

To Give and To Receive

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, March 5, 2023

The thick, sturdy, beautiful, sustaining tree of life stretched its branches to the sky, surrounded by the villagers who sought to nurture it. This tree was where the children played, where youth whispered dreams that became reality, where villagers came to proclaim their love for one another, and elders recounted sweet memories. The villagers were keepers of the tree, guarding and appreciating the tree's abundance of goodness, and all it had to offer. The narrative recounts, "We are keepers of the tree because this is where we are nourished... This is where we remember who we want to become." Can each one of us here, in this space made holy by our prayers and meditations, relate to this statement, in this moment? As you sit in your wooden pews with hymnal in hand, I invite you to pause and meditate on this phrase: "This is where we remember who we want to become." In the tale of this tree made sacred, we see the protagonists immersed in a community dedicated offering love for this life-giving tree, love that they intentionally spread to friends and strangers alike. We observe a community imbued in gratitude for all the sustenance the tree provided and who in turn generously protected and nourished the tree which offered them so much. Three spiritual practices are illuminated in this story, concentric circles rippling out: love, leading to gratitude, paving the way for lives immersed in generosity.¹

What about the story of stone soup? "It was not the stone that performed the magic." The old man whispered, "It was all of us together." While not as direct in proclaiming the love of the villagers, we can assume in their celebratory nature and their joyful communal meal that this was a community of love, and we can observe in their gracious reaction to the soup that they were grateful for this offering of sustenance and nourishment. And yet what this story clearly articulates is a tale of generosity. All they needed was a simple reminder, an invitation, and this community steeped in love and gratitude came together in acts of generosity that sustained the

¹ "Sustaining the Tree of Life" by Lynn Gardner

whole – one humble offering at a time, they created something nourishing and life-giving.² I wonder, in exchange for offering cabbage, as the villagers did, can we offer our community hope? Instead of offering nourishing carrots, can we bring one another wisdom? Instead of bits of potatoes, can we bring the monetary means that keep any community thriving? May we love. May we be grateful. May we generously share all that we can.

I offer you a third story – a story of heretics and lovers, of divinity and forgiveness. This is the story of our own radical faith – of the Universalists who countered the tenets of Calvinism, arguing against the belief of predestination, instead espousing the belief of Universal salvation – offering a God who did not damn but who forgave. Or the Unitarians who proclaimed that Jesus was not divine but fully human, a secular prophet whose love – simple and yet profound – changed the world. The Unitarians, who articulated that humans were not birthed into this world as inherently sinful but as inherently good and worthy. This is the story of our faith – one steeped in love, both sacred and profane. A faith that calls us to let love guide us in each of our days. A story life-giving to each body and soul in this room. I am grateful. Are you? Or the tale of our own church, a subset of this faith – a sacred community intentionally created for spiritual seekers to grow in their faith, to grow in their spirituality, no matter what their theology or belief of the sacred – a community where all of us can join together on a search for faith, truth, and meaning. I am grateful. Are you? Our faith is that tree of life we are called to nourish and share with friends and strangers alike. Our church is the stone which calls each of us to offer all that we can so that our community can be nourished and share in communal joy and meaning making.

In each of these narratives we have articulated three spiritual practices: that of loving, that of offering gratitude, and that of practicing generosity. In implementing these sacred acts, we better our own lives and the lives of those around us; we construct a foundation of faithful, meaningful living.

² A traditional folktale, as told by <https://foodgrainsbank.ca/resources/story-stone-soup/>

So, our first spiritual practice: love. We spent all last month exploring the theme of love and this culminates today as we explore another facet of love: a love of the community. What does it mean to love a community? Or, simultaneously, what does it mean to be part of a community grounded in love? Loving a community goes a step beyond self-love and love of the individual and instead becomes a love of the whole. This is a love of the overarching values espoused by the group, for the all-encompassing purpose that grounds and sustains that specific community, for their outlook on life and, in the case of spiritual communities, their relationship with the sacred and the guidance they offer towards a spiritually fulfilled life. In practicing this love of community, we garner guidance in orienting ourselves in the world. We find ways to heal our wounded hearts: Do we pray? Do we forgive? We find ways to practice and embody love and spirituality. Do we meditate? Do we sing? We find ways to journey together on this path of life and cultivate resources for support. This is a love of support groups, 12-step groups, friends, colleagues. This is a love of our own community, Channing Memorial Church. May we be grounded in the love of community.

Let us explore our second spiritual practice: Gratitude. I offer you a short anecdote. Nearly every weekend, my husband and I make the journey together to remote parks where we can hike through the towering trees and humble ground cover alike. I often fall into a trap while walking amidst the scurrying, soaring wildlife, of unintentionally losing myself in my own thoughts or anxieties. Luckily, I am accompanied by my beloved husband who does not fall into these traps but spends each moment intentionally engaging with all the beauty and awe that surrounds him. We are on the same hike, with, at times, vastly different experiences. But he serves as a reminder – offering me through gentle prompts and cues to listen to the birds, to take note of the slithering creatures, to feast my eyes upon the delicate, multicolored petals of budding flowers lining the forest floor. He reminds me not to traverse the hike – nor any of my days, nor any of my experiences - on autopilot. He regularly encourages me to center in gratitude for the wonder that surrounds me – for the inherent beauty in my midst. I aim to practice this while sitting with my morning coffee, while listening to music. I offer this as guidance for all of us in each mundane or awe-filled moment of our lives.

Gratitude is, at its core, an acknowledgment and small celebration of that which is good. There is goodness all around us, if only we take note. The nature I was immersed in is an example of this goodness. So is the love of a companion, or those values articulated by community, perhaps the values of our very own church. Gratitude is identifying where this goodness comes from – acknowledging those things outside of and beyond our individual selves that help us grow, thrive, and pause in moments of joy or introspection. Gratitude focuses on those gifts offered by beloveds or strangers or the sacred; those things that guide us towards goodness in our lives. This may be the love of our friends, counsel from our mentors, forgiveness from our sacred, or the profound and healing music offered by a pianist. Gratitude keeps us grounded in the current moment; garnering appreciation which simultaneously keeps us from taking any goodness for granted. How many smiles, how many tender touches, how many cries of the blue jays, have passed you by? And when goodness and gratitude join together as our focus, animosity, envy, resentment, judgements – these fall to the wayside, reshaping our thought processes. As you sit in those pews, as you raise your voice in song, as you rest your eyes and pause your thoughts in our moment of meditation, as you light a candle to illuminate the pain or joy in your soul, what are you grateful for? What about this church brings you purpose, meaning, and happiness?³

Which brings us to our third and final spiritual practice: generosity, that which we saw exemplified beautifully in the folktale narrating the creation of stone soup. In that story we learned how an abundance of humble gifts shared with those we love can create a whole that sustains and nourishes an entire community. Often generosity stems directly from the practice of gratitude, as we seek to feed and nurture that which in turn shapes and molds us, as we proactively sustain all of that which brings us joy and helps us craft meaning and build a life of faith. While gratitude encourages us to celebrate goodness, generosity allows us to share in abundance all the goodness that is within our grasp, and to give back to that goodness. This practice strengthens our own hearts and brings joy as we live a life of giving and service,

³ Ideas from https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_gratitude_is_good

simultaneously creating and strengthening well-being in ourselves and in others. Generosity creates a feeling of abundance even if we only have humble means to share.⁴

And so, we are centered in those spiritual practices that ripple out in concentric circles – love leading to gratitude which in turn stems a life of generosity. In our faith, we are each an embodiment of love and so is the sacred proclaimed by our Universalist forbearers. Each of our Principles asks us to affirm, promote, and live lives of love. And our church becomes – just as that sacred tree did – a place of dreams and love and memories. And for this I am grateful. And I know you are too. We each love this community, beyond the individuals, loving in a sacred way the values espoused and Principles enacted. And we in turn feed this, as the villagers joined together to create a nourishing stone soup, offering all we can to that which in turn gives us life. Love, gratitude, and generosity. And how do we feed this? Today, this month, we highlight the monetary needs of our church community. Each space we occupy, each hymn we sing, each small group that elicits hidden thoughts, each worship service that stirs the mind, each book group that elicits questions, all of this is sustained through the generous monetary gifts of our members and friends. Monetary gifts serve to sustain that which gives us so much. In our reflection on Stewardship, I invite us to look towards the future. Yes, we are grounded in love and gratitude and generosity today, but what of the years ahead? What do we envision for Channing Memorial Church? I invite you to reflect on this. May we, now and always, offer goodness, justice, and compassion to each other and to the world, steeped in life-giving spirituality and faith. May we thrive. May we love each other and this community. May we be grateful for each treasure our faith community offers us. And may we, in turn, feed that which gives us so much.

May it be so, and Amen

⁴ Ideas from <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/features/view/15783/the-spiritual-practice-of-generosity>