Soul Matters

Celebrating Blessings

Small Group

June 2022

Welcome to
Celebrating Blessings

A Soul Matters facilitator once shared, “I guess after plan A fails, I need to remember there's still a whole alphabet out there.”

Who of us doesn’t need a little help remembering that? Especially after enduring Covid for so long. And the ongoing reckoning with racism. And the world’s inability to deal with climate change. And political division. You get the point. It’s easy to feel demoralized, daunted and defeated these days. With so many things going wrong, it’s easy to overlook the many things going right.

For Unitarian Universalists, this tunnel vision is the central tragedy of the human condition, not just of our times. We respect those who frame the human problem as sin or twisted wills, but it’s nearsightedness that our religion is most worried about. Which is also why blessings are so core to our faith. They are our way of widening our view.

You see, unlike some of our sibling religions, we don’t *say* a lot of blessings. But we do *point* to them. For us, blessings are not so much about giving something to each other as they are about helping each other notice all that’s *already been given*.

And it’s not just about widening our view to see the gifts and blessings themselves; it’s about widening our understanding of life. Pointing to blessings repairs our relationship with life, allowing us to see it as generous instead of indifferent or threatening. And that’s no small thing. Because when the world seems stingy with us, we start getting stingy with others. In contrast, those who feel blessed have little trouble passing blessings on. Life spills into us and we spill into others.

And in that overflow, it does indeed get a whole lot easier to notice that there is, most certainly, a whole alphabet out there.

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A
A George Bailey Meditation Moment

When it comes to counting your blessings, just about everyone recommends the practice of keeping a gratitude list. After all, adding up all of the blessings in our life surely leads to happiness, right?

Well, it turns out it may be a bit more complicated than that.

Recent research suggests that a contrarian approach to the blessings in our lives is even more impactful. Instead of reflecting on the presence of a positive event ("I'm grateful I met my spouse"), these researchers recommend that we reflect on its absence ("What if I had never met my wife?").

It's a counterfactual meditation on our lives, inviting us to imagine a world where our most treasured blessings never occurred. It's basically what the angel in It's a Wonderful Life famously asked George Bailey to do.

So give it a try. You could do it each day for a week, but it's also impactful to just set aside one morning for it.

- Pick a blessing or two from your life
- Meditate on and imagine what your life would be like without that blessing in it
- Also reflect on how other aspects of your life would have played out differently if that blessing wouldn't have occurred.
- Then capture your thoughts. Journal. Jot some notes. Maybe even write a poem or draw a picture.

Here's an article about the "George Bailey effect" to help you along your way:

"Don't count your blessings. Do this instead."
https://ozanvarol.com/dont-count-your-blessings-do-this-instead/

Option B
Carry a Blessing with You into the Day

Begin your day with a reflection on blessings and carry it with you into the rest of your day. It's that simple!

To guide you, we suggest you use the numerous wonderful videos listed in the "Videos & Podcasts" section of the Companion Pieces part of this packet. Pick a different one each morning. There are enough to last you an entire week.

But watching/listening to it is only half of the practice. The key part is to pay attention to when that blessing video pokes its head into your day. Look out for moments when it re-enters your awareness and needles you to notice something, think about something differently or connect a couple of dots. Think of watching these videos as a way of putting on glasses that will hopefully cast the rest of your day in a whole new light.

Option C
Write A Blessing for Yourself

Words of blessing are often written as traveling partners, offering us not only hope but guidance for the path ahead. They point to what's possible. They highlight treasures otherwise easily missed. They function as maps, reminders and challenges all rolled into one. They help us get to where we need to go.

And nobody knows where we need to go better than ourselves. So while all those blessings written by others are nice, maybe it's time to take up a pen and be your own blessing writer. Here's how:

1. Start by reflecting on where you are right now on your journey and where you need to go.
2. Jot down a list of what you think you need to hold on to and remember as you take the next steps of the journey in front of you.
3. Read some of the blessings below for inspiration and structure ideas.
4. Put pen to paper or finger to keyboard and get writing.

- **Benediction, Bernadette Miller**
  https://gratefulness.org/resource/benediction/
- **A Blessing for Traveling in the Dark, Jan Richardson**
  https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/blessing-traveling-dark
- **A Blessing of Discomfort**
  https://www.paulistcenter.org/a-franciscan-prayer-may-god-bless-you-with-discomfort/
- **Beannacht, John O'Donohue**
  https://medium.com/@onbeing/beannacht-a-poem-8c2c29a4d14e
- **A Blessing for One Who is Exhausted, John O'Donohue**
  https://onbeing.org/blog/john-odonohue-for-one-who-is-exhausted-a-blessing/
- **A Blessing for Presence, John O'Donohue**
  https://mindfulselfcompassionuk.com/a-blessing-for-presence/

Option D
The Blessings of Aging… Make a list!

Aging is more than one long process of loss and letting go. If we are open to it, it's also a path littered with gifts. Yes, littered!

With that in mind, this spiritual exercise invites you to prove how rich the blessings of aging are. Heaven knows there are plenty of people willing to go on and on about aging's downsides. So why not produce a list of aging's blessings that goes on and on?!

So, don't just make a list; make a list that you keep expanding in some way. For instance, you might work on it for a week, not just a day. Or you could keep asking others what they would add to the list. The point is to find some method/strategy/practice to keep the list alive and growing.

Oh, and let's be clear: this is for all ages. "Aging" happens to all of us, whether we are 80, 48 or 28. So keep yourself open to this exercise regardless of how old you are.

Here's some inspiration to help you on your way:

- 30 Reasons Why Life Is So Much Better At 30
  https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/real-life/thirty-reasons-age-thirty-best-time-life/
- An Ode to Middle Age
  https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/01/ode-to-middle-age/603067/

- 25 Reasons To Feel Great About Middle Age
  https://www.huffpost.com/entry/benefits-of-middle-age_n_4209704#:~:text=But%20there%20are%20also%20endless,are%20happier%20than%20younger%20ones.
- The myth of the mid-life crisis
  https://sharperiron.org/comment/1207#comment-1207
- Being A Middle-Aged Mom Has Some Perks
  https://www.scarymommy.com/perks-challenges-middle-age-mom
- The Seven Blessings
  https://www.huffpost.com/entry/blessings-of-aging_b_4016821
- The Blessing of Aging:
  https://www.newyorker.com/video/watch/the-blessings-of-aging

Option E
Which Quote is Yours?

In the Companion Pieces section below, there are many quotes about the practice of Celebrating Blessings. Engaging these quotes and finding *the one* that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself.

So, as your spiritual exercise for this month, reflect on those quotes until you find the one that most expands or deepens your understanding of Blessings.

After you've found it, consider writing it out on a small piece of paper and carrying it with you or pinning it up so you can continue to reflect on it throughout the weeks leading up to your group meeting. Come to your group ready to share where the journey led you.

Your Question

Don't treat these questions like "homework" or try to answer every one. Instead, make time to meditate on the list and then pick the one question that speaks to you most. The goal is to figure out which question is "yours." Which question captures the call of your inner voice? Which one contains "your work"? And what is that question trying to get you to notice or acknowledge?

Often it helps to read the list to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with!

1. When in your life have you most felt like you were a blessing?

2. How would you complete the sentence: "I've been blessed with _____."?

3. What was the most significant blessing of your family system? Your birth order? Having a large extended family? Having a special relationship with your parents or siblings? Having a parent who wasn't like other parents? A special family ritual? Your family's love of books, or food or jokes?

4. What summer in your life contained the most blessings? Is there any part of you that wants to recreate or re-experience some of those blessings this summer?

5. What role has the blessing of friendship played in your life?

6. What blessing did the religion of your childhood leave you?

7. Is there anything held in common by the people you know who feel blessed by life? What do they have to teach you about "the secret to feeling blessed"?

8. They say blessings come when we are still enough to notice them. How good are you at being still?

9. Has a loss ever led to a blessing for you?

10. Has an obligation or burden ever surprised you with a blessing?

11. Have you ever witnessed anger offering a blessing?

12. Is it possible that feeling cursed or cheated is playing itself out in your life in unnoticed - or unwanted - ways?

13. Have you thanked your various "fathers" for their blessings? Many of us have more than one father figure in our lives. When was the last time you told them thanks for their gifts? And let them know you carry them and their influence with you still?

14. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of imagining the spiritual practice of Celebrating Blessings.

Word Roots

"The Hebrew word for blessing and benediction is rooted in the word for knee, suggesting that we receive blessing by kneeling down, by making ourselves small, humble, receptive."
Source

"The Aramaic word underlying our English word blessed is tubwayhun which literally means "ripe" or "ready for the picking"... And when that word is used in reference to people, it can mean integrated, whole, complete, mature."
source

Wise Words

There is a reality in blessing... It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it.
Marilynne Robinson

A blessing is not something that one person gives another. A blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind of relationship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth and strengthen what is whole in one another.
Rachel Naomi Remen

When we bless others, we offer them refuge from an indifferent world.
Rachel Naomi Remen

Blessing When the World is Ending
Jan Richardson
Full piece at
https://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/07/18/blessing-when-the-world-is-ending/

…there is…nothing that cries out more
for a blessing
than when a world
is falling apart.
This blessing
will not fix you
will not mend you
will not give you
false comfort…
It will simply
sit itself beside you
among the shards
and gently turn your face
toward the direction
from which the light
will come…

Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift.
Mary Oliver

I recognize that even in the valley of the shadow of my own tangled thoughts there is something holy and unutterable seeking to restore my soul … I always stop and touch the coarse gray bark of one particular tree with my hand or cheek, which I suppose is a way of blessing it for being so strong and beautiful. Who knows how long it has been standing there wearing its foliage like a crown even though a part of it is dying? Because of that quality of sheer endurance one morning I found myself

touching it not to bless it, but to ask its blessing, so that I myself might move toward old age and death with something like its stunning grace and courage.
Frederick Buechner

May you have the courage to listen to the voice of desire that disturbs you when you have settled for something safe.
John O'Donohue

May God bless us with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships
So that we may live from deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of God's creations
So that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,
So that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and
To turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with just enough foolishness
To believe that we can make a difference in the world,
So that we can do what others claim cannot be done:
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and all our neighbors who are poor.
A Franciscan Benediction

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth…
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Matthew 5

The awesome, often unrecognized, gifts come from what is Beyond, beyond our understanding and comprehension, beyond our capacity to produce. Without our thinking, the world appears. Food comes from the bounty of nature, the work of many people, the offering of other forms of life. We cannot fathom or manufacture the lusciousness of a tomato vine-ripened in the sunlight. What is Beyond has many names: God, Emptiness, Source, the Way. It's where the Muses hang out.
Edward Espe Brown

Sometimes our inner light goes out but is blown again into flame by an encounter with another human being. Each of us owes the deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this inner light.
Albert Schweitzer

A real [blessed] friend is one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out.
Author unknown

A friend is a loved one who awakens your life in order to free the wild possibilities within you.
John O'Donahue

It could happen any time, tornado, earthquake… Or sunshine, love, salvation… That's why we wake and look out — no guarantees in this life. But some bonuses, like morning, like right now…
William Stafford

Because I, too, feel that way: that my days are exceptional even when they are ordinary, that existence does not need to show us any of its more famous or spectacular wonders to fill us with amazement. We live remarkable lives because life itself is remarkable, a fact that is impossible not to notice if only suffering leaves us alone for long enough. Lately I have found this everyday remarkableness.
Kathryn Schulz

Oh do you have time
to linger
for just a little while
out of your busy

and very important day
for the goldfinches
that have gathered
in a field of thistles…
Mary Oliver

May you wake with a sense of play,
An exaltation of the possible.
May you rest without guilt,
Satisfied at the end of a day well done.
May all the rough edges be smoothed,
If to smooth is to heal,
And the edges be left rough,
When the unpolished is more true…
Carrie Newcomer

We are all born to be a blessing.
Rachel Naomi Remen

Music

Our music playlists are organized as a journey of sorts, so consider listening from beginning to end and using the playlist as a musical meditation on this month's theme:

Click HERE for the YouTube playlist on Celebrating Blessings
Click HERE for all the YouTube playlists.

Videos & Podcasts

A Blessing for It All
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDoNHGnJLwU

On Seeing Ourselves as a Blessing
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNS_D-pw8y4

Queer Morning Blessings
https://vimeo.com/458381618

On the Blessing of "Real Things"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRF1GUZHDIo

Blessed Are the Unemployed, Unimpressive, and Underrepresented
Nadia Bolz-Weber
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctcjNCrGyT8
A modern-day twist on the Sermon on the Mount

On the Blessing of Each Ordinary Moment
https://www.ted.com/talks/cesar_kuriyama_one_second_every_day?language=en
Also:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGDQurgHcQs&t=36s

Blessed by the Moon
https://vimeo.com/259818647

In Praise of Tomorrow, Sabrina Benaim
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1L8Ck1AlBg
On lifting up the blessings of those we love, and the blessing of getting yet another tomorrow with them.

Blessing For Sound, David Whyte
Video:
https://vimeo.com/639146289?embedded=true&source=video_title&owner=1022824
In Text:
https://www.themarginalian.org/2021/10/26/david-whyte-blessings/
On the blessing of sound as a doorway to the divine.

Juneteenth and the Blessing of Knowing the True Story
The Juneteenth Story:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMlUkZhYtcU
Juneteenth: A truthful telling:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7__GlJuFOM
!2 Things To Know:
http://mentalfloss.com/article/501680/12-things-you-might-not-know-about-juneteenth

Articles

Billie Holiday's 'God Bless the Child'
https://variety.com/2021/music/news/billie-holiday-god-bless-child-black-history-month-1234907327/

Black gratitude is not an attitude white people should ever expect
Sam McKenzie Jr.
https://sammckenziejr.medium.com/black-gratitude-is-not-an-attitude-white-people-should-ever-expect-e6162c7a6091

Movies

A Man Called Ove
"A Grouch Gradually Grows Grudgingly Grateful."

Boyhood
"Boyhood makes me thankful for everyone who shaped me."

Call Me By Your Name
On the blessed joys and sorrows of first love

Beginners
On the complicated blessings of father-son relationships as well as the blessing of getting to start over.

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page:
https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/

Our Instagram Page:
Find us as "soul_matters_circle"

Music Playlists:
Click here for links to the Spotify playlists for each month.
Click here to check out the YouTube playlists.

Soul Matters
SHARING CIRCLE

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