

Our culture is full of messages designed to make us fearful, insecure and anxious. If we are wise say some politicians and TV commentators, we will be suspicious of anyone who is different from us. Mexican folks are taking our jobs! Muslims are terrorists! Public employees are overpaid bureaucrats with excessive benefits. We ought to be able to carry guns to college, to church, to shoot people on our property with impunity. Really, don't trust anyone! When we allow ourselves to believe these messages, we can be controlled and manipulated more easily.

Life becomes constricted and unhappy. Fear cuts us off from other people, and we live isolated lives. Maybe we won't notice that our institutions are being dismantled while oil companies and the super wealthy get more tax cuts. Maybe we'll soothe ourselves by buying the things that we are told will make us happier, safer, and more secure.

Friends, we know that we don't need to believe these messages. I believe that the US is at a pivotal point, politically and economically. Some folks are working to deconstruct community. We don't have to go along with this agenda, with these stories. Politicians and advertisers tell us scarcity stories: there is not enough, you are not enough, you don't own enough and you are not good enough or smart enough. Certainly, you are not rich enough. But this morning's message is not primarily a political one.

I want to remind us that regardless of all those vitriolic and violent messages, there is good news! We can choose to be happy, indeed joyful, connected and generous people. Our lives are creative acts; we can tell ourselves different stories, stories of abundance, generosity and generativity. A generous life is a spiritual life; it is a life of growing spiritual maturity.

Here's a recent story from the Egyptian people's revolution, a quote from HDAF SOUEIF:

Well, you know, I think that what happened-and this isn't just me, because at one point, you know, you start thinking that maybe you were having visions or you were, you know-but everybody who talks about it talks in the same terms, that it was: people were rediscovering themselves and each other. It was as though everybody had been locked in solitary in a small little dark box, you know, and told to be afraid of everything else and sort of rattled from time to time. And you'd opened the box and stepped out and found that everything was great. You know, there was light. There were other people.<sup>i</sup>

Two weeks ago, I talked about compassion as primary to all our religious traditions and about the development of our religious traditions in the Axial Age which was a time of violence, alienation and dislocation. Those same religious traditions all teach us to be generous. We heard the Buddhist story, "Heart of Gold," already this morning. In Judaism, it is a primary, essential call to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger. "Remember the stranger for you were once a stranger in the land of Egypt." Jesus taught "Give and it will be given to you . . . the measure you give will be the measure you get back."<sup>ii</sup> The third pillar of Islam is *zakat*: almsgiving; the blessings of God's gifts make us responsible for giving and sharing in return.

Often people learn about giving as a religious compulsion, a rule to follow to be a good person or to avoid punishment. This morning, I am not talking about generosity as obligation. I now understand this religious guidance not as a rule to be obeyed out of fear and obligation but as assistance to a living a good life. Unitarian Universalism is good news.

Our good news is that to live a life of gratitude and generosity is to live a happier, healthier, more peaceful and more centered life. We even live longer, fuller lives through generosity. Our immune system is strengthened through serving others when we recognize and strengthen our connections to others.<sup>iii</sup> Generosity reduces stress, strengthens the heart (physically as well as metaphorically), and lowers cholesterol levels.<sup>iv</sup>

Giving is no secondary or superfluous activity. UU Minister Tom Owen-Towle calls generosity “a saving imperative – the route to maximize joy while cementing global kinship.”<sup>v</sup> A story about generosity:

THEY CALLED him "Mr. Gloves." Long before the word homeless was part of the everyday lexicon of New York back when people spoke of bums and derelicts, Meyer Michael Greenberg was bringing a special warmth to the city's lost souls.

For more than 30 winters, he gave gloves to the needy. On the Bowery, in Times Square, anywhere. The first winter, he handed out 72 pairs four times 18, the Hebrew symbol for life. Each year the number went up. It was not so much about providing protection from winter, as staving off the cold of indifference. "It's about telling the people they count," Greenberg said.

He once explained how it started: "When I was 11 or 12, I lost my gloves," he said. "I felt very guilty about it. I never even asked for another pair. Ever since then, for me, being rich is being warm." He began his mission in 1963, to honor his father's memory. He liked to recall his father's advice: "Don't deprive yourself of the joy of giving." <sup>vi</sup>

More of the documented benefits of giving:

- New relationships
- Reduction of fears, feelings of security
- Reduction in self-centeredness
- A sense of empowerment, living to one's potential
- The more you give of yourself, the more you find yourself
- Passion for worthwhile cause helps you tap into your creativity<sup>vii</sup>

“You are a conduit – the more you allow giving to flow through you, the more abundance flows back into your life, the more you give, the more you receive.” <sup>viii</sup>

Generosity grows from gratitude, from an awareness that we have been given many god gifts, that we live in the abundance of creation. UU Minister Tom Owen-Towle wrote, “I’m a statistical miracle, beyond deserving or imagination. I’m lucky to be here on earth. I can never repay the creation but I can reply, and my noblest response is to give unstintingly of my time, my talents and resources toward making the universe more just and joyful. Blessed be!” <sup>ix</sup>

I am particularly grateful this morning for Restoration's generosity. On Wednesday, ten people showed up in the middle of the day, in the middle of the week and at short notice to help me move. One of the gifts and for some of us a challenge of the generous life is to ask for help and to graciously receive gifts that we are given. Thank you for your help.

In a lovely and generous little book, *Being Generous: The Art of Right Living*, Lucinda Vardey and John Dalla Costa name ten virtues "that inspire and give form to the art of generosity. It is by comprehension and living of these virtues that generosity flourishes."<sup>x</sup>

*Courage: strong of heart. . . It is to dare, and to strive for, what validates human hope. This courage to change what is wrong in the world hinges on the courage to change what is wrong inside one's own heart.*<sup>xi</sup>

*Discernment: to consider authentic motives, one's own integrity . . . It sees meaningful implications. . . (It is) central to the capacity to set priorities . . . requires developing and trusting one's intuition.*<sup>xii</sup>

*Humility: an honest sense of proportion.*<sup>xiii</sup>

*Compassion: when true feelings are honored as the requirement of one's own integrity, it is inevitable that the heart opens to the reality of others. With compassion, generosity's aim and impact are on multiplying the possibilities of standing together.*<sup>xiv</sup>

*Mercy: about giving others the benefit of our doubts. (It recognizes our interconnection.) Everyone deserves heartfelt consideration.*<sup>xv</sup>

*Reliability: the concrete quality that brings good intention to life. Reliability is generous in itself because it allows people who know you to thrive in the confidence that their needs, expectations or contributions will be respected.*<sup>xvi</sup>

*Hope: At its core, all generosity is an act of hope, because without hope there would be no expectation that being generous would have any effect at all.*<sup>xvii</sup>

*Remembering: Jewish philosopher and scholar Avishai Margalit tells us that what we remember is what we really care about.*<sup>xviii</sup> The stories we tell ourselves and where we give our resources show what truly matters to us.

Balance: We need rest, restoration, and reflection. *people need free time to experience freedom. They cannot generate or be regenerative without resting, nor can they be open to receiving what is generous toward them if stuck in a perpetual rush.*<sup>xix</sup>

You have gifts to give: time, attention, listening, ideas, wisdom, help, hope, encouragement, love, respect, creativity, laughter and fun. And you have material resources to give: money, vegetables from your garden, items that you have created and stuff . “English epitaph, What I kept, I lost. What I spent, I had. What I gave, I have.”<sup>xx</sup> There is enough; you are enough. You do not need to live in a story of scarcity and fear. Gandhi , “There is always enough for the needy, but never enough for the greedy.”<sup>xxi</sup>

In the words of Michael Greenberg’s father.” Do not deprive yourself the joy of giving.” Blessed be. Amen and Ashe.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.democracynow.org/2011/3/8/ahdaf\\_souEIF\\_on\\_egypts\\_revolution\\_people](http://www.democracynow.org/2011/3/8/ahdaf_souEIF_on_egypts_revolution_people)

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 6:38.

<sup>iii</sup> Owen-Towle, Tom. *Wholly Joy! Being Happy in an Unhappy World*. San Diego, CA: Barking Rocks Press, 2001, p. 97.

<sup>iv</sup> Jamal, Azim and Harvey MacKinnon. *The Power of Giving: How Giving Back Enriches Us All*. New York: The Penguin Group, 2008, p. 22.

<sup>v</sup> Owen-Towle, Tom. *Wholly Joy! Being Happy in an Unhappy World*. San Diego, CA: Barking Rocks Press, 2001, p. 99.

<sup>vi</sup> [http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/opinions/1995/06/23/1995-06-23\\_goodbye\\_mr\\_gloves.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/opinions/1995/06/23/1995-06-23_goodbye_mr_gloves.html)

<sup>vii</sup> Jamal, Azim and Harvey MacKinnon. *The Power of Giving: How Giving Back Enriches Us All*. New York: The Penguin Group, 2008, pp. 19-30.

<sup>viii</sup> Jamal, Azim and Harvey MacKinnon. *The Power of Giving: How Giving Back Enriches Us All*. New York: The Penguin Group, 2008, p.34.

<sup>ix</sup> Owen-Towle, Tom. *Wholly Joy! Being Happy in an Unhappy World*. San Diego, CA: Barking Rocks Press, 2001, p. 89.

<sup>x</sup> Vardey, Lucinda and John Dalla Costa. *Being Generous: The Art of Right Living*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2007, p.32.

<sup>xi</sup> Vardey, Lucinda and John Dalla Costa. *Being Generous: The Art of Right Living*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2007, pp.32-33.

<sup>xii</sup> Vardey, Lucinda and John Dalla Costa. *Being Generous: The Art of Right Living*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2007, pp. 34-35.

<sup>xiii</sup> Vardey, Lucinda and John Dalla Costa. *Being Generous: The Art of Right Living*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2007, p.36.

<sup>xiv</sup> Vardey, Lucinda and John Dalla Costa. *Being Generous: The Art of Right Living*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2007, pp. 38-39.

<sup>xv</sup> Vardey, Lucinda and John Dalla Costa. *Being Generous: The Art of Right Living*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2007, pp.40-41.

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<sup>xvi</sup> Vardey, Lucinda and John Dalla Costa. *Being Generous: The Art of Right Living*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2007, pp. 42-43.

<sup>xvii</sup> Vardey, Lucinda and John Dalla Costa. *Being Generous: The Art of Right Living*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2007. p.44.

<sup>xviii</sup> Vardey, Lucinda and John Dalla Costa. *Being Generous: The Art of Right Living*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2007, p.45.

<sup>xix</sup> Vardey, Lucinda and John Dalla Costa. *Being Generous: The Art of Right Living*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2007, pp. 47-49.

<sup>xx</sup> Owen-Towle, Tom. *Wholly Joy! Being Happy in an Unhappy World*. San Diego, CA: Barking Rocks Press, 2001, p. 90.

<sup>xxi</sup> Jamal, Azim and Harvey MacKinnon. *The Power of Giving: How Giving Back Enriches Us All*. New York: The Penguin Group, 2008, p. 30