

**Beyond Negative Thanksgiving –
Overcoming the “Be Thankful You Didn’t Break Both Legs”
Syndrome**

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The United Church of Gainesville

Ecclesiastes 3:1-9 – Rabbi Rami Shapiro

Psalm 40 – Stephen Mitchell

My first year at Yale Divinity School was one of turmoil. Sandy and I got married a month before school started. She was teaching high school English in a difficult school. How difficult was it? A fellow teacher was fired for having a key to his classroom, which led to Sandy join the teachers’ union and picket the school board. She was stalked by a student four years younger than she. She cried most of the evenings from September to Thanksgiving.

The civil rights and anti-war movements were calling for radical commitment, and they turned our lives upside down.

Yale classes sent me to my dictionary nightly, looking up words like “Heilsgeschichte” and “hermeneutics”, and that’s just the “H’s”.

I worked as a student assistant in a little church in North Branford Connecticut where I taught Sunday School, assisted in worship, sometimes preached, and ran the youth group each Sunday night.

I share all this to explain why I applied for resort ministry in the Traverse City district of the United Methodist Church in Michigan for our first summer. We wanted a break.

The Methodists were trying to find out how the little Methodist churches scattered through the beautiful lakes of the northwestern region of Michigan could better serve the resort populations that swelled that area every summer. They were selecting top-notch divinity students to survey the summer tourists and report on programs that could help build community with and among them.

I got one of the positions. I was assigned to the town Lake Anne, just outside of Traverse City, where I would work in three little Methodist Churches on a circuit - Lake Anne, Inland, and Grawn. Their lay minister, Carter Miller, who had been a convenience store manager before hearing the call to preach, would leave for continuing education during the summer, and a hot shot minister, I can’t remember his name, let’s call him Henry Higgins, from a big church in Jackson, Michigan would preach. It was a great plan.

Sandy and I hitched up a little U Haul to our 64 Pontiac Tempest and set off for a summer adventure in resort ministry.

What followed was a rapid fire series of disasters. The first was where Carter Miller had arranged for us to live, a one room tar paper shack owned by a certain Uncle Red Hiestand in what would be fair to

call a swamp. We opened the door to find a single bare light bulb hanging over a concrete slab floor. A gas powered refrigerator that predated Ralph and Alice Cramden rumbled in one corner, and out back was of course, an outhouse. Uncle Red told us we could share the shower in the house with him and the Missus, but, he warned, we'd have to run because the mosquitoes were big enough to carry you away.

Now this was a summer resort community, and no one else was living in these conditions. Moreover, this was creepy. I noticed Sandy's lip start to quiver. I told Uncle Red we needed to check on something and dragged that U-Haul up and out of there like I had heard banjos of "Deliverance" in the distance.

We found a pay phone and called the Methodist district superintendent who, God bless his soul, told us to come straight to Traverse City. He got us a comfy motel for the night and sent us out for a home style fried chicken dinner. By morning he had found a simple mobile home for us to live in near the village of Lake Anne.

Second disaster. It turned out that the yoked churches of Lake Anne, Inland, and Grawn had voted **not** to participate in the summer ministry resort program and thus for us **not** to come. In order to suck up to the district superintendent and get out of there for the summer, their minister, Carter Miller lied about the vote and told the district superintendent they **would** participate in the program.

Carter Miller then went off to his summer ministerial school assuring us that the Rev. Henry Higgins from Jackson would happily move in to Uncle Red's shack and cover Sunday worship while he was gone.

Henry Higgins, however, never showed up. I encountered Uncle Red at the post office and asked after Rev. Higgins. Uncle Red said "that city slicker drove down my road, looked at the cabin, made some wise crack I didn't get, sump'm like: 'Dr. Livingston I presume,' and then drove off. Ain't seen him since."

So a twenty two year old me with one year of seminary under my belt had three churches to take care of and a resort ministry needs assessment to undertake. That, however, wasn't so bad. We met some people who actually let us swim in Lake Anne, and a young couple who invited us to water ski behind an old boat that didn't always work, but which was nevertheless fun. I preached in the three little churches, sermons that sometimes caused them to look at me oddly. But basically they accepted me, and we enjoyed each other.

As I did my surveying of the resort population I discovered that the most common need was something for teenagers to do. So Sandy and I organized a block dance one night in August on Main Street in Lake Anne.

The week before the dance we went away for a night to celebrate our first wedding anniversary at a basically empty ski lodge. Then arose the third disaster. When we returned we discovered that the Lake Anne

constable had called a town meeting. He said he heard rumors that Blacks were being bused in from Detroit to riot and burn the town of Lake Anne (this was 1967). He wasn't going to be responsible for anarchy. He turned in his gun and badge. A really Barney Fife moment. So thanks to us and our planned dance, there was no law and order in Lake Anne.

Our water skiing friend picked up the gun and badge and said he would be responsible for the safety of the town. The night of the dance came. Townspeople lined Main Street in their cars to watch. One by one, gangly, shy teenagers approached the little table where we had snacks and records. When the evening was over maybe twenty boys and girls had danced, drunk some punch and eaten cookies. The town still stood. The kids had fun. All was well, for the moment.

The next week I submitted my report to the congregation about my survey. These summer resort people wanted activities for youth and children. They needed pastoral care and networking when they experienced illness or crisis over the summer. They liked the idea of occasional interfaith worship services down by the lake. So I suggested that the churches provide summer activities for youth, support networks, and crisis lines and occasional cooperative outdoor worship.

About a week later my parents and sisters came to visit. I went to the meeting where the church was to vote on my report. It turns out that what they really wanted was for me to get as many of the summer people as possible to come to church and put enough money in the offering to cover the heating bills for the winter. They didn't really care about meeting needs of summer resort folks. They voted to reject my report and for good measure also voted not pay the promised traveling expenses for us to get home. I think both Sandy and I cried that night.

Thoroughly demoralized, Sandy and I went back to my visiting family. As we were telling the story, President Lyndon Johnson was making one of his sad and pathetic speeches on TV in the background. American cities were burning with racial anger. The war in Vietnam was a quagmire and protests raged. Johnson himself was a fish out of water, a Texas Senator whom the country resented because he wasn't John F Kennedy.

My mother's response to our summer long struggle which had come to a head that night was to point to the TV screen and say, "Well at least be thankful you're not Lyndon Johnson."

That sentence has gone down in Sandy and Larry family lore as the worst thing to say to someone about thankfulness. It's like saying, "Well at least be thankful you didn't break both legs." This is the myth of negative thanksgiving.

Of the three things I'd like you to take away from this sermon, the first is this. Any call to thanksgiving which begins, "At least be thankful – you're not..., or you didn't..." is not good thanksgiving.

To be able to eventually give thanks in the midst of struggle, we must first be able to say of the present bad experience, “This just stinks!” Good thanksgiving is not negative thanksgiving.

In pastoral counseling situations, I often see people in bad times who prematurely try to minimize the bad stuff they’re going through. They start in with, “Oh I should be thankful. It could be worse.”

My pastoral response is typically: Something could always be worse. That doesn’t mean a bad thing isn’t terrible.

So here’s something important about Thanksgiving. There are times that are not yet thanksgiving ready.

When Jesus was dying on the cross, he didn’t thank God that he was not tortured more brutally. He said, quoting Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

When the Pilgrims arrived on the Mayflower at Cape Cod, William Bradford wrote, “And for the season it was winter, and they that know the winters of that country know them to be sharp and violent, and subject to cruel and fierce storms, dangerous to travel to known places, much more to search and unknown coast. Besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness...If they looked behind them, there was a mighty ocean which they had passed and now was as a main bar to separate them from the civil parts of the world”. Fifty of the 110 who sailed on the Mayflower survived that first winter.

There are times that are simply terrible and need to be named as such. Let that stand.

And yet, and yet... That’s my second thing I’d like you to remember. There’s always an “and yet”.

Faith is never just one story. It is always two or even more stories of competing truth seeking to be lived. There are times for love and times for justice. There are times for strength and gentleness. Faith is about the discerning the times.

Struggle, once named, can move to thanksgiving.

At the end of the summer, those 50 surviving Pilgrims did give thanks. Bradford wrote, “They began to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty. For some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercised in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion.” And they gave thanks.

We read Psalm 40 as translated by Stephen Mitchell earlier.

“I trusted you Lord, and waited, and you came to answer my plea. You lifted me from the pit and pulled me out of the mire...

Hold me in your embrace, Lord;

Make me transparent in your light.

Grant me awareness; keep my gratitude fresh each day.”

That’s the direction God can take us, even our bad times.

While I have forever linked my mother with the cliché of negative Thanksgiving that lives in my family in infamy, I need to tell one other Thanksgiving story as well.

My mother died in our home just a few months past her eightieth birthday. She was diagnosed with ALS, Lew Gehrig's disease in the winter of 1996 while she was visiting us. We contracted with hospice, turned our study into a room for her, and she spent the final six weeks of her life with us.

In many ways this was the finest chapter in her life. She thanked us every day for the gift of having her in our home. She apologized for some of the ways she treated me after my dad died at age 62. She was just angry, she explained, and some of that anger got directed at me. I certainly thanked and forgave her. She also shared her gratitude for my ongoing place in her life.

My mom was the person who was always present for me - at night when I was sick, at school when I played trumpet, with open arms when I came home hurt, coming to school with my lunch or permission slip when I forgot them, even trudging outside in her bathrobe on cold New Jersey winter mornings to push my Model A Ford down the driveway when it wouldn't start.

Third, therefore, on this, our final Sunday of celebrating Saints and Heroes, I'd like you to remember this. My mom was one of my saints. She lived through and brought me through the "At least be thankful you're not..." syndrome to a true thankfulness for, as Ecclesiastes says, "moments of life and the passing of moments." She is among the host of saints, the ordinary and extraordinary people of our lives, symbolized by these origami birds that have blessed you and me this month, for whom you and I may be eternally thankful.