

LIVING THANKFULLY DURING TROUBLED TIMES

A Sermon preached by
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American painter and illustrator, Norman Rockwell, is best known for his series of 4 oil paintings entitled, "The Four Freedoms": (1) Freedom from Want, (2) Freedom from Fear, (3) Freedom of Speech, and (4) Freedom of Worship. They were inspired by the FDR's State of the Union in January, 1941 in which he identified 4 basic human rights. Originally Rockwell offered his sketches to the United States Office of War Information in 1942 in response to their campaign to educate Americans as to why the country was at war, but they were rejected. They were finally published, one in turn, by The Saturday Evening Post in the spring of 1943, accompanied by an essay by a well-known author. Rockwell received over 60,000 cards of encouragement and thanks for his work. And they went on to garner for the US Treasury over \$132 million in the sale of war bonds, reproduced as stand alone posters, and as postage stamps. Although criticized by many for its regionalism, and offering nothing thought provoking and cutting-edge in response to the then current times – only an idealized America - his style is unmistakable, and he continues to be thought of by many as America's artist.

As cosmopolitan and urbane as we all are, there is within all of us a bit of provincialism, the parochial, is there not? *Freedom From Want*: the desire for me and mine to have what we need...and a little bit left over. Food, shelter, clothing, meaningful work. Where is the fault? *Freedom From Fear*: the desire to live everyday of our life without having to watch over our shoulder for any menace. *Freedom of Speech*: the desire to say what we feel and think without the threat of being arrested or abridged. *Freedom of Worship*: space to observe the faith of your choice, or none at all. And again, where are we guilty in making these things so for ourselves...first...before we secure them for our next door neighbor, our relative in another state, or a little girl on the other side of the world? The task of staying alive and well is an arduous task, full of choices, some that carry unintended consequences.

Rockwell's Four Freedoms came on the American scene when it was embroiled in WWII, a global military conflict which involved the majority of the world's nations. For six years the nation's attention was turned towards Europe and Asia. It devoted the lives of hundreds of thousands of women and men to serve on the various battlefields and in its factories...working to put down the menace to world stability. It was a time not wholly dissimilar to our own – when our daily and nightly broadcasts include word of invasions, thwarted plans, safe areas, and the weekly war dead. There was legitimate cause to be alarmed, decisions had to be made, and a resolution was not easy to come by. So, what to do but remind the public with very clear and evocative images of what was at stake...why it was all necessary? These paintings touched a place in the lives of those who looked at them; a life they longed to preserve, an innocence they knew that was fading fast. They were true symbols of their time.

And what might be a symbol for our time, as we watch the formation of President-Elect Obama's cabinet? As we approach the the sixth anniversary of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? As we witness the unraveling of our economic system. As we reconfigure our household budgets not only for the holiday season, but for the foreseeable future? As we discern the coming year for our

Fellowship as it relates to our passion for justice and peace?

For many of us the holiday season serves as a symbol for hope: Thanksgiving Day...a year of hard work, bringing in the harvest and the well-spread table shared by family, friends and the strangers. Christmas Day...a time of joyful expectation and reality being turned on its head. While some cry commercialism, and manufactured attempts at producing happiness and goodwill, other say that this is in fact human nature's way of working through all those things that are not right with us individually and as a society. The running about here and there, the buying and preparation, the gathering and merry-making are serving their purpose in relieving us, if only for a while, of the debilitating stresses and strains of poverty, hate, subjugation, and uncertainty. From Thanksgiving Day until New Years Day...36 days...we have a chance to indulge ourselves and those we love...to become drunk with our thirst for, if not how it was, then for how we would like for life to be.

Well, there is no going back to Eden; that state of innocence for this country or any other country on this globe is long gone. And even though Rockwell's depiction of the Four Freedoms elicit from us thoughts of a more romantic patriotism, current events only seem to frustrate that those principles rendering them almost as mere illusions. Yet, even as our country's economic and military horizons continues to look bleak, with the holiday season bringing its own demands, I am persuaded that we can preserve our sanity, make meaning out of the challenges before us, cultivate and maintain healthy relationships, and be advocates for the kind of nation...world that we want to be citizens of. I believe Rockwell's series intimated at it, but the message was obscured by the charm of the painting. It is the principle...the discipline of gratitude.

In her book entitled, *Gratitude*, Melody Beattie describes gratitude as that which “...*unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today and creates a vision for tomorrow.*”

We are guests on this great, good Earth, and our every breath should be one of gratitude to all those forces seen and unseen that hold us and everything else together. Meister Eckhart, the 14th century German theologian and philosopher, once suggested that if the only prayer we say in our lifetime is “thank you” that would suffice. “Thank you” for services rendered to us – regardless of being requested or a matter of duty. “Thank you” for events and experiences – desirable and otherwise – that have informed our attitude and actions. “Thank you” for the breath that fills our lungs, and our bodies. For loved ones, family, and our circle of friends. For strangers and those to whom we are estranged. For the bountiful little blessing which arrive in our lives unheralded. For both pleasure and pain. The object of our thanks, be it a person or group, or the forces of the universe, is nothing more than acknowledging what is truly divine and wonderful.

A number of years ago, I came across the Japanese psychology, Naikan Therapy; **Nai** meaning “inside”, “inner”; and **kan** meaning “looking”. Hence, the idea of introspection, self-reflection. Introduced into the West in the 1940's by Yoshimoto Ishin, a devout Buddhist, the goal of Naikan Therapy is to broaden one's view of reality where longstanding perspectives are accompanied by much that had been hidden...what we have been blind to. By attending to three questions: (1) What have I received from _____, (2) What have I given to _____, and (3) What trouble and difficulties have I

caused _____ ...we spend time time remembering how we have been supported and cared for by others, **and**, how our acceptance of that service has contributed disease and difficulties to their existence. In all, if we are not willing to see and accept those events in which we have been the source of someone's suffering/trouble, then we cannot truly know ourselves and the grace by which we live. A simple method of Naikan self-reflection requires at least 20 – 30 minutes in a quiet place without distractions, possibly before retiring for the evening. You simply record the answers to the three questions in relation to the day's events, a particular person, or a past event. Be as specific as you can. Nothing is too trivial. The outcome is that you can learn more about yourself; about your life. Fundamentally, your knowledge will be expanded regarding how you have lived, and how you will choose to live in the immediate future.

With the holiday season upon us, and the year coming to a close, with all of the crises we face as a nation, it is my intention during these troubled times to open myself up to how I am blessed by others – how everything in my world is not permanently derailed by me or forces beyond my control.

To give you an example, Melissa Ericson, relates her experience with Naikan self-reflection through an event that occurred in 1986. One morning as she waited on a platform with hundreds of other commuters on the Long Island Rail Road, Melissa glanced at her watch and commented to herself that she would indeed be one of the first persons on the train when it arrived. And that is the last thing she said she remembered when speaking to her husband and the doctors who were attending to her. It turns out that she had fainted and fallen on to the train tracks. The fall was due in part to a chemical imbalance associated with her pregnancy. A gentleman standing by her had come to her aid by jumping down onto the tracks to retrieve her. Having gained consciousness in the hospital, she was told that she sustained a broken jaw, fractured rib cage, broken her arm in 6 places, and a concussion. Nevertheless, because she was 4.5 months pregnant she was put on bed rest with orders not to engage in any kind of work whatsoever. Relatives, friends and co-workers saw to her and her husband's meals, laundry, medical appointments, errands, and other assorted tasks. For next few months, there was a constant stream of individuals in her home and elsewhere working on her behalf. Read Melissa's story at the ToDo Institute's Resource Library at www.todoinstitute.org. There you will read her responses to the three questions of Naikan Self-Reflection: (1) the various kinds of assistance she received from strangers and friends, (2) what she gave to these individuals who helped her throughout her ordeal, and (3) how her accident factored into the lives of all who were involved – from fellow commuter to visiting nurse – inconveniences to their schedule, added stress, and or problems and feelings that she may never know. She reports that, “My Naikan reflection on this accident has allowed me to see, in detail, all the thoughtful acts that were done on my behalf by others -- many efforts by my family and people I had never even spoken with. At a time when I was wounded, weak and unable to care for myself, they were there for me, watching over me, offering their love and support to help me get well. It renews my faith in the world that we are intrinsically good, and it awakens my deep gratitude. I am more clearly aware now of my obligation to do for others.”

Another idea is to keep a gratitude journal. Choose a blank notebook or journal to write in every night. Keep this notebook next to the bed with a pen readily available. Look for things during the day for which you are grateful; positive and negative. Make mental notes throughout the day. Notice how the gratitude journal shifts the focus to a more positive outlook.

Write five things you're grateful for each night before bedtime. Review the day and include

anything, however small or great, that was a source of gratitude that day, e.g., a baby's smile, sharing a walk alone or with a friend, listening to music, attending to a item of business or personal project. Make the list personal. Write a few words about the five benefits or blessings. Be brief and increase the length as time progresses. Begin looking everyday for the positive angle in all things. View obstacles as opportunities to appreciate, or find prompts to find new solutions.

Focus on the wonderful things in life to attract similar encounters in the course of the day. Use positive energy as a magnet to draw even more positive energy. Include these attractions in the journal. Personalize the gratitude journal. Expand it with clippings, photos, quotes or verses from magazines or other sources.

As we continue into the holiday season, try your hand at expressing your gratitude by (1) being more intentional about offering verbal expressions of thanks, (2) exploring daily Naikan self-reflection, or (3) keeping a gratitude journal. These practices may not bring world peace, ensure stability on Capitol Hill or Wall Street, cause individuals responsible for bombings, wars, and the suffering and death of scores of children, women and men. But it just might touch off a revolution in our own lives where: (1) our attention ceases to be focused only on problems and obstacles, (2) we are able to cast off the attitude that we are entitled to the efforts of others, (3) we own being the source of discomfort felt by others, and (4) we acknowledge that we are alive by sheer grace... the graciousness of others, seen and unseen, dead and alive...now and in other times and places. Who knows! Maybe a culture of thankfulness, gratitude, may be the catalyst to a prosperity not only for our Fellowship, our city, our nation, but for the whole world.

Now, I invited all of us to extend a word of thanksgiving and gratitude to each other in return for how we have been supported and cared for during our time in this Fellowship. Maybe it was hug, a wise word, a call, a bit of distance given, an offer of forgiveness. Whatever. In any case, if that person is here, turn to them and simply express your gratitude to them. I will start.