

# Generosity

Confluence Lecture  
Victoria B.C.

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*The confluence lecture was designed to fit with the introduction of the Northern Lights chalice lighters introduction and is about Generosity.*

(Wayne) Jane and I wanted to have a little fun in the lecture and to learn something about ourselves so we thought we might start with a joke.

(Jane) I first wanted to explain why Wayne and I are using flip charts when just this morning Dr Paul Bramadat used an up-to-date Power Point presentation. It's not because we couldn't have done this, but I am technologically-challenged and Wayne wisely decided that if I was anywhere near a computer I might end up sending us down one of the rabbit holes Peter Scales was talking about earlier ...not Paul Bramadat's cute little bunny holes..

One of the things we learned in writing this Confluence Lecture together is that Wayne and I have very different senses of humour. So to be fair we flipped a coin and I...will tell you a joke. And actually, Wayne, now that I've got the microphone I'm going to tell two jokes. The first one is just for fun, and the second one, of course, has to do with generosity, since that's the topic of this Confluence Lecture.

## 1. The Bathtub Test

During a visit to the mental asylum, a visitor asked the Director what the criterion was, which decided whether or not a patient should be institutionalized.

"Well," said the Director, "'we fill up a bathtub, then we offer a teaspoon, a teacup and a bucket to the patient and ask him or her to empty the bathtub "

"Oh, I understand," said the visitor. "A normal person would use the bucket because it's bigger than the spoon or the teacup."

"No." said the Director, "A normal person would pull the plug. Do you want a bed near the window?"

2. At an auction in Manchester a wealthy American announced that he had lost his wallet containing £10,000 and would give a reward of £100 to the person who found it.

From the back of the hall a Scottish voice shouted, "I'll give £150!"

(These jokes are from Tom Telfer, Rotary Club of London West, Ontario, Canada, taken off the Web found at 'Humour about Generosity' -jmrbb)

This joke warns us that generosity is not all that easy to discuss.

## Section on Happiness

Wayne, we've discussed you and I, that one of our unspoken conditions of talking about generosity is knowing that our intention is to have everyone end up in a more positive state of mind than when we started. We are not trying to 'guilt' anyone. We want you all to be happy about our ideas and the possibilities growing from them.

So that's one of the reasons to talk about happiness. But there are natural connections between happiness and generosity. Here is some of what what I have found.

First of all, that "Happiness is ...not merely the function of a individual experience or choice; it is also a property of groups of people. Changes in individual happiness can ripple through social connections and create large-scale patterns in the network, giving rise to clusters of happy and unhappy individuals....Happy people may share their good fortune..., change their behavior toward others...,or merely exude an emotion that is contagious." (*Connection* p. 54)

Do you think we are a happy group of people...here? Now? Are we usually happy as a religious faith? One of the things that originally drew me to this religious perspective was that it was all right to laugh in church. We laughed at jokes, at ourselves, at the ridiculous situations we human beings get up to. That's not all we do, of course, we experience awe and sorrow as well, but it still gives me a sense of freedom, of knowing there is a spectrum of thought and behaviour broad enough to include many many varieties. I like that!

And then there was a fascinating example I ran across in my research on happiness. It was about the stinging nettle plant. If you've ever met one, you won't likely have forgotten it! Well, apparently the stinging nettle plant has been unfairly labelled. The stinging is not automatic, but happens only when the plant is threatened by an unconscious intrusion or an aggressive act. If you sat down next to a stinging nettle and gently stroked its leaves it would not sting at all!

A medicinal herbalist comments: What other experiences in life had left a painful sting [that] could have been treasure troves had we had the sensibility to unlock them with a caress? " (*Connection*,p. 62) In other words, are there times when our happiness is not perceived by others and thus they are unwilling interact with us and open their hearts? If so, that becomes our loss.

I also read about a new book and theory that is based on the Jungian idea of the anima/animus - (the archetypes of the unconscious mind) with the anima being the female principle. The author, Dr. Leonard Shlain, 'a surgeon who understands the workings of the human brain contextualized [this]current movement in history as one in which the culture is moving from left-brain*dominance* to right-brain *prominence*.' It suggests that we are moving away from overdeveloped rationality...and linear processes..to a more flexible, image-oriented and emotional sense of flexible interconnection....It represents a basic turning away from the competitive and exclusive sense of "divide and conquer" to the co-operative sensibility of "create and unite." (*Being Generous*, Vardey and Dalla Costa p. 92) What on earth does this have to do with happiness, you may be wondering? It seems to me that happiness is much more evident when there is an emotional sense of flexible interconnection. - a new phrase for happiness - flexible interconnection!

And another happiness connection comes from our own religious tradition, from Thandeka, one of our 21st Century's UU theologians. She talks about how UUs "love beyond belief" (love beyond the different beliefs we all have) and that for me is definitely happy-making!

And yet another strand of generosity and happiness came from a TED talk I heard in the last few weeks. It was originally broadcasted in February of this year. (TED=Technology, Education and Design) - the speaker was Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize laureate and behavioural economist. You may be interested to know that for 8 years he was a professor at UBC (1978-86) in cognitive psychology. Part of his TED talk was about research being done in the scientific community on happiness and well-being. He talked about the results of a recent Gallup poll that found that in the United States the average income of \$60,000 is a cut-off point for experiencing happiness. Above this income, the experienced levels of happiness is flat, but below this amount, the perception drops linearly. Kahenman says this shows that "money doesn't buy you happiness, but the lack of money buys you misery".

I don't think that this research shows that everyone who has or makes \$60,000 is happy - what it is showing is that more money does not produce more happiness. (To translate this into Canadian terms, I would think that

\$50,000... is the cut-off amount) Having just enough money to bring comfort, safety and nourishment seems to be what is required for happiness. More money and you're not any happier. So keep yourself happy and share your good fortune! This is certainly what those with a generous spirit will do.

It's a funny thing about happiness. It's easy to believe that happiness has to be with you every second of every day or you're not happy. I think the meaning of real happiness is quite different - it's an attitude one can have towards one's life - an attitude of gratitude that is required.

There's a new song that I listen to quite regularly which reminds me to be grateful for what I have....and to share that gratitude. As the song "Go Gratitude" (singer/songwriter Shawn Gallaway) says in part: "Thank you for the morning sun, thank you for my home, thank you for the fields of fun, the trees, the streams, the stones....Thank you for my Juicy dreams, ...my playful part.. my joys and pains, ...and when I'm feeling sorrow and my world is upsidown...my attitude of gratitude can turn my life around....Thank your lucky stars, let it open your heart.....Go Gratitude! "

There are definitely complementary relationships between gratitude and generosity and happiness...and of course love!

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### Section on Our Own UU History

Just what does our own theology and practice, our history, have to say about generosity as used in the broadest sense in our religious perspective? I had read several books about generosity and different religions and they all made very specific mention of the necessity, the requirement, of generosity. Of course, being a non-creedal religion means that we have not mandated generosity (or many other ethical/moral characteristics) into our way of being in the world. I think we are all expected to be able to see that being generous of spirit, and by extension, generous with all our gifts, is required if we are to be the best we can possibly be.

And when I went back through our own UU history I could see small indicators of generosity here and there. In Phillip Hewett's book on *Racovia*, about an early Polish liberal religious community in the 16th and 17th Century, there were several mentions of the Polish Brethern (the name for Unitarians in Poland) being generous in the help they offered to each other in times of adversity and generous help offered to others when misfortune was visited upon them. [It was] 'the earliest period of the organised Unitarian movement, back in the sixteenth century....[and] its members achieved what the polish historian Stanislas Kot has called a 'synthesis of rationalism and love.' (*Racovia* p.40)

And in another book of Phillip's, *A Unitarian Way* I found the comment that, "back in the year 1821 the english Unitarians composed a document which was written in Latin for general circulation in Europe. It contained the striking phrase, 'they take love as their bond of union instead of faith' (*A Unitarian Way* p.29) I know that love is certainly not the same thing as generosity, but generosity can not exist without it.

Continuing to come forward in time, consider the results of the 1976 Religious Values System of Unitarian Universalists. This was a survey using the Rokeach Values Survey instrument. It was done by Robert L'Hommedieu Miller, UU minister and then Professor of Religion at Tufts University. It is even possible some of you may have been involved in it. The study identified a distinctive Unitarian Universalist paradigm of values. In particular, it was found that UUs ranked loving as a high instrumental value (instrumental being a value that is a means to a valued end), and mature love as a terminal value (terminal meaning values that are an end in themselves) more highly than did respondents from other groups, religious and nonreligious." (*Engaging Our Theological Diversity* p.53 )

Of course, that was not all we valued. We also valued being independent, intellectual, imaginative, and logical as instrumental values and self-respect, wisdom, inner-harmony, ... a world of beauty, and an exciting life as terminal values which, taken together, show an orientation towards competence rather than morality and stress

personal realization, individual self-fulfillment, and self-actualization. From my point of view the word 'competence' has always sounded rather cold, so I was relieved to find that in other places in the survey we showed much more heart.

The 2005 Commission on Appraisal report entitled "Engaging our Theological Diversity" commented on this earlier Rokeach survey by noting that "words that express caring and connection between people, and sometimes beyond the human community, occurred frequently in core-of-faith statements. [words like] ... 'love, compassion, connection or community' were the words used often. (*Engaging...*p. 53)

And in answer to one of the recent Commission on Appraisal's questions about theology (done between 2002-2004), 92% of ministers and 78% of lay respondents rated as highly important the statement "Love and service are core; we respond to the gift of life with gratitude, generosity (!), and compassionate action." (*Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, p.55 2005 COA)

At this stage you could all say to me, so what? What you've talked about so far was somewhere else or long ago. What does this have to do with us here in Canada in 2010? And why do you keep bringing up love? I thought this lecture was supposed to be about generosity? Please keep listening and I hope it will become clearer!

Mark Mosher DeWolfe, minister to the congregation in Mississauga, ON from 1981 until his death in 1988 said: "There is a need in Canada, I have sensed it, since I came here, for a religion which offers authentic hope. Not hope in pie-in-the-sky idealistic alternatives, but hope in possibilities for human love, for human action, for human beings." (Mark Mosher deWolfe, UU Minister in "The Kirk's Alarm...in Canadian Context Revisited, 1998, Victoria, BC, UUMOC) .... I believe we will find reason for hope within the experience of men and women, their creativity, the possibility for new beginnings in the longings which tug at the human heart. (*The Kirk's Alarm* p. 34)

I believe this is part of what our communities are wanting - authentic hope. And I believe it will be found as we learn how to grow our generous spirits.

And let us celebrate some of the generosity that congregations have shown in the past. Many of you will remember other generous acts and perhaps you will be willing to bring them up when we have some time for dialogue. I recall the assistance that Toronto First gave to help create the Neighbourhood Congregation; I believe there was a similar support and generosity in beginning the second Montreal congregation in 1953 called Lakeshore; Ottawa assisted the eastside UU Fellowship of Ottawa. Vancouver has midwived at least two congregations - South Fraser in Surrey and Beacon in Coquitlam. Victoria, just recently was generous with the sharing of ministerial interns so that Nanaimo could be re-birthed; and in 1982 the Unitarian Church of Edmonton (UCE) agreed to help fund and found the congregation called Westwood. They did this quite creatively - by agreeing to lend the new congregation some of their members and their pledges as well for 5 years. As the present minister Brian Kiely puts it: 'Why did UCE do this (under the ministerial leadership of Rob Brownlie)? It was the right thing to do.'

And Interim Minister in Calgary, Fran Dearman, reminds us that the Calgary congregation was generous by sharing her time with the many smaller and non-clergy congregations on the prairies. Generosity was not in any sense, unheard of...but did we stretch ourselves to be generous? Did we try to reach for the highest possibility?

This brings me to an unexpected insight I had...an 'aha' moment. You know that phrase often used for something that is present but not acknowledged? You know the comment about there being "elephants" in the room? This is pertaining to large unspoken or unacknowledged difficulties a group has that are never

mentioned, but everyone knows they are there, it takes so much energy to avoid talking about them and they affect the 'tone' of a place something fierce.

But what I have just realised is that there can also be a sense of something present that is extremely positive; that is shimmering just out of reach; rarely seen or heard but palpably present just below the surface of consciousness, something longing to be noticed so that it can be breathed into being. What I sensed was a white spirit bear encompassing the unlimited possibilities and potential available to us.

But what I have just realised is that there can also be a sense of something present that also isn't mentioned: something that is extremely positive that is shimmering just out of reach; rarely seen or heard but palpably present just below the surface of consciousness, something yearning to be noticed so that it can be breathed into being. What I sensed was a white spirit bear wanting to be invited into the light of reality and acknowledged as being real. For me the white bear represents that love mentioned as essential for UUs in Poland, in Europe, in Canada - a love that is the foundation for generosity and a balance for our rational selves.

A close UU friend told me that during the Olympics held in Vancouver in February, part of the opening show was the lights going on and suddenly out of nowhere, there was a large glowing white spirit bear.....The bear had been there all the time but wasn't noticed until illumination happened. Then everything became clear.

What would happen in this denomination in Canada if we were generous? What could we do if we were transformed by the energy of our generous spirits? What could we do if we acknowledged that love, love in our history, love, joy, pride in self, in community, in a world woven together out of disparate yet complementary pieces was ever-present? That this abundant love fuels generosity and never runs out?

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## Closing Section

One of the main resources both Wayne and I read was *Being Generous* by T.R. Malloch The first two sentences of the book read: "Ample evidence suggests that being generous - giving selflessly to others - lies at the heart of what it means to be a thoughtful and moral human being. Through the ages, the world's cultures and great religions have in profound though different ways sought to answer the big question: how should we live?" How should we live? How shall we live? What a wonderful coincidence - the same title as this CUC ACM! Our title, with the 'shall' in it being just a little more positive or optimistic.

And it is what we talked about as we were researching our topic of generosity, and why we called our lecture, *Can We Live Other Than Generously?* Something at once both simple and complicated.

## Wayne Begins.....

These are several good reasons to express generosity in our lives. Jane and I researched them carefully, yet there is still a formidable barrier to generosity in each of us. The barrier is that many of us believe we don't have enough. And if we do not have enough, how can we give anything away.

We each operate under the mistaken notion our reasonable mind makes decisions for us. Yet brain research tells us that we make 60% of the most important decisions in our lives are made with our limbic brain, our emotional brain, which does not have access to reason.

Generosity is difficult because if we believe consciously or unconsciously that we do not have enough, it is almost impossible to be generous, no matter how many reasons we have for doing it. Not having enough, or the unconscious fear of not having enough, is a strong force in deterring us from ever giving anything away. Almost all of us struggle with how much and how often we want to be generous. We know how hard it is to gain money, recognition, respect, love, forgiveness, and gratitude in our lives. My goodness why would we

give any of it away? Any fourth grader would tell you that there is only so much in our lives and as we give any of it away, we will have less.

You can see our reluctance to give things away with something as simple as saying I'm sorry. Admitting a mistake is such a rare thing these days. I'm sorry I made you wait. I'm sorry I did not come through for you. We seem to loath saying I'm sorry, as if it will make us less to say it. Yet when we say I am sorry sincerely, to someone we have wronged, it seems to free up some energy. When we are generous with forgiveness, it seems to feed us. Giving this little bit of ourselves away does not make us less.

Forgiving someone IS hard. Why would we forgive fore –give.....giving before it was necessary, when we remember what they did to us..... they might have hurt us, given us a hard time or done something far worse. fore-give, even the word structure expresses the act as generous. Yet this kind of generosity helps us let go of an edge of anger and resentment. Without the anger and resentment, life is lighter.

Even the simple expression of thanks can be an offering of generosity. I don't know about you but I don't hear "Thank you" often either. We constantly hear the criticism in all of our congregations "no one ever thanked me so I stopped....." Giving thanks is just another simple opportunity for generosity, for giving thanks. But we find it hard to say it, as if by saying thank you, we are less for it.

I just traveled with 20 church folks to Boston as a pilgrimage to our UU mother church, we had a great time, but on the way the bus broke down. We were stranded for 12 hours. People were sleeping in MacDonald's. I don't like to eat often at MacDonald's let alone sleep there. At one point I went up to everyone individually and said thank you for being so patient. At our reflection the following night, several people said, I was so glad you thanked me last night. It made it easier to just be patient and wait. They said it made a difference. It didn't cost me anything.

Holding on, keeping what we have, thinking we can do everything ourselves, rugged individuality..... there is nothing wrong with doing things this way. Couldn't generosity be part of what we do? It has such a tremendous force because it arises from an inner quality of letting go. We can hold on all we want, but when we let go, tension is released, people relax. Being able to let go, to give up, to renounce, to give..... to act generously all spring from the same inner source of loosing up. When we let go of what we think we find out things we did not know. Letting go gives us profound freedom and the opportunity to express this freedom. I personally believe without generosity, social action can be aggressive.

The Buddha said that a true spiritual life is not possible without a generous heart. A spiritual life is not possible without a generous heart. He said this because when we hold tight, unconsciously or consciously our holding ...keeps tightening us up. When we are tight, when our boundaries are up, insight, the experience of unity, and a greater awareness is unlikely. We all know why, our fear of not having enough, is like a fence that stops learning, insight, flow, generosity and awareness. In an ironic paradox, the holding on to what we have, limits not only what we might receive but also what we can give to others.

The easiest way to practice generosity is to let go. When we do this with people with forgiveness, kindness, appreciation, thanks, Generosity can be a spiritual practice as good as any cross legged meditation. But it is an advanced spiritual practice because it is going to change us. It is going to cost us part of who we think we are.

As we leave here we might think about how we can act generously. As we think of how to act generously we might say to ourselves, "Well, that person has a lot more than I do materially, and so what difference does it make if I give them something?" You might be thinking..... "Why should I give if they have not been nice

to me.” You might think, I’m busy right now, I’ll give tomorrow. All of those thought patterns fall away as soon as we offer a sincere act of generosity. Don’t we want them to fall away?

We even know it, when we say after a death, I’m so sorry your loved one has died. Who gave us the authority to say I’m sorry? Yet when we say that and hear it, everyone softens.

When we are generous with our words or money in a genuine spirit of letting go, without attachment to a certain result, without expectation of what will come back to us, it’s like a tiny celebration. In that moment, we’re not relating to each other in terms of roles or differences, who is better or worse. In a moment of pure giving, we become one family. In that MacDonald’s .... once I thanked people sincerely, it helped us see each other as people struggling to handle a difficult situation. And we helped each other out more.

When Emerson said, “the only gift is a portion of thyself”, don’t you think he was right? It is all we really have to give. It is all anyone really wants. When Martin Luther King says, “Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness.” He is talking about you and me and how important generosity is to making our lives whole.

If we practice this quality again and again, it will grow very strong. Our movement will grow very strong.

As we leave, I hope you will wonder how you and I can practice generosity, how we can let go of fear... of not having enough. I wonder if you if you might just begin to let go among us. Say thank you more often. Forgive when you don’t have to. Appreciate someone’s work as a gift. Once we start it gets easier.

One day we will have to let go of everything we have, our money, insights, possessions, lovers, children, even our bodies, I think it is so much better for us to gracefully learn how to do this now.....by being generous, reasons or not. Our movement is calling.....