

## *Principles of Generosity*

### **A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**By The Rev. CJ McGregor**

**Delivered on February 2, 2020**

I have been quite generous over the past few months. If I weren't generous, I would tell you how disappointed and frustrated I am with the New England Patriots on this Superbowl Sunday. If I weren't generous, I would call the Patriots subpar, say that they were more likely to catch a rare disease from the Amazon versus catching the ball. If I weren't generous, I would say that the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes had better kickers this season. But I'm not going to say any of that because I'm generous.

Sylvia K., one of the first women to achieve long term sobriety in AA tells us that generosity is usually associated with the giving of money. She reminds us that in Step 12 generosity is associated with the giving of ourselves. Understood as a virtue, generosity is not simply an act, but a character trait, a settled, habitual disposition to give of our resources in order to help others. Nor is generosity the giving of just anything, but of that which has value for us. This includes but is not limited to—nor is it primarily—the giving of material valuables.

Here at All Faiths, we give generously of our time, our attention, our energy, our work, our skills and talents, our knowledge, our experience, our physical space, and our emotional involvement. We give a compliment, a kind word, a smile, a pat on the back. We give credit, we give recognition, we give validation. We give the benefit of the doubt and are quick to acknowledge the good in those who falter. We give reassurance.

Even in the giving of the material we give spiritually, from the heart. We give willingly, gladly, and freely, with no expectation of return or repayment. Our recognition of this reality, and our grateful response to it, is the spiritual ground of our generosity. Thus, generosity is rooted in, and continues from, humility and gratitude. In being generous, we give ourselves in love and service, trying to show to others the grace that has been shown to us. Like letting the Patriots off the hook.

Let me offer parts of a sermon written by The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg, “There could be any number of reasons one might determine to give. Some people give out of obligation or obedience, others out of shame or guilt. But the greatest fuel for generosity is love. Think about it: We're all generous with whom or what we love – generous with our time, our resources, and our money. If we love self, we lavish ourselves with what makes us most happy. If we love others, we lavish them with what makes them most happy.

The Jewish tradition with its tremendous respect for all we have inherited from previous generations reminds us that we often find ourselves “living in houses which we did not build, drinking from wells which we did not dig, and eating from trees which we did not plant.” In that spirit, think of a time when someone offered you tremendous generosity. It could have been a gift of time, intelligence, money, caring, or simply presence. Remember who that person was and what they gave you with as much detail as you can. Remember how you experienced that event and how it affected you afterward. From family and friends, to teachers and camp counselors, to

even random strangers, most of us have been the beneficiaries of tremendous generosity at various points in our lives. Sometimes we have the opportunity to pay these generous givers back in kind. More often, our invitation is to “pay it forward” to others: to both literally and metaphorically build houses in which others will live, dig wells from which others will drink, and to help plant trees from which others will eat. Likewise, recall a time when you made a memorable gift or donation to an organization about which you feel passionate. Again, in addition to money, what may come to mind is a generosity of time, intelligence, caring, or presence.

From the Buddhist tradition Lama Surya Das writes that, “Giving brings happiness at every stage of its expression. We experience joy in forming the intention to be generous; we experience joy in the actual act of giving something; and we experience joy in remembering the fact we have given.” Similarly, from the Christian tradition, Henri Nouwen writes, “Every time I take a step in the direction of generosity, I know that I am moving from fear to love.” From a UU perspective, we can attribute these findings to the fact that whereas scarcity-thinking leaves us isolated and alone, generosity makes us more aware in a positive way of our connection to the “interdependent web of all existence.”

When we think of some of the most generous givers in history, one word that comes to mind is philanthropy from the Greek words for “Lover of humanity”. That etymology is at the core of what we aspire to be as Unitarian Universalists. We sometimes speak of UUism as a theologically liberal religion in the best sense of that word liberal: open to new ideas, generous, open-handed, open-hearted, and open-minded. Accordingly, our Seven Principles include tremendously high aspirations of philanthropy: recognition of the “The inherent worth and dignity of every person,” seeking to create “Justice, equity and compassion in human relations,” and “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” And one of the first steps we can take to help “build the world we dream about” is a personal commitment to take the next step — whatever that looks like for us individually and collectively — on the path toward greater generosity. That might look like a generosity of money, but it may also look like a generosity of time, intelligence, caring, or simply presence.

Earlier, I invited you to consider a time when someone offered you tremendous generosity as well as a time when you made a memorable gift or donation to an organization about which you feel passionate. Looking to the future, what are you passionate about in this season of your life? What gifts of time, intelligence, caring, or simply presence do you have to share? Instead of paying someone back for generosity in the past, what might you be called to ‘pay forward’ to someone else? A mentor once told me that, “Generosity is the beginning of wisdom.” The prefix of the word generous means “birth,” as in the word generative. I took him to mean that generosity invites us to share our gifts and our self with the world. And if communities like All Faiths have fed you, comforted you, and stood in solidarity with you in times of injustice, the invitation is to give generously out what you have that together we might expand our ability to do likewise for others now and in the future.

Many organizations that work for social change make a mistake in calling themselves non-profits. We need to start seeing ourselves as a “social profit” organization. We invite you to invest your money, time, and energy in this place because we bring social profit to this community for building a better world based on connection, compassion, diversity, and justice. And we have the potential to do so much more beyond the significant work that we are already

doing. I should also say that one joke about the genre of the message I offer this morning is that instead of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, stewardship sermons are "Sermons on the Amount." I do think it is important to speak periodically about the virtue of practicing generosity, I generally feel like the major determination for whether someone gives generously to this congregation is not whether I preach one "Pledge Drive Sermon" per year, but rather the community, spirituality, and support we seek to provide week in and week out. But I do feel led to speak more explicitly about generosity and stewardship at the beginning of this year's pledge drive because we are at a turning point in the history of this congregation.

We are growing, not just in numbers, but in or spiritual maturity and our impact on our community. We aren't going anywhere and will stay right here in this building, but we will soon need to adapt it for our changing needs. So as we look to our next five years here at All Faiths and beyond, I invite you to consider your responses to what author Peter Block calls "powerful questions":

- What gifts [of time, intelligence, money, caring, or simply presence] do you hold that you are willing to bring to this congregation?
- What is the commitment that you bring to this congregation?
- How valuable do you want your involvement with this congregation to be?
- How valuable an experience do you plan for [your involvement] to be?

For now, I'll conclude with the following words adapted from a congregational pledge that invites us to reflect on how each one of us contributes to what this Beloved Community is and can become:

My congregation is composed of people like me. I help make it what it is.

It will be friendly, if I am. It will be kind, forgiving, and welcoming, if I am. Its seats will be filled if I help fill them. It will do great work, if I work. It will make generous gifts to many causes, if I am a generous giver. It will bring others into its worship, if I invite them and bring them. It will be a congregation of loyalty and love, of fearlessness and faith, of compassion, charity and mercy, if I who make it what it is, am filled with these things. Therefore, I dedicate myself to the task of being all things that I want my spiritual home to be.

I'm grateful to be on this journey with all of you. And I look forward to continuing with you on the path toward ever-greater generosity of heart, generosity of mind, generosity of wealth, and generosity of spirit."

May it be so.