

*Mitten Tree***A Message for All Faiths****Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on December 12, 2021**

I remember as a child at my Catholic school there was always a very large Christmas tree just inside the entrance during this season. This tree was called the mitten tree. The community was asked to donate mittens and hats and string them on the tree. These would eventually make their way

to children who sorely needed them. There was such a response that you could barely see the green tree underneath all the mittens and hats. I wonder if you have ever seen or even donated to a mitten tree. It is likely that we've all seen such a tree. Many retailers this time of year display trees with cards asking for certain items designated for children, people living in care facilities, or generally people in need. I wonder what went through your mind when you saw such a tree? In the few seconds after

encountering the tree did you think about the people? Did you think about plucking one of the cards off the tree with the intention to give? Did you actually take one of the cards and return later with a gift? When you saw the tree, what was your heart telling you? Take a moment to recall that feeling.

The mitten tree leads you in answering a question, Why do you give? I know it's easier to respond to this question by letting ourselves feel what we feel when we give

versus an intellectual response. It's a difficult question, hard to answer in just a single sentence. Maybe you give because you feel obligated by a kindness that was once passed to you. Perhaps you give to set an example for others. Maybe it was your friend's birthday, and you gave them a gift to make them feel appreciated. What about the spare change you gave to a stranger? How did giving make you feel?

The truth is that giving is an experience threaded into the daily

lives of most people. We give currency in exchange for a full stomach. We give handshakes, hugs, and waves. We give presentations, we give dinners to our families. It might not seem like *giving* while it's happening, but this quality is exactly what makes acts of kindness so mysterious and so special. Giving is hard-wired into who we are as human beings — and not surprisingly, so is receiving. We receive opportunities, clean drinking water, and prayers. Most people like receiving things

because it makes them feel connected, it makes them feel like a part of something bigger than themselves. Would you have guessed that people like *giving* for the very same reasons? Research has shown that giving usually makes people feel some kind of happiness, even if that giving requires a small sacrifice. It has also been demonstrated that happy people tend to give more.

Do giving and receiving really make us all feel the same way?

While we acknowledge that people

give for a variety of different reasons, there are as many different reasons to give as there are benefactors. Two main concepts underlie these acts and help explain why it feels good to give. First, as social individuals, we like to believe that we're nice, kind and decent people. When we do something such as giving back to others, we're proving to ourselves and society that we're good people, and this gives us great satisfaction. At the same time, by giving to others in need, we're fostering goodness in hopes that

when *we're* in need, that act of kindness will be reciprocated.

We're guided by the principle that the way we treat others will be the standard by which we're treated if/when we're in need.

New York City-based religious

leader and journalist Rabbi Levi

Welton explained that the act of

giving back tugs at the core of our

spiritual selves. "It feels good to

give because that's the entire

purpose to life," he explained. "In

creating the whole structure of

reality, God was the ultimate giver

— and he created humans in his image — so giving back helps us to access that huge energy. Giving taps into the deepest parts of our soul and represents the ultimate reflection of our access to our faith—what we believe. Rabbi Welton noted that the ancient Hebrew word for love, ‘ahava,’ contains the root ‘ahav’ which means ‘to give,’ and he believes that the dual acts are one and the same. “Love is all about giving, and the process of determining the talents and gifts you can offer, and then sharing them will lead to

greater happiness,” he said. “It stops becoming about you and leads to a bigger and greater purpose. Choosing to think beyond yourself and be a person of service is the highest spiritual achievement one can attain.”

Nourishing us physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually, science confirms that the act of giving benefits more than just the recipient. Ultimately, giving is as important to the person who gives as it is to the person who receives. Empathy is

an individual's ability to share the emotions of other people, so feeling another person's sadness can certainly spark in us a desire to make that person feel better.

After all, it's what we would want if we found ourselves in similar shoes. If we can accept that giving is a part of who we are as people, then it should also be easy to understand that empathy can be exhausted. This means that it's possible to give too much, or to give for the wrong reasons. In fact, research suggests that giving to others because you feel

obligated or because you want a short-term reward can have detrimental impacts on your mental health and social behavior — it can make you less compassionate for others and disappointed over a long period of time. Giving, whether it's a donation, a birthday present, or a dinner, should always feel natural. It should always be a reflection of the values that define you. It should be like planting a seed that you can watch grow into a forest. Empathy extends beyond human-

human interaction to animals, and our environment.

Pet adoption is a particular hybrid of giving and receiving: a person brings an animal without a family into their own. For the adopter, they are giving the pet love, food, and shelter, and in return they are receiving a companion that responds with consistent appreciation. Although the original motivation for adopting the pet may be rooted in sadness (sadness that a dog or a cat is living in a cage, for example), the joy

associated with giving that pet a better life far outweighs any associated sadness or sacrifice. Giving is a very broad event, so the levels of joy and sadness or disgust felt around these events are balanced. Pet adoption, which requires a big commitment of giving and a sacrifice (a sacrifice of time, money, and effort to raise a pet and keep it healthy), still skews strongly toward joy. It is almost as if people require the ability to feel sadness in order to act on the desire to bring joy to others. This doesn't mean being sad or depressed by

default; it means empathy. It means willingness to try on shoes that aren't your own. Joy is more powerful than sadness.

The relativity of emotions is inescapable. How can a person define hate if they have never felt love? How can a person feel the joy of giving if they themselves have never received a gift? As we might expect, receiving events skew compellingly toward joy. A large influence of this skew is the fact that receiving is primal. Humans survive as newborns by receiving

food and water and shelter, not by reciprocating appreciation for those things. Parents bring children into the world with the understanding that their babies cannot grow into strong young adults without constant nurturing. The joy that we feel when we receive something is fundamentally rooted in our survival instincts. It feels good to have a full stomach when you are hungry for the same reason that it feels good to get the gift you've always hoped for: because you hunger for something, or, because

that gift satiates an emotional hunger.

Giving within your means and within your values makes you feel just as much joy as receiving something. You don't need to give everything you have in order to feel good about giving. You don't need to give the most expensive gift, or a gift worth any money at all. The very gesture of goodwill associated with an act of kindness is enough to bring positivity into our lives, to make us feel joy. That our gift could multiply or change

someone's life in a way that makes the world a better place is just an added bonus to doing and feeling good.

We all know how great it feels to receive gifts. However, the joy of getting is short-lived. Our lives are richer when we share, and that great inner joy comes from helping others to better their lives.

Truly giving from the heart fills your life with joy and nourishes your soul. Giving provides an intrinsic reward that's far more valuable than the gift. As

Mahatma Gandhi said, “To find yourself, lose yourself in the service of others.”

Giving takes you out of yourself and allows you to expand beyond earthly limitations. True joy lies in the act of giving without an expectation of receiving something in return.

Academic research and thousands of years of human history confirm that achieving meaning, fulfillment, and happiness in life comes from making others happy, and not from being self-centered.

A Chinese proverb says: “If you always give, you will always have.” The rewards of giving are priceless. If you want to have happiness, you need to give happiness. If you want love, you need to give love. It is only in giving that you receive. No matter what your circumstances in life, you have the ability to give.

May it be so.

Joke

A preacher was trying to get his people to be more enthusiastic about their church. The preacher said in his sermon: "If this church is going to get anywhere, it has to learn to crawl."

-The people said, "Let it crawl, Rev., let it crawl!" Then he said, "And after it learns to crawl, it has to learn to walk." And the people said, "Let it walk, Rev., let it walk!" The preacher got excited and said, "After this church learns

to walk, it has to learn to run!" The people shouted back, "Let it run, Rev., let it run!"

-Then he said, "And if this church is going to run, it's going to take money!" And the people said, "Let it crawl, Rev., let it crawl."

