

First of all, let me assure you that today's sermon on generosity is NOT a sermon about money. So, if you stayed home this morning because you didn't want to hear me talk about money, again, you missed seeing everyone here for the wrong reason.

The Thursday Morning Women's Group was kind enough recently to give me some feedback about my sermons and some other things around the Fellowship. And, I do mean kind enough; because I appreciate hearing from you about what you feel is not working and what is. Not that I have any ability to make everyone happy all of the time. I'm sorry – I don't. But, I can assure you that I listen and appreciate your feedback and input.

Anyway, what the ladies told me is that they feel my best sermons include my humor and personal stories. Thank you. They also let me know that, for them, my worst ones are about money and historical events. Today's sermon isn't about money OR historical events, so I hope I've got a shot at being worthwhile for your listening pleasure today.

I want you to remember that I don't preach or practice ministry from a place of consummate knowing and fully-realized humanity. Ministers, at least Unitarian Universalist ones, are mortal men and women who like the questions and search for the answers. In talking today about generosity, I'm sharing with you from the perspective of a fellow traveler – one with strengths and weaknesses, sterling qualities and glaring shortcomings - one who has a vision for how she would like to live her life; one who tries to live that vision, and, yet, often falls short. The challenge, and the joy, is in the journey we make together, learning and growing as we go along.

As I said, today's sermon about generosity ISN'T about money; because I think how we deal with our money is only an outward manifestation of a deeper, inner philosophy or personal story about how we deal with life. And today I want to spend time with that inward reality, with that part of us that makes choices about how we see the world and how we respond to it. I want us to consider what it would mean for us if our inner philosophy was to live fully and completely in the world with generosity of spirit.

Let me tell you a story. Not a personal story, but a teaching story in the form of an ancient folktale.

One day a wise woman was traveling in the mountains when she found a precious stone in a stream. The next day, she met a fellow traveler who was hungry. The wise woman opened her bag to share her food. As her bag lay open between them, the hungry traveler saw the precious stone and asked the woman to give it to him.

She did so without hesitation. The traveler left, rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime. But, a few days later, he came back to return the stone to the wise woman.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, “I know how valuable the stone is, but I give it back in the hope that you can give me something even more precious. Give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me the stone.”

(from Deborah Evans Cox, [www.ignitespirite.com](http://www.ignitespirite.com))

How many of us would have been able to make the wise woman’s gift?

We live in a world where individuality and watching out for yourself are lauded as ideal states. Think of reality television – shows like “Survivor” promote the idea that you win by taking care of “number one,” even when it may hurt someone else. We like our comforts, even if it means that the rest of the world lives in poverty and want.

I have a great cartoon on my desk that causes me to laugh every time I catch sight of it. It shows a man talking with his therapist. The caption reads, “Of course I count my blessings! But then I think of people who have more and better blessings, and it pisses me off!” How hard is it to live in a state of inner abundance and generosity of spirit when everything around you screams of limits, comparisons, and falling short in the great race of life?

We live in a world where fear and threats of scarcity are used to manipulate our thinking. As we enter the holiday shopping season, we will be constantly bombarded with messages about how our life is lacking because we don’t have the latest appliance, electronic toy, or fashion-forward accessory. It is human to compare ourselves to others. It is marketing to convince us that we pale in that comparison and that our lack can be filled with consumer goods.

The wise woman of our earlier story had a gift to give more precious than gems, the lesson of living from a spirit of generosity. From the story, we don’t know how she came to know how to live in this way, how she was able to practice selflessness in light of the need of another.

The struggle with generosity presents itself early in our lives. When I was little, we went to visit my cousins and I took along one of my dolls to play with. Well, when my cousin saw my doll, she wanted it, and she wanted it BAD. We tussled and fussed about it to the point where my frustrated aunt went and bought my cousin a doll of her own. In my mind, it was a BETTER doll and I wanted it. Round two...

”Those primal feelings are still present in most of us. We have to acknowledge them when they arise. At the same time, it is when we care enough for someone to let go of what we want for ourselves that we grow as people.”

(<http://jackalope.wordpress.com>)

We all have a tendency to see the world from our own point of view. It’s natural to think that you see things as they really are, that those who agree with you are brilliant, and people who frustrate or perplex you are, at the very least, wrong-headed. It’s natural for us to be selfish, to want what we want and to want to have it.

Our human challenge is to remember that there are other people involved in our lives – other points of view, other lives influenced by their experience and their perspectives, other realities.

I think there are some places where each of us can start when we seek to develop our personal spirit of generosity and demonstrate it in our lives. Mostly, it's an inside job. We have to take a look at our own attitudes and approaches, considering how to bring our behavior and thinking into alignment with our inner goals. Like all spiritual practice, developing a generous spirit takes courage to start and discipline to stay on track, but the end is worth it.

First, give people the benefit of the doubt – when in doubt, choose to think the best of other's intentions. Assume that there was a reason for their behavior, and that, at least to them, that reason was an important one, even if you experienced it as problematic or hurtful.

Second, follow the Platinum Rule – treat others as they wish to be treated. Not necessarily the way you think they want to be treated or how you might treat them out of habit. Consider your motives and your actions from the other person's point of view, and adjust your approach to honor how they would most like to be engaged.

Third, focus on and allow yourself to enjoy the many wonderful things that other people contribute to your life and allow yourself to let go of small frustrations and irritations. Give up the power struggle to be right on the small stuff.

And, fourth – embrace others for who they are, rather than who you wish they would be. There's an old saying – “Never try to teach a pig to sing. It will only frustrate you and annoy the pig.” Step out of the power struggle of trying to give people around you a makeover. Let them be who they are.

(adapted from <http://zelophehadsdaughters.com>)

Living from a place of abundance, with a spirit of generosity, not only has personal implications. It influences our life in community, as well. I'd like Carl to share with you his poem, *Generous Redwoods*.

#### *Generous Redwoods*

I marvel at the height achieved by the coastal Redwoods.  
With my analysis of individualism, their singular trunk seems reason enough  
for their statured success.  
The redwoods and I have no need to question our separateness.

However, my evaluation is lacking. Each tree dedicates support to the others with their underground weaving of roots.  
It is in their interdependence that each contributes to the firm base  
of their forest community.

Nature knows cooperation. The earth knows bounty.  
The redwoods' ancient wisdom bestows upon us a path  
to understand holy generosity.

What could our community be, if we knew we, too, were blessed with generosity?

Unitarian Universalism is a faith without a solid center. To me, that means that we don't offer a specific dogma, creed, or ironclad guarantee that serves as the core of our faith. Rather than a lack, we experience this as a blessing of our faith, a freedom that nurtures our minds, hearts, and spirits.

What we offer the world is radical hospitality. In the words of Rev. John Buehrens, former UUA President, we are a people with a "radically inclusive witness in an exclusionary world, whose core identity lies in the quality of the relationships we have with one another."

Creating a radically hospitable faith community demands generosity of spirit. When we, as people of this faith, open the doors of our community and invite others in, what we are inviting them to join is a relationship. We are welcoming them in accompanying us on our journey of questions. We are inviting them to come and share themselves with us – their potential goodness, as well as faults and flaws. It's a call to radical hospitality because we don't know who will answer that call, and our UU values say that we welcome whoever it might be; not just those who we think "fit" our personal model of a "good" UU.

What does that look like, you ask? We are a community of open minds, loving hearts, and helping hands. To live together and work together and grow together, we must offer each other acceptance and understanding. It means we must be generous with one another, giving each other our time, attention, respect, patience, and support, as well as our forbearance and forgiveness. We allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to be excited for others' joys and compassionate in their sorrows.

Sometimes, it can be a pretty tall order, I know. But, miracles can be created by small, simple gestures repeated over and over. We become our vision of ourselves when we try and try again, even when we fail or fall short.

We are a faith community of practice, not perfection. We call ourselves a community of faith not because we share a common creed, but because we have faith in ourselves and each other, in our ability to offer radical hospitality and welcome to one another. It isn't about our programs, though those help us respond to each other's needs and facilitate our learning and understanding. It isn't about our building, though that gives us a comfortable place to be with one another. It isn't about money, though that helps make our visions a reality.

The strength of our congregation, of our faith, is in believing that we have the power, through generously sharing our journey with one another, to be a loving, embracing, and encouraging community. Let's keep the faith.

Amen.