeal the Doctrine of Discovery. Unitarian Universalist congregations were charged with studying this issue, and to come prepared to discuss and vote on it. No one in our congregation attended G.A. last year, or you would have heard of this action, for it was a major feature of the gathering. Here is the resolution:

*BE IT RESOLVED that we, the delegates of the 2012 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery as a relic of colonialism, feudalism, and religious, cultural, and racial biases having no place in the modern day treatment of indigenous peoples.*

Lest you think that the Doctrine of Discovery is not relevant to the lives of current Native Americans, let me disabuse you of that idea. The October 31<sup>st</sup> issue of *Indian Country* contains an article about changing the laws around who has jurisdiction over crimes on the reservations. Here is why.

*According to the Indian Law Review Center, Indian women are 2.5 times more likely to be assaulted than other U.S. women and more than twice as likely to be stalked. One in three Native women will be raped in her lifetime, and six in 10 will be assaulted, ...and on some reservations the murder rate for Native women is 10 times the national average. (Indian Country, Oct. 31, 2012, “Women at Risk”, p. 13)*

Federal authorities have exclusive jurisdiction over these crimes. However, prosecutors live as much as 100 miles away from the site of the crimes. They dismiss 67% of such cases referred to them by Native American authorities. Therefore criminals have no fear of prosecution if they assault a Native American woman or girl.

Because our law relating to Native American people is based on the Doctrine of Discovery, women are suffering violent attacks upon their persons, with little or no opportunity for justice. Representatives of the United Nations are with Native American nations to encourage the restoration of tribal authority “to enforce tribal law over all

perpetrators both Native and non-Native, who commit acts of sexual and domestic violence within their jurisdiction.” (Ibid.)

As a Euro-American I deplore the actions of my ancestors. However, I am very grateful that I was born into a democratic society, and within a system that provides me a comfortable, relatively safe life. I am also grateful that the delegates to last year’s General Assembly voted to repeal the Doctrine of Discovery. We have an incredibly complex society, which provides most of us, even the 47%, with most of the necessities and some of the luxuries of life. We should, however, acknowledge the great debt we owe to Native Americans from whom we took this rich land.

It is possible, perhaps even necessary, to have an attitude of gratitude, while still deploring some aspects of the society in which we live. One of the things I have learned during this last year when I was reading *Indian Country* is how much gratitude Native Americans have for this land, and the nation within which their own nations reside. They volunteer for the armed forces in a greater percentage than any other ethnic group. And they honor their veterans at every ceremonial gathering. During this past election season they studied the issues as they relate to Indian Country, but also the larger society.

I am most grateful that one of the results of this last election was an affirmation that we Americans are embracing our diversity, and affirming the value of minority populations. The new composition of the United States Senate includes both a Buddhist and a Hindu. Marriage equality won in every state in which it appeared on the ballot. We have more women in the Senate than ever before—still not commensurate with our population, but improving. In truth, this may be the single thing for which I am most grateful at this time. The United States affirmed that it is a pluralistic nation. For this I am grateful. For this we should all be grateful.

Yet, even if the outcome of Tuesday’s great exercise of democracy had been different, we would maintain an attitude of gratitude. We would still be glad at stars, and all they represent.

We would still be thankful that we live in a democracy in which, if your candidate or issue does not win this time, there is always the next time. We are thankful that we now share Turtle Island with its Native inhabitants. And finally, we are thankful that we belong to a faith community that works for justice for all people.

Shalom and Salaam.

Blessed Be and Amen.