

Connecting

Connecting to deepened wisdom and deepened relationship

First Unitarian Church of Des Moines
a Unitarian Universalist Congregation
1800 Bell Ave
Des Moines, IA 50315
www.ucdsm.org / 515-244-8603



2024 Mar

Generosity

Chalice Lighting

Words of Rev. Deanna Vandiver: “When we see that our days are replete with abundance, we are less afraid. When we are less afraid, we connect more. The more connections we see in our lives, the more abundance we notice.”

Check In

How is it with you today? How has the last month been?

Generosity in the Proposed U.U.A. Article II Bylaws

Section C-2.2 Values and Covenant. As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love. Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love. Inseparable from one another, these values are: . . .

Generosity. We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope. We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.¹

Defining Moment

Etymology. Generosity is from the Proto-Indo-European root *gene-* “give birth, beget” with derivatives referring to procreation and familial and tribal groups. Hence, the Latin *generosus*, “of noble birth,” taken as implying magnanimity, liberality in giving.

Synonyms. goodness, hospitality, kindness, largesse, unselfishness.

¹The five other values named: interdependence, pluralism, justice, transformation, and equity..

READINGS

Read these pieces with a pencil in hand. Underline parts that seem worth remembering. Be ready to share in your group meeting what you underlined – and what those selected words mean to you.

Awareness of the Truth of Abundance is the Font of Generosity and the Spiritual Task from Walter Breuggemann, “The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity”

The majority of the world's resources pour into the United States. And as we Americans grow more and more wealthy, money is becoming a kind of narcotic for us. We hardly notice our own prosperity or the poverty of so many others. The great contradiction is that we have more and more money and less and less generosity -- less and less public money for the needy, less charity for the neighbor.

Though many of us are well intentioned, we have invested our lives in consumerism. We have a love affair with “more” -- and we will never have enough. Consumerism is not simply a marketing strategy. It has become a demonic spiritual force among us.

The Bible starts out with a liturgy of abundance. Genesis 1 is a song of praise for God's generosity. It keeps saying, "It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good." It declares that God blesses -- that is, endows with vitality -- the plants and the animals and the fish and the birds and humankind. And it pictures the creator as saying, "Be fruitful and multiply." In an orgy of fruitfulness, everything in its kind is to multiply the overflowing goodness that pours from God's creator spirit.

We who are now the richest nation are today's main coveters. We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. The central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity -- a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.

According to the Nike story, whoever has the most shoes when he dies wins. We end up only with whatever we manage to get for ourselves. This story ends in despair. It gives us a present tense of anxiety, fear, greed and brutality. It produces domestic abuse, indifference to the poor, the buildup of armaments, divisions between people, and environmental racism. It tells us not to care about anyone but ourselves -- and it is the prevailing creed of American society.

The ideology devoted to encouraging consumption wants to shrivel our imaginations so that we cannot conceive of living in any way that would be less profitable for the dominant corporate structures.

Jesus said it more succinctly. He says, "Don't be anxious, because everything you need will be given to you." Jesus talks a great deal about the kingdom of God -- and what he means by that is a public life reorganized toward neighborliness.

Generosity Makes Us Healthy.

Terri Yablonksy Stat, Chicago Tribune

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/2015/08/06/be-generous-its-a-simple-way-to-stay-healthier/>

Countless studies have found that generosity, both volunteering and charitable donations, benefits young and old physically and psychologically. The benefits of giving are significant, according to those studies: lower blood pressure, lower risk of dementia, less anxiety and depression, reduced cardiovascular risk, and overall greater happiness.

“Volunteering moves people into the present and distracts the mind from the stresses and problems of the self,” said Stephen G. Post, founding director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care, and Bioethics at Stony Brook University School of Medicine in New York. “Many studies show that one of the best ways to deal with the hardships in life is not to just center on yourself but to take the opportunity to engage in simple acts of kindness.”

Studies show that when people think about helping others, they activate a part of the brain called the mesolimbic pathway, which is responsible for feelings of gratification. Helping others doles out happiness chemicals, including dopamine, endorphins that block pain signals and oxytocin, known as the tranquility hormone. Even just the thought of giving money to a specific charity has this effect on the brain, research shows.

According to Dan Ariely, professor of behavioral economics and psychology at Duke University: “If you are a recipient of a good deed, you may have momentary happiness, but your long-term happiness is higher if you are the giver.” For example, if you give people a gift card for a Starbucks cappuccino and call them that evening and ask how happy they are, people say they are not happier than if you didn’t give it to them. If you give another group a gift card and ask them to give it to a random person, when you call them at night, those people are happier. “People are happier when they give, even if they’re just following instructions,” Ariely said. “They take credit for the giving and therefore are happier at the end of the day.”

The way we give is important too, Ariely said. Taxes are a form of giving that typically does not make Americans happy. “If you give directly from a paycheck, we don’t pay attention to it,” he said. “It’s the way we give and how we give that makes us happy. The key is to give deliberately and thoughtfully, so that other people benefit from it.” Research supports this, and researchers started from a baseline of equal physical characteristics among study participants, so it wasn’t a case of healthier people being more willing to volunteer.

A 2012 study in the journal *Health Psychology* by Sara Konrath and a team at the University of Michigan found that older adult volunteers had a lower risk of dying in a four-year period than nonvolunteers, as long as they volunteered for altruistic versus self-oriented reasons.

“In order to gain a personal benefit from volunteering, you have to focus on how your giving helps other people,” said Konrath, now director of the Interdisciplinary Program for Empathy and Altruism Research and assistant professor at the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University. “We have the ability to shift our focus, and many of us do

have an other-oriented reason for giving. If we can just focus on that aspect rather than what we can get out of it, chances are it will be better for own health too.”

An online national survey of 4,500 American adults (the 2010 United Healthcare/Volunteer Match Do Good Live Well Study) found that people who volunteer have less trouble sleeping, less anxiety, less helplessness and hopelessness, better friendships and social networks, and a sense of control over chronic conditions.

With an aging population, reducing cognitive decline is important too. A recent review of studies published in the November 2014 *Psychological Bulletin* found that, among seniors, volunteering is likely to reduce the risk of dementia and is associated with reduced symptoms of depression, better self-reported health, fewer functional limitations and lower mortality.

Volunteering has even been shown to lower blood pressure. In a June 2013 study from Carnegie Mellon University, adults over 50 who volunteered at least 200 hours in the past year (four hours per week) were 40 percent less likely to develop high blood pressure than nonvolunteers.

There are several possible explanations for this, said study author Rodlescia Sneed, now a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Pittsburgh. Volunteerism may boost self-esteem and protect people from social isolation, both of which are linked to better health in older adults, she said.

Doing volunteer work may also give older adults perspective on their own life struggles, which can help them better cope with stress. Helping others also may promote the release of stress-buffering hormones that may reduce cardiovascular risk.

The benefits of giving are seen in younger people too. A recent study of 10th-graders at a Vancouver high school found that students who spent an hour a week helping children in after-school programs over 10 weeks had lower levels of inflammation and cholesterol, plus a lower body-mass index.

And if you can't find time to volunteer “hands on,” there's some benefit to making a meaningful donation to charity. “Studies show that people who donate meaningfully even just once feel happier months later, though it is best to do so with some regularity,” Post said.

Researchers also have found that those in Alcoholics Anonymous who help other alcoholics double their likelihood of overcoming alcoholism one year after going dry. The benefits of helping others are greatest when you have experienced the same chronic problem, Post said.

The concept is being used in therapeutic farm communities developed for people with serious mental illness. “The premise is quite successful,” Post said. “If you encourage people with major mental disorders, including schizophrenia, depression and bipolar disorder, to contribute meaningfully to a community, they can better manage their condition.”

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Generosity Makes Us Happy.

Jordan Michael Smith, The New Republic

<https://newrepublic.com/article/119477/science-generosity-why-giving-makes-you-happy>

Start giving your money and time away. New research shows you'll be happier for it. Americans who describe themselves as "very happy" volunteer an average of 5.8 hours per month. Those who are "unhappy"? Just 0.6 hours. This is just one of the findings in *The Paradox of Generosity*, a new book by sociologists Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson presenting the findings of the Science of Generosity Initiative at Notre Dame. Researchers for the initiative surveyed 2,000 individuals over a five-year period. They interviewed and tracked the spending habits and lifestyles of 40 families from different classes and races in 12 states, even accompanying some to the grocery store.

The result is among the most comprehensive studies of Americans' giving habits ever conducted. Other findings include lower depression rates among Americans who donate more than 10 percent of their incomes (41 percent say they rarely or never experience depression versus 32 percent for everyone else.) And giving away money isn't the only way to reap the psychological rewards of generosity: Americans who are very giving in relationships—being emotionally available and hospitable—are much more likely to be in excellent health (48 percent) than those who are not (31 percent). The following interview with Christian Smith is lightly edited for clarity.

Jordan Michael Smith: How is this different from preceding studies? Christian Smith: A lot of studies before don't conceive of themselves as studying generosity. They're either focused on just volunteering or just financial giving or just giving blood. Our project is trying to see what the connections are between all different forms of generosity and to develop new ideas and measures of generosity that other people haven't studied before, such as relational generosity. That's making oneself in one's relationships available to other people and being giving towards them. We're trying to understand where generosity comes from, but also what the consequences of generosity are. So this book *The Paradox of Generosity* is very much focused not just on who gives or why they give but what effect it has on the giver to be generous.

JMS: Your book finds not just a correlation between generosity and happiness but actually a causation. Being generous makes you a person happier and healthier. How do you explain that? CS: We have a chapter in the book looking at what social scientists call "causal mechanisms." We found nine different causal mechanisms. It involves everything from developing a sense of self as generous to being more socially networked to being more physically active. We argue that it involves neurochemical changes in the brain, that it gives people more pleasure chemistry in their brain, a sense of reward for having done something good. We don't argue it's one-way. We argue it's circular. The more happy and healthy and directed one is in life, the more generous one is likely to be, although that's not guaranteed. It works as an upwards spiral where everything works together, or it works sometimes as a downward spiral if people aren't generous.

JMS: And yet the book argues that generosity has to be practiced consistently to offer rewards to the giver. It can't just be a single act of giving blood or something like that. CS: It

has to be a practice, it has to be something that is sustained over time, that people engage with regularly. One-off things just don't affect us that much, whereas things that we repeat, things that are sustained in our bodily behaviors and in our minds, have tremendous effects on us. The empirical evidence was very clear. Nothing we tested where you just do it one time has an effect. But all the things that you have to sustain over time have that effect.

JMS: If giving is good for you, why aren't more people generous? CS: Mostly because what's going on in their heads. Most people could be more generous. They think they don't have the money or the time but they could be more generous. I think people are afraid. They don't realize that it's good for them, that it would benefit them and not just other people. They're afraid that it would be a loss. That if they gave money away or devoted their time, they would be losing something. So part of it is just ignorance, part of it is fear and insecurity. One of the points of publishing the book is to help people step out of the fear and step into a better place.

JMS: Since I know I'll be better off by being generous, can I just start giving a bit and reap some sweet rewards? CS: Actually, you can't cynically try and look to get effect. We have to learn just to be generous people. It's sort of like happiness itself. You can't just go out and say, "I'm going to be happy today, damn it," and then get happy. We just have to do things that make us happy, like have good relationships, and have rewarding work. And then lo and behold, we find ourselves being happy. It's very similar. The best way to put it is that ultimately we have to pursue living well, and then ultimately we'll be happy. And generosity is part of that.

JMS: OK, but let's say that you volunteer but are doing it to, say, meet new people, as opposed to helping others. Will that work? CS: It might in the following way. Sometimes our minds follow our actions. So for a lot of practices of generosity, even if we're nervous about it, or unenthusiastic, if we just get going and start doing it, later we realize that was not too bad or that was enjoyable or we try it again. So there is a certain amount of generosity that has a fake-it-til-you-make-it aspect. It's better to just get going, even if it's not for the purest motives, and then let it develop, instead of waiting around to become Mr. or Ms. Altruism, and then do it. If someone thinks, 'I'll volunteer five times and then I'll be healthier,' that's probably crazy. But if people have mixed motives for what they're doing, why not? If that's what gets them going, sure.

JMS: Some of the people in your book who you chronicle and classify as ungenerous seem to be close with their spouse or child. Isn't that a form of generosity? CS: They might be helping each other in a very limited sense. And that's a good thing, of course, when people help their immediate, nuclear family. But the dynamics of generosity are such that people who are learning to be generous increasingly expand their circle to people beyond their most comfortable or the most intimate and there is a helping of "the other," and not just one's own tribe, so to speak. That's an important threshold to cross in being a generous person.

Generosity Extends Our Lives.

Elizabeth Renter, US News

<https://health.usnews.com/health-news/health-wellness/articles/2015/05/01/what-generosity-does-to-your-brain-and-life-expectancy>

There's a definite feel-good moment when you see the face of someone you're helping light up in acknowledgment of your compassion. But research shows these feelings are far from fleeting and that generosity affects our brains and our health, possibly even extending our lives.

Generosity and Your Brain. The feel-good effects of giving begin in the brain. It's called "giver's glow," says Stephen G. Post, director of the Center for Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics at New York's Stony Brook University. The response, he says, is triggered by brain chemistry in the mesolimbic pathway, which recognizes rewarding stimuli.

Philanthropy "doles out several different happiness chemicals," Post says, "including dopamine, endorphins that give people a sense of euphoria and oxytocin, which is associated with tranquility, serenity or inner peace."

This pleasure and reward system evolved some 1 to 2 billion years ago, and at its most basic level, is tied to the joy we receive from eating, sex and social interactions. Viewing the brain with MRI technology during moments of generosity or selfless behavior has led scientists to uncover that even the thought of giving can engage this ancient response.

Some experts suggest that evolution isn't merely the survival of the fittest individual but is dependent on the group or community living and working together. This evolutionary theory of group selection could help explain why the brain responds to generosity in a similar way as it does to behaviors necessary for life.

Mental and Physical Benefits of Giving. Numerous studies have attempted to capture the benefits of giving, and they've consistently shown that giving makes people feel good. Whether it's volunteering or donating cash, selfless action can help lessen the risk and symptoms of depression and day-to-day stress.

One study published in 2013 in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that giving time and assistance to others reduced the mortality risk tied to stress, a known risk factor for many chronic diseases. According to the study, which looked at 846 adults in the Detroit area, stress did not predict mortality for participants who had helped others within the previous year. But the link between stress and mortality was apparent in people who didn't lend a helping hand, even after adjusting for age, health and other variables.

A larger, earlier study followed more than 2,000 residents of Marin County, California, and found that volunteerism reduced mortality rates more than exercising four times weekly and attending church regularly (another behavior tied to improved mental health and greater longevity). Subjects who volunteered for two or more causes had a 63 percent lower rate of mortality than people who didn't volunteer during the study period. The findings were published in the *Journal of Health Psychology*.

But volunteering isn't the only method of good-for-you giving. Charitable donations trigger the mesolimbic system in much the same way. Even thinking about giving money to a meaningful cause engages this evolutionary reward system, according to research led by Jorge Moll of the D'Or Institute for Research and Education in Brazil.

But it Has to be Heartfelt. Whether you're giving time, money or a helping hand, you stand to receive the stress-busting benefits of altruism. But your intentions, or how you feel about the action, matter.



“If it's a meaningful donation, it can have a significant impact,”

Post says, “but if it's trivial or just grudging or whatever, probably not.”

This kind of meaningful giving, or even contemplating such heartfelt generosity, takes your focus off yourself and things that may weigh you down from day to day. Writing a check in hopes of lessening your stress without thought as to where the money is going likely won't be as effective as giving from the heart.

When you're able to give part of yourself in a selfless manner, the potential windfall can be significant, and it all comes relatively easily.

When giving selflessly, “people say their friendships are deeper, they're sleeping better and they're able to handle life's obstacles better,” Post says. “On a scale of 1 to 10 – and 10's a really powerful drug like insulin in the treatment of diabetes – this stuff is probably up there around a 7 or 8. And the amazing thing is, you don't need to go to a drugstore for it.

Spiritual Exercise 1.

Assessing Your Foundation for Generosity

It's hard to be generous – even to yourself – when you're in the grip of scarcity, real or perceived. Consider the 28 items below and rate how abundant or scarce each one is in your life. Use a scale from 0 (extremely scarce) to 10 (extremely abundant). Then make time to reflect on the results. What surprised you? What insight came from consciously assessing these items? What changes do you need to make to be more generous to yourself so that you can be more generous to others and your world?

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|---|--|
| _____ 1. Access to food | _____ 16. Books read |
| _____ 2. Freedom to make decisions about what you wear | _____ 17. Dinners where your loved ones sit and talk |
| _____ 3. Friends | _____ 18. Play |
| _____ 4. Experiences of beauty | _____ 19. Passion |
| _____ 5. Freedom from being subjected to others' aggressions, including micro-aggressions | _____ 20. Respect of your peers |
| _____ 6. Freedom to make decisions about how you use your time | _____ 21. Freedom from envy |
| _____ 7. Exercise | _____ 22. People to talk to when tough times come |
| _____ 8. Financial independence | _____ 23. Fond memories |
| _____ 9. Freedom from regret | _____ 24. Freedom from overly burdensome family obligations |
| _____ 10. A sense of purpose | _____ 25. Freedom from overly burdensome work/professional obligations |
| _____ 11. Access to health care | _____ 26. Time for meditation/prayer |
| _____ 12. Time to volunteer | _____ 27. Self care |
| _____ 13. Access to reliable shelter | _____ 28. Self love |
| _____ 14. Freedom from worry | |
| _____ 15. Access to entertainment | |

Spiritual Exercise 2. Find It By Giving It Away

A story related by Soen Nakagawa (1907-1984): “A student went to his master and said, ‘I am very discouraged. What should I do?’ The Master replied, ‘Encourage others.’”

Diane Fisher: “When we are feeling the poorest, that’s time to give a gift.”

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 and see what you end up with in return.

Questions.

1. The proposed new article II for the UUA bylaws lists generosity as one of six values, centered on love. The current article II bylaws include the 7 principles and the 6 sources, and do not include an explicit reference to generosity. How (if at all) do you think this change might shift what life as a UU is like?
2. The text in the proposed article II describes our generosity value: “We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope. We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.” What’s your reaction to this? In what ways do you find it most challenging?
3. Breuggemann says, “Consumerism... has become a demonic spiritual force among us.” What are your thoughts about that?
4. Breuggemann says, “The ideology devoted to encouraging consumption wants to shrivel our imaginations so that we cannot conceive of living in any way that would be less profitable for the dominant corporate structures.” Is generosity – or, in Breuggemann’s words, “a public life reorganized toward neighborliness” – a threat to corporate profits?
5. Considering the studies mentioned in the articles on pp 3-8: What accounts for these findings? Why are humans built in such a way that would produce the results of these studies? And, given these benefits of generosity, why aren’t more people more generous?

For Families

Birch Spick, Faith Formation & Congregational Life Coordinator

As the oldest child in my family, my parents asked me to do a lot of sharing growing up. Toys, clothes, friends, free-time – if you can name it, I probably shared it with my little brother at some point or another. This might be something your parents asked you, or you ask your own children to do. And if you were at all like me, sometimes you were more willing to share than others.

Can you guess what I hated sharing the most? Responsibility! The older I got, the more my parents and other adults expected me to be a good role-model and share the skills I knew with younger kids. They asked me to share the responsibility of caring for our little community. My family shared responsibility with me, and later I shared that same responsibility with others. I didn't like it at first, but the older I got the more satisfaction I found in sharing what I had. When we practice generosity, with whatever we have, we start thinking a little less about ourselves, and a little more about the world we want to live in, and the people we want to live with. Does this remind you of our theme from last month?

This month, we will read these stories in our Sunday services. In each story, someone uses their time, talent, and treasure to help others. Our children will explore them and their lessons more through games and crafts during class. Consider exploring these stories and their lessons at home with these questions.

- “Loaves & Fishes,” by Sophia Lyon Fahs. In this retelling of a story from the Christian Gospels, the people realized they had enough to share after someone helped them shift their perspective. *How can our creativity help us share what we have if we think it's not enough?*
- “The Ant and the Grasshopper,” retold by Lynn Ungar & Michelle Richards. This is one of Aesop's fables, where ants decide to share their food with a hungry grasshopper, despite thinking the grasshopper was undeserving. *How can sharing help us see that everyone deserves to meet their needs?*
- “Charles Dickens,” by Gabrielle Farrell, Jenice View, & Natalie Maxwell Fenimore. This story is about the Unitarian writer Charles Dickens, who used the fame and fortune he found in adulthood to help people in his community. *What gifts or skills have people shared with you that you can share with others?*
- “Joseph Tuckerman's Revolution,” by Janeen K. Grohsmeyer. In this story, a Unitarian minister makes life decisions that will help him be more helpful to other people in his community. *What will help you help others?*
- “The Story of Easter,” by Sophia Lyon Fahs. On Easter, Christians and their families remember the life of Jesus, who taught his followers to share as much of themselves as they could. *Who inspires you to share with others?*



Check Out

What overall message stands out for you?

Chalice Extinguishing

Words of Rev. Angela Herrera: “Abundance is not about having what you want, but about noticing what you have, and multiplying it through sharing it, multiplying it through your manner of being in this world.”



Connecting is produced by the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines for use in small groups. Each month (ten months a year) explores a different theological or spiritual theme.
Next issue: 2024 Apr: Love