

**Channing Memorial Church
Unitarian Universalist
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Seen and Unseen – The Spirituality of Generosity

Although both my parents grew up in the Midwest, I was raised on what are often considered to be very “Yankee” values . . . responsibility, accountability, and achievement, with a really heavy dose of duty thrown in. They were non-compromisable. Maybe those are Midwest values, too, American’s heartland and all that. They are good values, and I am grateful for my upbringing . . . it has served me well.

But as I have gone through life, bumped into and been part of other ways of being, other cultures, it has dawned on me that there are other values, offering equally valid ways of being in the world, values which complement and, at times, might even supplant those four. Like, perhaps, compassion, grace, and generosity. Wrestling with and coming to terms with these as not just “side course values” but central ones has been an important part of my spiritual journey. And I still am trying to figure out what they are and how to work them easily and naturally into my life.

Take generosity, for example. I was taught – or at least came to understand – that generosity is good, and important . . . it is a responsibility to share and help those less fortunate . . . and it is a duty as citizen, and as a participant in society. And I came to believe that generosity is an act . . . the act of helping the needy, or anyone, actually. But it always had that sense of duty, or responsibility and accountability; it never took on a sense of joy, or a sense of being. Those were the days when even children had contribution envelopes for church, into which I dutifully placed a dime from my allowance each week, and placed in a big box near the Director of Religious Education’s office.

I use the word *generosity*, and I talk about it as though I know what it means, but like all of these big, round, fat, spiritual words, it seems to have dimensions and facets that are not immediately apparent.

A couple of years ago there were some stories in the newspaper about people who had “generously” given their homes to victims hurricane Katrina, but been burned when the houses were trashed, or they did not feel that the people they helped were grateful enough. The givers seemed to be looking for something in return; sometimes they even seemed to think that offering their homes gave them certain rights over the people they were helping. One story talked about church-people from a church that had provided a house walking in unannounced and without knocking, telling them it was time to get up and not sleep so late, and treating them as if they were a “project” rather than as human with dignity and worthy of respect.¹

So when I saw that the Ecumenical Institute of Theology in Baltimore offered a class on generosity this past fall, I signed up. I just love being there, because there is such a delicious variety of theologies and spiritualities, all trying to understand faith and

¹ *Baltimore Sun*. “A gift of generosity gone awry,” December 2, 2005.

engage it in their lives and actions. Maybe all those other denominations and religions have figured it out, I thought, and can help me “get it.” This particular class was a colloquium, which means that the professor is getting ready to write a book and wanted lots of input from students approaching the idea from many traditions and perspectives.

We looked at the idea of generosity and giving over the course of several thousand years, beginning in Hebrew scripture, through Christian scripture, and into many and various interpretations of what it means to give, to share, to care for one another. And. . . this is most important . . . we observed how the idea of generosity forms a common thread through the stories of the ages, constantly updated to the culture of the time. So we worked on questions like:

Is it *generous* for God to promise huge amounts of land to one people and threaten to blot out other peoples? Is it *generous* to make the receipt of that land contingent on certain beliefs, behaviors and codes of ethics? It feels more like accountability than generosity . . .

Are we to remember when we were slaves in Egypt, and be generous to those who are now slaves? It might call us to a sense of *duty* . . . but is it generous?

When people gathered into small communities, little communist or at least communal, cells agreeing to share everything together, is that generosity? If you have to give everything to the poor before you can join, is that generosity? If you’ve given everything away before you join, then exactly what is it that you are sharing . . . and how do you work out the practical – earning a living – with the generous and graceful – caring for the blind, ill, infirm, and disabled?

What about reciprocity? Ought we to call to our suppers and our feasts the lame, and the maimed, and those who cannot repay us? [4th century St. John Chrysostom.] If it is something we “ought” to do, is it generosity or is that duty again?

Or are we to gain all we can, save all we can, and give all we can, as John Wesley, founder of Methodism, admonished in the 18th century? Gain all you can through honest labor that harms no one (duty, responsibility and accountability); save all you can by being frugal in your spending and not indulging foolish desires (he wasn’t talking about saving in a bank, as we think of it); and give all you can, because you are part of the household of God, and what you have you are a steward of on behalf of all creation. Is that generosity, or is it duty?

What was particularly fun – at least for me -- was the section of the course labeled “secular.” The readings in that section included: Abigail Adams – (*I raised my hand – excuse me, not secular . . . Unitarian*); Abraham Lincoln (*not secular – he was an avid reader and follower of Unitarian minister Theodore Parker*); Henry David Thoreau – (*hello again*) . . . Not really trying to be annoying, I told my classmates. . . just making a point . . .

And then there is Bill Gates, presented in the class as a secular example of generosity. In his case, it is probably true . . . he is apparently not affiliated with any particular church. We read the remarks that he delivered at the Harvard Commencement last June. Listen to those supposedly secular remarks:

“Reducing inequity is the highest human achievement.”

“Every life has equal value.”

“A government should spend taxpayer money in ways that better reflect the values of the people who pay the taxes.”

“The magical thing about this network [the Internet] is not just that it collapses distances and makes everyone your neighbor. It also increases the number of brilliant minds working together.”

“These advances are triggering a revolution in what human beings can do for one another.”

“From those to whom much is given, much is expected.”

Now, that last one is a direct quote from the book of Luke, which Gates apparently did not realize – he attributed it to his mother.

I would argue that all of those statements are *theological* statements. They lay out a very particular value system – specifically a liberal protestant one. They lift up into sharp relief a set of values upon which Gates bases his generosity.

Are values secular? My American Heritage Dictionary defines secular as “worldly rather than spiritual.” Yet what are values if not spiritual? They have no bodily existence, except as humanity puts them into practice.

I would argue – and did in the class – that Gates actually has a profound doctrine of humanity. What is not clear is from where he draws his authority . . . I think he thinks he is drawing it from reason . . . but in fact it is rooted in protestant scripture: The Luke quote is the most obvious . . . but . . . every life having equal value is akin to made in the image and likeness of God, or in UU tradition, the inherent worth and dignity of every person; he uses the language of neighbor, and challenges us about who our neighbor is; he speaks of what human beings must do for one another – sounds a lot like love your neighbor as yourself. . . Scripture, of course, came from reason, and sometimes it is helpful to begin where other wise reasoners left off, rather than begin from scratch.

And . . . most importantly, Gates uses this value system, this theology, this doctrine of humanity – regardless of where it came from -- to guide his generosity – in the billions.

In my research into the Unitarian Universalist tradition about generosity, I discovered a very particular way of thinking about it. William Ellery Channing speaks of “disinterested love” giving of self freely and openly without thought of return. Henry David Thoreau, for example, said:

I would not subtract anything from the praise that is due to philanthropy, but merely demand justice for all who by their lives and works are a blessing to mankind. I do not value chiefly a man’s uprightness and benevolence, which are, as it were, his stem and leaves. Those plants of whose greenness withered we make herb tea for the sick serve but a humble use and are most employed by quacks. *I want the flower and fruit of a man; that some fragrance be wafted over from him to me, and some ripeness flavor our intercourse. His goodness must not be a partial and transitory act, but a constant superfluity, which costs him nothing and of which he is unconscious.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

Our tokens of compliment and love are for the most part barbarous. Rings and other jewels are not gifts but apologies for gifts. The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me. Therefore the

poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral and shells; the painter, his picture; the girl, a handkerchief of her own sewing . . . it is a cold, lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something which does not represent your life and talent, but a goldsmith's."

Notice what all of these have in common? Generosity has to do with something coming from deep within the individual, separate from money. As I reflected more and more deeply on that, I began to formulate a definition, reflective of an oh-so-Unitarian style doctrine of humanity, where divinity is within everyone and is ever called forth. What I came up with is that generosity is a *disposition of the spirit that manifests in free and liberal giving of self and/or property*. Generosity itself is not the act, but the spiritual disposition, sense, desire.

Spirituality is a way of being, which you then act on. Generosity then, for me, is a dimension . . . a facet . . . of spirituality, and it has to be acted upon. In a way it is irrational, not reasonable -- Economists tell us that giving -- the act part -- is irrational. Not *reason-able*. We don't get something of equal value back for it. Rather, we go into relationship and create human meaning from both the disposition and the act.

So that is kind of where I ended the course . . . but I found myself unsatisfied. It felt like it needed more thought. . . . maybe because I'm an introvert and think slowly. So even after I turned in my final paper I kept pondering it.

I realized that what was gnawing at me was that what I had come up with was a good spiritual definition . . . applicable to the individual. But what about a *religious* definition? Is there a spin on the term that could be applicable to a religious community? Remember religion as I use it is what binds us together. What would a *collective* disposition of the spirit look like? If individuals collectively honor their inner divinity, and come together to make a community that is greater than the sum of the parts . . . which I believe happens when we intentionally join together. . . for me it is the very definition of religious community . . . then what do we get? Well, we get generous religious community. Duh! But what does that mean? What does it mean to be engaged openly from our inner beings?

What occurred to me one night when I woke up thinking about this, is that it is the opposite of something. But what? In the individual, spiritual sense, it is the opposite of stinginess, miserliness, selfishness, cheapness -- my web thesaurus offered a bunch of possibilities. But what about religiously? Here is what I came up with: Religiously, from the standpoint of the whole community, generosity is the opposite of fundamentalism.

Think about it. Fundamentalism tends to want to preserve that which is or has always been. It avoids compromise. It often takes on quite a militant quality -- an insistence on its own premises . . . and its own conclusions. It tends to be closed and closed-minded.

And think about generous religious community. It tends to have a quality of openness, which invites both listening and compromise. It has a quality of both giving and receiving . . . receptivity and giving. It has a quality of invitation rather than insistence. It engages rather than closes. It turns toward in love, rather than away.

Henri Nouwen reminds us that the word generosity "comes from the Latin genus . . . referring to our being of one kind. [It] is a giving that comes from the knowledge of an

intimate bond . . . [indeed], generosity creates the family it believes in.”²

Fundamentalism creates divisions. It sets up conditions and ultimatums: you must believe this or there will be dire consequences; you must agree to certain principles, or else. Generosity does the opposite – it asks, rather than tells; wonders rather than concludes.

It invites difference into oneness – Unitarian – for all souls – Universalist.

May we strive to make it come true.

² Nouwen, Henri. *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.