

Last month, I talked about the gift of our lives, and all the gifts in our lives. I ended with the idea that these gifts must move, must keep moving, keep being passed on, or they cease to become gifts. They become commodities, possessions whose meaning is strictly transactional.

There's another way to refer to all of these gifts. We call them blessings. We say that we are blessed with good health, with long life, with a good job, with healthy relationships. It's a pretty common way of talking about these things, one that's embedded in our language and our culture, so I think it's worthwhile to unpack that a little.

In traditional religious language, to bless something is to sanctify it, to make it holy. There's some debate about the etymology of the word, but most sources trace it back to Old English, and the act of consecration by anointing an altar with blood, typically the blood of a sacrificial animal. That was back when your domestic animals meant survival for you and yours, and to give one up was pretty significant.

To sacrifice is to give up something important or valued for the sake of other considerations. To make something sacred is to set it apart from the mundane, and in many cases to make it untouchable and unchangeable.

But to be blessed in the way I noted before is to have been granted happiness, health, or prosperity; or to have been endowed with some talent or aspect, such as perfect pitch, a photographic memory, or physical attractiveness.

Ahh... but who or what does the granting or endowing? Many people would say it is the act of some divine power, and that they are favored by their deities. That's pretty dangerous theological territory, because the flip side of that is that those who don't enjoy such blessings are not favored by those gods or goddesses.

Is it any wonder we might hesitate to use such language?

The implied question is: Where do such blessings come from? Luck? Divine favor? Good genes? Your socio-economic status? Hard work? The threads of good fortune are tangled together, and it's hard to tease them apart. And many blessings are mixed blessings.

Whatever their source, I think we personally have a lot less to do with it than we'd like to imagine.

That understanding goes a long way towards keeping perspective on our lives and our fortunes. It keeps us humble. Or it should.

But wherever our blessings come from, however they show up in our lives, it's important that we bless the world in return - whatever the depth and breadth of our blessings, be they many or few.

They may seem like obvious questions, but why and how should we do that?

We Unitarian Universalists have been described as being a heady bunch, which has always seemed pretty accurate to me. "Heady" being a euphemism for left-brained. Our heritage favors the rational side of things. We like to have reasons, perhaps too-well-thought-out reasons, for the things we do.

So when we talk about blessing the world, we tend to think in prescriptive terms. Be kind. Give to charity. Pay it forward. Advocate for legislation. Change our language. If we could just make all those things happen, then the world would be a better place. Perhaps. The intention is good. The record so far is mixed. I'm not saying we shouldn't do those things, but maybe we need to be working on the hips to fix the crick on our necks, so to speak.

Trying to change complex systems with linear thinking can be extremely frustrating. A straight line doesn't always get you where you want to go. In that spirit, let's take a little detour into the left-brain/right-brain thing.

Back in 2009, Iain McGilchrist published *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. In it, he contends that the popular notion of the brain hemispheres as respectively logical and creative in nature is superficial and wrong, and that the correct view is that they pay attention in fundamentally different ways, the left being detail-oriented, the right being whole-oriented.

In broad terms, one could say that it is the job of the right hemisphere to envisage what is going on holistically, while the left one provides precision on particular issues. Further, it is the right that is responsible for surveying the whole scene and directing all the data coming in, so it is more directly in touch with the world. So the right usually knows what left is doing, but left may not even be aware of anything outside its narrow focus. It has blinders on, which allows for that precision. The hemispheres have a partnership that evolved over millennia, but like much of evolution, it's a bit of a hack, and one that can go wrong when one partner becomes too dominant.

His larger claim is that the emphasis on left-brained, precise, categorical thinking has come at the expense of the bigger picture, and has now reached a point where it is seriously distorting both our lives and our thought.

So what has that got to do with blessing the world?

Like a body worker who fixes that crick in your neck by adjusting your hips, we can effect change by doing something that might not seem to make sense at first.

Some of you may remember the story of Jill Bolte Taylor, the neuroscientist who was able to observe and remember the experience of having a cerebral hemorrhage that shut down the left hemisphere of her brain.

She watched herself lose the ability to speak, move, and understand. That must have been terrifying, huh? Here's what she has to say about it:

*'... it was as though my consciousness had shifted away from my normal perception of reality, where I'm the person on the (exercise) machine having the experience, to some esoteric space where I'm witnessing myself having this experience. I look down at my arm, and I realize that I can no longer define the boundaries of my body. I can't define where I begin and where I end, because the atoms and the molecules of my arm blended with the atoms and molecules of the wall. And all I could detect was this energy. Energy. And I'm asking myself, 'What is wrong with me, what is going on?'*

*... 'And at first I was shocked to find myself inside of a silent mind. But then I was immediately captivated by the magnificence of energy around me. And because I could no longer identify the boundaries of my body, I felt enormous and expansive. I felt at one with all the energy that was, and it was beautiful there.'*

As her left hemisphere ceases to function, she's able to fully access the right brain's experience of the world, that sense of unity and belonging that seems to elude us much of the time.

She goes to say that, "Religion is a story that the left brain tells the right brain." But if that relationship is out of balance, as Iain McGilchrist claims, then our work is to restore the balance, and have the right brain tell the bigger story, the one that keeps the work of the left in perspective.

Short of having a stroke, human beings have millennia of experience in getting the left hemisphere to shut the frack up and listen. Some forms of meditation, for instance. Repeating a mantra. Mind altering drugs. Fasting. Prayer. Ritual and worship.

And blessing the world, in the original sense of sanctifying, making holy.

Let's give that last one a try, shall we?

I invite you to simply bless everything you see or hear or taste or touch, and all that is unseen, as well. Don't judge anything. Just bless and keep on blessing, every chance you get. Bless the good, the bad, whatever you consider beautiful or ugly. Bless your enemies and your friends and every stranger. Bless the sun and moon and stars. Bless the trash and the trees. Bless it all.

If you can, raise your hand in benediction and speak aloud. That may be somewhat embarrassing in public, so just raise an imaginary hand and silently speak your blessings. It's gonna feel funny at first, but stick with it on a daily basis. And you're going to be busy, because there's a lot to bless.

When we start to bless all the parts of the world, they are joined together by the blessings. We begin to experience the world as a unity, and ourselves as just a part of it, continually blessing and being blessed.

We move into communion with the world.

This changes the brain and our relationships to each other and the world. Jill Bolte Taylor notes that..." there was both freedom and challenge for me in recognizing that our perception of the external world, and our relationship to it, is a product of our neurological circuitry."

We want to nudge those circuits in the right direction, no pun – or politics - intended.

To sanctify the world by blessing it. That can't work, says the left hemisphere. I got to figure it out, slice the world into smaller and smaller pieces, seeking ever more precision. I got to fix things, come up with a plan and execute it. I have all these prescriptions you should take. That's the way to change the world, says the left brain. Take your medicine.

But without communion, those plans seem to flounder, don't they? And communion something the left brain just isn't capable of. Religion has to be a story that the right brain tells the left.

That bring me to a couple of conclusions.

As a practical matter, we need to seek communion before action. Communion grounds our actions in something larger than ourselves, by linking everyone and everything involved.

And as a spiritual matter, if we don't bless the world, who will?

So... more next month on communion and the bigger picture.