

When I was in the business world, I would sign all my letters and emails Sincerely, Jay Wolin...not necessarily because I was sincere, although I tried to be, but it was something I read in Baldrige's book on Business Etiquette. This was the kind of thing that I would do when I was learning anything new. I tried to learn what was expected, I would study what other business people did. I think this is a good lesson for anything we take on in life, whether it be a new career, a new hobby, social activism, or ministry, find out what successful people in the field have done and tailor it to your own unique style and circumstances. So as I pursued ministry, I started watching and studying what ministers did.

I noticed many used very creative signature lines, some using quotes, I actually took a lot of time discerning this question. That may speak a little to obsessiveness on my part, but this is something that in some ways defines the essence of who I am. So I thought how do I want to be defined? I wanted to be intentional and authentic. If there was one virtue, one statement to express the essence of my being to others, what would it be. A good question for each of us to think about. So if you ever received an email from me you know I chose the phrase with a grateful heart. Now I have to be honest, I don't *always* have a grateful heart, but it is what I aspire to be and do every day.

And since I write a multitude of emails every day, this is always in front of me, always staring at me, always challenging me...and before I send out an email, I look at the line and ask myself, did I write this email with a grateful heart. Am I a living with a grateful heart. And not just with gratitude. Not just an intellectual understanding of being thankful, but being grateful in the core of my being, in the life force that flows through all my body. Like a constant affirmation and reminder, naming my intention of how I want to be in the world

Of course gratefulness requires us to look at the world with a relative lens. Often it is only with the perspective of time and of accumulating experience that we can appreciate gratitude. Such as when I was growing up, I really didn't like where I was growing up, but as I went out into the world, I learned there were a lot worse conditions I could have been in. And I realized what major advantages I had living where I did. But at the time I didn't appreciate what I had. Now I appreciate what it took for my family just to be in the position to live where we lived. Now I have learned to appreciate just having a roof over my head however minimal it may be. It is not something we should ever take for granted. As we know there are many right here in town without a roof over their heads. Another example would be growing up, I thought my sister was very pushy...and I didn't appreciate her....now many years later, I still think she's pushy, but I appreciate having two siblings who has shared a lifetime of experiences with me, who know me as no one else does and looked out for me and people I know I can always count on in a time of need. It is important for us to look back over time to see how our perceptions change and to bring that awareness into the present moment to examine our current perceptions and assumptions about our current experiences. I can't always control my circumstances, but I can control how I react to them and how I let them affect me.

As an example, when I am driving and someone cuts me off, I always like to imagine they are rushing to the hospital because they just found out their mother was ill. Now when my son is in the car, he imagines something less altruistic, and responds with anger often. But the truth is we don't really know. But instead of becoming angry I become grateful, grateful that they didn't hit me, grateful that I don't have anything causing me to be nearly so anxious as that person, and that in turn makes me less anxious. And when I am late for a meeting, I have learned, that it is far healthier for me not stress over it and rush to where I am going, risking my safety, a speeding ticket, and my stress levels.

And I try to become grateful for even having a car to drive in, for there was a time when I didn't have a car. I become grateful that I have a meeting to go to. I become grateful that I am optimistic that the person I am meeting will forgive my lateness. The truth is medical study after medical study has shown that gratefulness leads to, less stress, to better health, and to more happiness. Now I am not Pollyannaish, and I know that person who cut me off, probably isn't going to the hospital, but I don't know their life, what led them to that point, that caused them to do that...and I try

to remember that there was probably once in my life when I accidentally cut someone off....and I become grateful that I did not hurt someone else.

We can choose how we react. Do we react with anger or do we react with love in our heart, do we react from a place of gratefulness for what we do have and reminder of our own imperfect selves. Are we the carrot, the egg or the coffee.

We heard Ann talk about Guest at your table boxes from the UUSC. If you read the booklet included with the box, it is a reminder of how blessed we are and how the challenges we face often pale in comparison to people in other parts of the world. Sometimes we like to think this is because we are exceptional, but in fact, we were blessed recipients of a land with excessive fertile soil, and limited population. An indigenous population that we deposed from those lands.

It is of course ironic that the Thanksgiving Holiday, we retell with the story of how the indigenous peoples of this country helped us survive at our early beginnings in this country and how this holiday celebrates our sharing a meal together with them. This is not to say that all of our ancestors, many who came here long after those events, and even long after slavery had been outlawed, didn't work very hard to achieve what they did. But let us remember to be grateful for the opportunities we had that so many other here and in the world didn't have, let us be grateful for having the opportunity to live the way we choose, when so many were not allowed to live the lifestyle they were living before Europeans arrived. Let us be grateful.

What gratefulness does for us is lead us to the realization of the interdependence all things. It leads us to reject the myth of pure self sufficiency. If I am grateful for something else, I am connected to something else. And self sufficiency is a myth. No one does it on their own. Thich Nhat Hanh I think expresses this wonderfully in his writings called "The heart of understanding" He states Please look at this piece of paper, without the clouds in the sky, this piece of paper could not exist. Without a cloud, there will be no rain, without rain, the trees cannot grow, and without trees we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. If we look into this sheet of paper deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine.. And so we know that the sunshine is also this sheet of paper. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper, and we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist." (And I would add that the person who typed the words, the person who made the computer it was typed on.... The person who taught that person to read and write....also are a part of this piece of paper. Certainly we all have a part in and are responsible for our own actions, but no one does it alone. I thought about this last week at a memorial service when someone said something to remind me of the Orson Wells quote, "we are born alone, we live alone, we die alone, Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for the moment that we're not alone." I always found that a strange line.

Certainly we have an inner world, some things that we don't share with others, but at birth is the one time we are undeniably not alone, we are physically connected to another human being. Last week one of our long time members passed away....she was not alone, she had her husband by her side, her many friends from this congregation by her side constantly with them caring for them in the last months of her life. In fact I would say Welles got it completely wrong, I believe that we try to create the illusion that we are alone, People in our society often do everything they can to isolate themselves from others. Look for every possible reason to hate and be hurt by others.... And it is this feeling and belief of alienation that we are separate from other things that allows us to look at other things and beings as commodities, as something other than ourselves. Realizing our interdependence, with all of existence, forces us into a more emotional and intimate relationship with existence...it requires us to be authentic, to lower our boundaries, to risk pain, to care about others and

ultimately if I am interdependent with you, if I harm you, I harm myself. If I help you, I help myself. We don't have to be alone... We can open our hearts to others. We can open our minds to new ways of being and doing things. It is in breaking this illusion of aloneness that we will realize the universality of all things and all people.

So how do we create a sense of gratitude, how do we create this sense of oneness. I believe the key to doing this is to have a spiritual practice. I feel having a spiritual practice to be so important because It requires intentionality. And once we learn the discipline of intentionality in one area of our life, we can apply it to other areas of our life. Intentionality in our actions, intentionality in our thoughts, intentionality in our speech, and most important intentionality in our relationships with others. Now I know when we think of spiritual practices we think of a monk doing meditation in a monastery. Now I will be the first to tell you that meditation has been a powerful spiritual practice for me.

And there is an irony in that doing something solitary like meditation can lead to a greater ability to connect with others. But I can also tell you that meditating with a group has been a much more powerful experience for me than meditating alone. Intellectually that doesn't make sense. Maybe there is a certain accountability of being with others, or maybe it is the psychic energy of those around me, but either way that has always been my experience. Spiritual practices do not have to be solitary acts though, they can be almost anything we do if we act with intention. Other examples include spiritual body practices such as Tai Chi, and Yoga, creativity practices such as poetry writing, and other creative art work, practices such as gardening, knitting, cooking, even cleaning the house if done with intention and love should be considered a spiritual practice. I have not achieved that level of awareness myself on that last one.

But in regard to specifically making gratitude a spiritual practice, there are some very specific things that you can do. Every morning or evening you can journal or think about a list of things and people you are grateful for. You can use visual reminders, such as I do with my email, or writing a list of the things you are most grateful for and keep them in your wallet, and when things get stressful, pull it out and read it. Another important practice is to on a daily basis tell someone something you appreciate about them. There is a power in the naming of something out loud. And I know that there will be days, when the hard winds blow, and the body aches, and the bill collector calls, that you are just not going to feel like doing it. But I tell you it is important to do even if you are not feeling it, even if it means just going through the motions. I know going through the motions can has a negative context, but as Aristotle said, We are what we repeatedly do. In more current times than Aristotle, Stephan Covey in his book 7 habits of highly successful people used the image of sharpening the saw...being grateful is not something we can just turn on and off, we must make it a practice, a part of our every day life, so that it comes naturally to us day in and day out.

So I do have a grateful heart, and I am constantly practicing...I am grateful for many things. First I want to say, I am grateful for auto-save on Microsoft Word. While writing this sermon, due to a sensitive mouse I accidentally shut the file down, and after an anxious moment I was very grateful, I hadn't lost the sermon. I am grateful. I am grateful to be here with you, to have this opportunity to minister with you. I am grateful to be able to work in the vocation that I am passionate about and gives my life meaning. I know many people cant say that. I am grateful. And as I asked all of my Facebook friends what they were thankful for.

With the exception of one cousin who is seriously grateful for his xbox, I like most of the people who responded am grateful for my health, for my family and their health, for friends, congregations and a religion that sustains us as we journey through life, for the wonders of nature, and as another person's note reminded me, something my grandfather would often say to me later in his life, When I would ask him how he was, he would respond, "Jay, Every day above ground is a good day." So yes, I am grateful for the mere existence of my life on this planet, and my awareness of it. So be grateful, every moment, of every day, in every interaction you have. May it be so.