

Rev. Linda Simmons
Giving as Sacred Art
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A man was walking along the beach, enjoying an afternoon vacation stroll, when he heard someone screaming. Looking around he saw an obviously distraught woman kneeling next to a little girl. The man quickly determined the child had swallowed something that was blocking her airway and held her up by her heels and gave a few quick thumps to her back. Sure enough, the child started to sputter and cough and spit a coin onto the sand.

“Oh, thank you sir!” cried the grateful mother. You seemed to know exactly what to do. Are you a doctor?”

“No, ma’am,” the man replied. “I’m retired. But I am the chair of the pledge committee for my church.”

This is the Sunday when we talk about giving and how giving changes your life. Some call this the sermon on the amount. All churches have a designated one. And each year I am tasked to write it, I reach deep and wonder what it is I can say differently about giving this year. But of course, that is the wrong question.

The other day, several of us sat around Paul Stewart’s table and stuffed pledge letters into envelopes for you all and wrote notes on those letters. One of the papers we stuffed into those envelopes was a page about some of what we have done here this last year with attendant photos. It was so colorful and engaging and full. I felt so proud looking it over for all the good work we do together.

And it struck me then and there. Generosity is an opportunity to live in committed relationship, to live as if the interconnected web of all existence were real and important and life sustaining, to live as if we were rich no matter the money we have.

There was once a student who went to his master and said, “I am very discouraged. What should I do?”

The Zen Master replied, “Encourage others.”

Venerable Dhyani Ywahoo, chief of the Green Mountain Band of Ani Yun Wiwa writes, “When we are feeling the poorest, that’s time to give a gift.”

I was a single mother until I met Gary when my daughter Gina was 15 years old and married him when she was 21. I had left her father and my husband at the time in Germany when Gina was 3 months old. He never sent child support. When Gina was two, I went to University and took 6 years getting my BA in Economics. When I graduated, I got a job working 2/3rds time so I could spend some time with my daughter. Those were lean years to say the least. Some of those years I made no more than \$25,000.

And yet, we were generous because if we were not, we would have then been poor. We fed folks and gave to our local UU Church. We housed homeless friends, we participated in our community. We had to. It was the only way to live as if we were rich. It made us feel rich.

I found a joke another joke that starts this way:

Our church was saddened to learn this week of the death of one of our most valued members, Someone Else.

For many, many years as a part of this church Someone Else did far more than a normal person's share of the work. Whenever there was a job to do, a class to teach, or a meeting to attend, everybody said, "Let Someone Else do it."

"Whenever leadership was mentioned, this wonderful person was looked to for inspiration as well as results; "Someone Else can work with that group.

"It was common knowledge that Someone Else was among the most generous givers. Whenever there was a financial need, everyone assumed Someone Else would make up the difference."

Many of us turn away when another asks of us. We think that we will have less if we give to this or that or show up at this or that. That it belongs to someone else to step up or give. By stepping up and giving we are able to live into lives that have a meaning that supports us, that nurtures us, that guides us when we are in the dark. We create a pattern of meaning from which we can author our lives with peace and hope.

This is the advice I read in a generosity manual: "Don't try to find encouragement; give it to others. Don't tackle your problem head on; look for others with the same struggle and find a way to offer them help. If you are feeling poor, figure out a gift you can give. In short, address others' needs for more abundance and see what you end up with in return."

How many of us when we are sad or hopeless or feeling without, go about looking for others in need? And yet, it is a remedy I can attest to. When I am called to be there for someone and I am low, it is only a moment or two before I am lifted up by another's courage, hope, meaning, desire to find purpose.

In the book, *The Sacred Art: Creating a Lifestyle of Generosity*, Rev. Lauren Tyler writes about giving as a sacred art. She writes, "It's about creating an entire lifestyle of generosity. This transformation will help you connect to other people; it will relieve stress from the daily worries of your life; it will open you up to encounters with the Sacred."¹

¹ Lauren Tyler Wright, *Giving—The Sacred Art: Creating a Lifestyle of Generosity* (Vermont: The Art of Spiritual Living, 2012) (Kindle Locations 44-48). Turner Publishing Company. Kindle Edition.

Generosity...connects us to other people; relieves stress from the daily worries of our lives; opens us up to encounters with the Sacred. Sounds like an elixir that we all need, and that is available to everyone one of us.

As many of you know, I used to work with at risk youth who had dropped out of high school. Many had been in and out of jail or their parents had been; most of them were plagued with addiction issues, they all lived below the poverty level.

Part of what we did each year in the program was choose a service project. They hated choosing this. They felt that others had so much more than they did, that others knew more peace than they did, had more advantages and therefore blessings than they did. It was hard to see it any other way than theirs.

And yet each year we chose a project, sometimes not far from their own neighborhoods: we painted community centers, went to nursing homes and sang songs, we picked up trash and cleaned out garages for the disabled.

Each year, they moaned and I dreaded the excuses. And as we did this work, something would change in all of us. We would begin to believe that we had a power that we could not see before, that we had a capacity and a strength and a place of wellness that others could not see, that we could not see, until we picked up that paint brush or hammer or broom which became a sort of batman cape. We could make another's life better, we could participate in goodness, we could give something that mattered in the wellness of a community.

Generosity changes the giver. We have long known this. And it is not only because it makes the giver feel better about him or herself in all the ways we can imagine. But because it connects us to the world around us in a way that makes us feel like we are part of something, an integral, meaningful part. Because it makes us look up from our own stories and imagine what another's story might be. Generosity opens doors of consciousness. It pulls up the shade. It offers new meaning.

Somewhere inside of generosity the understanding dawns that your wellness is tied up with mine; that your story and mine are not so far apart; that you and I belong to one another.

I remember a distinct example of how an act of generosity changed me.

When I had lung cancer in January of 2016, in the pre-op room the day of the surgery, I was afraid. Those white gowns and IVs in those cold rooms do not breed much comfort. A friend had told me, if you become really afraid, just start thanking everyone who comes in your room to work with you. I tried it.

I thanked the nurse who put in the IV, I thanked the one who put on my little non-slip socks, I thanked the anesthesiologist and the doctor. I thanked the one who checked to see if I was cold.

And by the end, I was not afraid. I felt part of something that would take good care of me. Generosity had transformed me, had made me feel connected to the world, had opened my heart, had lifted me from my small story, which was isolating me in fear, into a larger context in which we all had a story, in which we all had needs and fears. I was a member of a community when I was done. I knew people's names. I became more than a middle aged woman with lung cancer in a white gown with skid proof footies on.

So what do I mean by the sacred art of giving? Why bring in the word sacred here?

For me, when something becomes sacred, it is lifted from a practice and becomes a way of being in the world through which we are made better, more whole, more holy. It is something imbued with and that we imbue with ritual and rites that set it apart from the everyday.

The sacred is a way of being that offers redemption, or an opportunity to be made better, for all who engage in and receive it. Generosity, when practiced with this intention, is sacred because it is not only about how we spend our money, though this too becomes part of this sacred art when done with consciousness.

It is about how we look at other people and react. It is about how we spend our weekends. It about how we forgive.²

“Living generously, in its most complete form, involves knowing people, sharing in the mundane parts of their lives...forming relationships with them, knowing their (vulnerable places too).”³ Living generously involves being vulnerable, being available, being willing to be touched by others too.

After I quit my job as a senior manager for the non-profit that ran those program in the state of NH for youth who had dropped out of high school and those at risk of dropping out, I became a Reiki Master and started working in a hospital in Dover, NH. I would put my hands on people who were in pain and experiencing such anxiety. I began each of these sessions with a visualization, asking the patients were they most liked to be. Most said the beach or the woods. I would take them there with my words and then play some soft music and do reiki for 20 minutes, which in the hospital setting was a laying on of hands and an invitation to breathe evenly and slowly. Many people felt better during this time, more at ease, more peace-filled.

² Lauren Tyler Wright, (Kindle Locations 186-187).

³ Lauren Tyler Wright, (Kindle Locations 201-202).

And they would turn to me with gratitude, the key to generosity, and this gratitude would lift them from their suffering just a little, would relieve their anxiety just a little, would open their hearts up toward another story, and this other story would offer them some room to breathe. It would connect us to one another, beyond illness, beyond fear, beyond death.

Generosity is a sacred art because it changes everything, it molds the giver into someone who can be present with themselves and others in a new way, it opens up new connections and new building blocks for new stories.

We become artists together in this sacred art form and as every artist knows, the art makes us as much as we make it.

It is pledging season here at the UU Meeting House. A pledge is not the same as the money we put in the basket. A pledge is a conscious decision to participate in the UU Meeting House financially by offering some of our resources to this congregation, its work, its care of others, its mission, its social justice programs, its commitments to paying its staff fairly, and the paying of bills to keep these doors open. Everyone at the UU Meeting House is asked to pledge, all of us, even if we have a very little bit to give. We are all part of this story together.

A pledge is an opportunity to participate in living our values out loud so that we can keep the Immigration Resource Center open once a month for our island immigrants, so that the Food Rescue program that delivers 30 tons of food to island residents can go on, so that programs like Make it Stop that works for sane gun legislation can continue to do its work including bringing a movie, Under the Gun to the Dreamland in November. So that the noonday concert series can continue and the beautiful music we hear every Sunday can lift us up, so that classes like the Year to Live class can continue to be built and led, so that St. Mary's and the UU Meeting House can work collaboratively to welcome the J-1 Visa students each year at Brant Point, so that you can come here and hear your values expressed and also be challenged to live with more open hearts and minds so that we can all go on with more dignity and love in this world. So that we can all have a place to continue to bless and be blessed by one another.

Giving changes our lives. It makes us into people who can see beyond our separateness and into the web that holds us here together, each vulnerable, each in need, each capable of offering to another a salve.

Our wellbeing, our salvation, our redemption, our ability to know that we live in a sacred story is supported by generosity, by giving, by building new meaning together.

There are so many ways to give. Pledge generously. Recognize someone at the store, let another person go before you in traffic, give a compliment to someone you envy, offer

forgiveness to someone you resent, let go of a story that keeps you small and others at a distance, open your heart to someone you have closed your heart to.

As Rumi says, "There are a hundred ways to kneel and kiss the ground." Let's let caring for one another right here and now be one of them.

Amen.