

## ***The Gift of Generosity***

UUSL November 17, 2024

Rev. Dr. Judith E. Wright

This past June at our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly UU delegates from around the continent voted and passed for our faith a new Article II revision for our UU A By-laws, providing us now with a flower like symbol with a chalice of Love at its center and six petals, representing our shared values.

Over the course of this congregational year, I plan on preaching about each of these values central to our UU faith.

*drawn from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, and building on the foundation of love.<sup>1</sup>*

The six values that form the petals of our UU flower are Interdependence, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Generosity and Justice.

This morning let's begin exploring these values by focusing on the UU value of Generosity.

Article II of the UUA By-laws describes Generosity in this way:

*We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope.*

*We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources.*

*Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> [Final Proposed Revision to Article II I UUA.org](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Final Proposed Revision to Article II I UUA.org](#)

For me, generosity means being kind,  
moving out of a sense of self-absorption,  
and being willing to give without any expectation  
of getting something in return.

When we are generous, we give of our time, our resources, our talents,  
perhaps at personal cost or even sacrifice.

Being generous often involves being compassionate as well,  
listening and caring for others, without thought of reward.

A generous mindset is one that sees abundance where others see scarcity.

Our prayer/reflection this morning by Rev. Richard Gilbert, UU minister,  
lifts up for us this spirit of abundance,  
which Rev. Gilbert calls : *the graces of life that abound-  
air to breathe, food to eat, companions to love, beauty to behold,  
art to cherish, causes to serve.*

Our task, as Unitarian Universalists,  
says Rev. Gilbert, is to notice such abundance all around us,  
pouring inside of us, and then to be willing to give back if we can –  
*something of ourselves, some love, some beauty, some grace, some gift,  
we give back in gratitude, if we can...*  
*for those who abide with us and will follow.*<sup>3</sup>

It's not very hard for me to think of a number of us  
who give so very generously of our money, time and talent  
to sustain the many needs of our congregation.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Gilbert, [The Chalice of Our Being | WorshipWeb | UUA.org](http://TheChaliceofOurBeing.com/WorshipWeb/UUA.org)

I will just lift up two recent examples this morning of this value of generosity being practiced well within our congregation.

Last Sunday morning I watched as Liz Laphum carefully arranged our altar flowers, which she has done often for us.

Liz was facing surgery on the following Thursday morning, which, I am very happy to tell you, went well.

But she didn't know that last Sunday morning.

She decided last Sunday to give to us beauty in spite of her not feeling well.

We have, as a congregation, been graced with the beauty that Liz's flower arrangements bring to us, without any expectation of her receiving something in return.

Liz graces us with her generous spirit.

And secondly, I want to lift up the members of our Parish Committee who give over and over again of their time and energies for our congregation.

I especially want to recognize as an act of generosity those members of the Parish Committee currently working on a survey that will be coming to all of us soon about our masking policy.

This committee continues to work hard on creating a survey that represents all sides of the issues of our masking policy.

It's proven to be a hard job and time consuming.

Again, we as a congregation are graced by such generosity.

When we look at our everyday lives we indeed can discover many acts of generosity abound.

One that graced me was when because of my recent surgery,  
I couldn't carry groceries to my car or into my house.  
A number of you generously offered to go to the grocery store for me.  
Hazel Zimmer, who is my neighbor as well,  
actually did go to the store for me - for which I am, of course, grateful.  
And then, what touched me at the grocery store,  
once I was able to go by myself,  
was that the clerks at the check-out counter  
carefully bagged my groceries for me in small amounts, -  
so that I might safely carry my groceries home.  
This took more time than usual,  
and in spite of the line of people behind me,  
these clerks generously helped me out.  
A small act of kindness, one that takes time to do,  
and is above and beyond what normally happens.

Such actions remind us that human beings are more generous  
than what we often think.

This UU value of generosity brings up the question of  
whether people are fundamentally generous or fundamentally selfish.  
It's an age-old debate.

Some folks say that people are basically selfish.

Columnist David Brooks writes in a NY Times Opinion column  
that classical economics is based on the idea  
that people relentlessly pursue their self-interest.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> David Brooks. *People are More Generous Than You May Think*. The NY Times. Opinion Column. 08/31/2023.

He goes on to quote the economist Gordon Tullock, who said: “The average human being is about 95% selfish in the narrow meaning of the term.”

And David Brooks reminds us of the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins who argued in his book “The Selfish Gene” “we are born selfish.”

But David Brooks believes that we humans are more generous than selfish:

Here are David’s words:

*“I’d say a lot of our public thinkers have vastly underestimated the importance of the moral and social motivations woven into human nature. We tip at restaurants we’ll never return to. We leap to help one another in natural disasters.”*

David believes that *such public thinkers have encouraged people to magnify the selfish side of our natures.*

And in essence, he believes we don’t have to listen to such encouragement towards selfishness anymore, but to develop our generosity instead..

It is indeed true that there is, especially here in the West, a tipping of the scale more towards selfishness than generosity primarily by appealing to people’s economic self-interest.

David Brooks comments that we in the West have built *inhumane systems in which material incentives blot out our social and moral incentives.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> David Brooks

We are living in a culture where greed for more and more money motivates some to amass large fortunes.

Today the top 0.1 % of US households control about 14% of total U.S. wealth.

This is a significant increase from about 9% in 1990.

There are 131 households within this group,  
each with at least \$ 38 million in assets.

*The top 1% collectively hold roughly 34% of the country's wealth, with the vast majority concentrated in corporate equities and other investments.*

*The next 9% (90th to 99th percentile) control about 36% of the wealth.<sup>6</sup>*

This is about 70% of the wealth owned in our nation by the top 10% of people.

In stark contrast, the bottom 50% owns about 3% of our nation's wealth.

That's half of our nation have only 3% of our nation's wealth.

These figures made me think of the wide- spread poverty during Jesus's lifetime for the Jews in Judea.

We, who studied the Great Course on the History and Archaeology of the Bible recently learned about the terrible poverty that occurred then.

Jews were doubly taxed – both by the Romans who occupied their country, and by the Temple authorities.

There is agreement among scholars today that the Galileans were laboring, because of such harsh taxation, below subsistence levels.

This surely included Jesus's world during his upbringing and later during his ministry. .

Jesus in his *Sermon on the Mount* specifically addresses

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<sup>6</sup> USAFacts  
<https://usafacts.org>

the poor and the hungry.

And his comment about the widow's mite has even more potency when we realize just how very poor this widow must have been.

Mark tells us the story:

*. One day, Jesus was sitting with His disciples near the temple treasury watching people depositing money into the offering receptacles.*

*The court of women held thirteen such receptacles, and people could cast their money in as they walked by.*

*Jesus watched as the rich were contributing large sums of money, but then along came a widow with two small coins in her hand.*

*The widow put her coins into the box, and Jesus called His disciples to Him*

*and pointed out her action:*

*"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on"*<sup>7</sup>

Here Jesus appears to be teaching that generosity is not measured by the amount, but by the level of sacrifice given.

While our current level of poverty in the US

is not as high as the level of destitution

that existed in Jesus's Galilee,

it is clear that there is a wide gap in income distribution

that affects people's lives today in terms of charitable giving in our nation.

While the wealthy contribute more to the total charitable donations given, studies show that middle and lower-income individuals often donate a higher percentage of their income to charity than the wealthy.

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 12:41-44. [What does Jesus want us to learn from what He said about the widow's mite? | GotQuestions.org](http://GotQuestions.org)

While some wealthy individuals have given away most of their income,  
such as Bill and Melinda Gates,

it is also true that wealthy giving often is focused on  
institutions that primarily benefit the wealthy,  
such as donations to private universities or museums.

Personally, I believe that the wealthy's giving could have a broader impact  
through fairer taxation which could benefit all of society by providing funds  
for the general public's benefit, like education, housing and healthcare.

As Unitarian Universalists we envision

a quality of generosity that has no strings attached to the giving.

Rev. Dr. Sandra Fees writes that in order to be truly generous  
we need to let go of any strings attached to our giving.

*She states that when there are strings attached to our giving,  
it can change the way we relate to each other*

*... giving and receiving gifts with strings feeds into the consumerist culture*

*in which relationships, love, looks, and everything else can be bought and sold and  
bartered for the right price.*

*It's like coming to church and asking, "what's in it for me?"  
rather than "how can I serve?"*

Instead, Rev. Fees lifts up Rev. Richard Gilbert's message when he was asked  
about being a Unitarian Universalist..

Rev. Gilbert explained that he neither feared hell nor sought heaven.

He believed in "the importance of being good - for nothing."

Gifts without strings is a way of being good – for no reason.

This UU value of Generosity resonates deeply with our UU principles



of promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person,  
as well fostering justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

Generosity strengthens our connections with one another,  
through providing mutual support and care for one another  
and our UU communities and faith.

Generosity is also an important spiritual practice  
that helps us to nurture empathy and gratitude.

Practicing generosity is a spiritual practice  
that can help us to gradually, as we become more generous,  
develop more of a sense of abundance and less of feelings of scarcity.

Many of us do not want to live any longer in a world that is angry and isolating.  
Instead by practicing generosity we can chose to, as Ghandhi taught,  
*be the change we want to see in the world.*

Being generous has many benefits to those who give.

Best of all, of course, is giving without any expectation or strings attached.

Through practicing generosity,  
our hearts can open more and more.

We can look for opportunities to give of our time, energy, money and goods,  
love and our services to others.

I am sure we all know there are plenty of ways to do so.

There may be times when we hesitate to give or are afraid to give.

We best work through such hesitancies and not wait for another time.

-For there may not be another time, as the woman  
in our story in A Time For All Ages about the bag of cookies sadly discovered.

The more we practice generosity  
the more we will be learning to center our lives in love –

in connection, in community.

Here is a final quote, this one from Beth Roth, from a Buddhist perspective”

*The Buddha said, “If you knew, as I do, the power of giving,  
you would not let a single meal pass without sharing some of it.”*

Beth Roth continues:...Generosity is this powerful for very good reason.

*Because it is characterized by the inner quality of letting go or relinquishing,  
it reverses the forces that create suffering.*

*It is a profound antidote to the strong habits*

*of clinging, grasping, guarding, and attachment that lead to so much pain and  
suffering.*

*Generosity brings happiness at every stage of its expression:*

*we experience joy in forming the intention to give,*

*we experience joy in the action of giving,*

*and we experience joy in remembering that we have given.*

*As Gandhi said, “The fragrance remains in the hand that gives the rose.”*

Peace and love to you.

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