The Wisdom of Generosity

By Guy Newland, UUFCM 3/22/2020

In the 1990s, in rural Thailand, there was an illiterate farmer, a young mother whose husband had abandoned her. She struggled to feed her family, and she managed only by having her older children tend the younger ones while she worked all day. But despite these challenges, she spent every evening in her home *giving free haircuts* to her neighbors' families.

This is a true story. And it is not an unusual story, or a Buddhist story or a Thai story; there may be dozens of such stories among just those of you listening to me today. If you asked that particular woman *why*, amid her own poverty, she was so generous to her neighbors, she would say that it was so that she could earn good karma. But that would be *her* way of expressing confidence that generosity is a wise investment in her family's welfare. And she would be right.

In giving of ourselves for the sake of others' well-being, we enhance our *own* well-being. In letting go of some of what we own, we actually (paradoxically) increase our own security and sense of comfort.

Conversely, by clinging to what we personally have, we lose out on joys that we might gain. Trying to hold onto what we possess diminishes its long-term value to us. If we seek always to protect ourselves against any risk, *our character is formed in ways that make us more anxious*—and actually more vulnerable to future misfortune. In short, *if we fail to care for others, we are not properly caring for ourselves*. This is called the paradox of generosity.

Such is the received wisdom of many traditional societies, indigenous cultures, and many world religions. But it is important *for us to know that it is also scientific fact*, supported by extensive surveying, in-depth interviews, and clinical observations. For example, it has been found that when incarcerated men work in group therapy, those who benefit the most are those who are most actively trying to assist others.

The Dalai Lama, leader of Tibetan Buddhists and a Nobel Peace Prize winner, has famously said that if we are going to be selfish, we might as well be smart about it. By which he means: recognize that *the best way to create flourishing in our own lives is to consider others*. He says:

> The core of spiritual practice is the practical development and deepening of our wish, our aspiration, to help others. When you live with a sense of dedication to the well-being of others, *then you yourself feel fulfilled*. This is the very purpose of our lives. What is the point of having merely a luxurious way of life, spending lots of money, while on the same planet others are facing terrible difficulties, even starving? Helping others, serving others—*this is the real meaning of life*. It is clear that we are social beings; among social animals, *the very basis of life is taking care of each other*, showing concern, helping one other.

This notion that we become who we are, that we become *fully human*, by caring for one another, is supported both by archeological research as well as research on nutrition among hunter-gatherers including the San peoples of the Kalahari. For example, in game-rich areas of northwest Tanzania, skilled Hadza hunters bring home game just 4% of the time; it is a brief bonanza, not a reliable nutrient supply. But children in proto-human and early human families—like all young primates—thrived after weaning *only when fed by others several times every day*. So it appears that children's needs were met by the collection of nuts, tubers, berries, insects, and small reptiles, but *also by meat portions shared within a network of hunters with whom their caregivers had previously established relationships*. We survived scarcity on the ancient savannah because we had strong skills not just as tool-builders, but also as relationship builders. Even if we are successful just 4% of the time, we have near and distant kin, and also many people who are not biological kin but with whom we have established kin-like bonds: chosen families and beloved friends. If we have a very large network of people for whom we care, then we have as much security as is possible. The Lakota people speak of their traditional sharing ethic—an ethic pervasive in traditional societies—as "storing meat in each other's stomachs."

That is a culture of wise generosity, and such cultures are crucial. Research on giving in the USA today shows that people are much more likely to be generous when they have parents who have been generous and w*hen*

their religious affiliations regularly expose them to calls to give. We should foster—within our families and communities—a culture supports generosity.

Such research also shows that there is no magical time in life when one suddenly becomes prepared to give, by having more money left to spend or more time on one's hands. Some assume that as students they are too busy to volunteer, or that as young parents they are too financially squeezed to donate. But in fact, there are different sorts of constraints on time and money at every stage in life.

In 1985 I lived and studied for a few months with a Buddhist teacher in India. He taught me a great deal that helped me personally, intellectually, and also practically in my professional work. I lived with him, paying neither tuition nor rent, simply because he saw that I was eager to learn. My friends assured me that it would most appropriate for me to make my teacher some sort of offering. I truly felt very grateful to him, but I felt disoriented and anxious in the absence of even the vaguest "price tag." I felt painfully self-conscious, worried about giving too little or too much. Finally I told a Buddhist friend whom I trusted of this dilemma. He assured me that, really, REALLY, there is no "expected amount," no implicit price tag. Everyone's capacity is different. So, he said, *give just as much as you can possibly give without regret*. Strangely, this created in me a huge sense of relief. Within a short time, I was able to offer from my heart much more than I had imagined, and to do so joyfully without self-consciousness or pride or regret.

Later, when I first told this story, there happened to a rabbi there listening. In a friendly way, he mocked the idea that the marker to give people is "give as much as you can without regret." He reported that if he used that model, his synagogue would soon have to close down. Instead, he said, he had always to urge upon the faithful that painful sacrifice, "giving until it hurts," is exactly what God demands, just as he demanded of Abraham even the sacrifice of his son.

Later, reflecting on my sense that I had somehow been weirdly bested in this exchange of viewpoints, I realized that there are actually dozens of famous heroic stories of very extreme and painful self-sacrifice in the Buddhist tradition. Spiritual practitioners become able to surrender, as needed, all of their possessions, their comfortable family life, even their bodies and their lives. But these are *not* stories about great sacrifices demanded by gods or by buddhas; they are stories of people whose hearts have grown exceptional in their capacity to give. And when telling the more extreme stories, my teachers insist that they are not to be taken as models for our current behavior. Instead, they say, such stories inspire us always to expand what we are capable of sharing—and *never to assume that we have reached the limit of what we can do to help others*. While our generous hearts are still growing, it is needless and counterproductive to berate ourselves over sacrifices for which we are not yet ready.

We have to look within and see how large our hearts can grow—and then work to make them bigger. I offer these thoughts as today we reflect upon our appreciation for and support of this self-sustaining fellowship. I am a Buddhist and yet this fellowship is my sangha, which means: my primary spiritual community. It is here, with you, that I have come to deeply understand what it means to be a *liberal* Buddhist, a *UU* Buddhist, a *free-thinking* Buddhist. I know that giving in support of UUFCM helps others and this gives me an immediate sense of delight. And it helps me to grow accustomed to, and inclined to, greater generosity.

All we have done and all we are doing at UUFCM comes from *what we ourselves find it in our hearts to give*. I say: Let us *not* give in a way that leaves us resentful of the burdens of stewardship. And yet, let's never assume too quickly that we can give only this much or that much. Let us see look deeply and see whether we cannot, in good spirit, give much more than we would have imagined.

The Main Sources

Brown, Sid. *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun: Even Against the Wind*.
Dalai Lama. *From Here To Enlightenment*.
Hrdy, Sarah. *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding*.
Jackson, William, ed. *The Wisdom of Generosity*.
Smith, Christian and Hillary Davidson. *The Paradox of Generosity*.

Also draws heavily on two prior sermons I gave at UUFCM
"Natural Selection and the Hope of Human Love" (2009) and
"Giving" (2011)
Those can be accessed here: https://www.uufcm.org/sermons-dr-guy-newland-archive.html.

This sermon directly followed the reading below, which is adapted from Jon Mooallem's piece linked here: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-disaster-response.html

In 1964, an earthquake at 9.2 on the Richter scale shook Anchorage, Alaska for 4 ½ minutes. For those who were there, it was an inflection point in history—life was ripped into a before and an after . . .

Maybe you've lived through a natural disaster like this. Maybe you've just lived through the last couple of weeks, or the last few years. Daily life is unpredictable—a persistent anxiety that can surge at any time into shock. Another constitutional check or political norm is shamelessly shattered. Another wildfire leaps the highway. The virus spreads . . . The instability of our lives was always there; at some level we have always known thay—without warning—a terrible magic can scramble our lives.

In the 1960s, the US government had locked on to natural disasters as realistic proxies for nuclear Armageddon: When a hurricane or earthquake struck, a team of professors, funded by the government, would arrive to watch just how society crumbles. But 28 hours after the Anchorage quake, they found the opposite: The community was meeting the situation with collaboration and compassion.

Ordinary citizens began crawling through the ruins downtown, searching for survivors, and using ropes to heave people out of the debris fields. Bystanders rushed to dig people out; working together, they towed away a huge section of fallen concrete, saving a woman who'd been beneath it in her station wagon. One of those citizens said: "Everybody was trying to do a little bit of everything for everybody."

Hundreds of volunteers spontaneously appeared at the fire station, eager to pitch in. No one expected this . . . The conventional wisdom was that in a disaster, hordes of civilians would flee the hardest hit areas; but instead people converged in mutual support. All over town, neighbors fed and housed the displaced. What shook lose in Anchorage was a dormant capacity — an deep impulse — for people to come together and care for one another, a capacity that felt largely inaccessible in ordinary life. A nurse named Dolly Fleming clung to a little boy who happened to be on a staircase with her during the quake. "It's there in front of you, so you do it," she would later explain. And no one had a better theory to offer.

Watching the menacing spread of a virus is altogether different from reacting to the obvious and instantaneous shock of a quake. For most of us, the medical dangers of this disaster are still invisible and diffuse—except on the news. But: any resilient and successful response now has to be rooted in the same profound feelings of interconnectedness, some pervasive and bracing obligation to one another and our collective safety.

Washing your hands, staying home when you're sick, limiting travel, keeping yourself healthy, not touching your face — little of what we're being told to do feels heroic or world-changing. But for most of us, that is the job that's in front of us right now. This is that role that these circumstances call on each of us, at a minimum, to play.

We can't afford to feel that canceling a concert, or suspending a basketball season, is a withering retreat; we must see all of this as part of an empowered, collaborative undertaking. We are all coming together to keep our distance; we are not alone in our isolation.

Many of our ugliest assumptions about human behavior have been refuted by observations of actual humans in crisis. In ordinary times, we suffer alone; any acute experience of our own particular vulnerability leaves us desolate, or even resentful of others. But this disaster affects everyone; it compels us to look at the very issue of human life itself. When danger and loss are a public phenomenon, everyone sharing the experience is brought together. Distinctions between people fall away, leaving only human beings responding to one another as human beings. We are thrown off balance, but we are thrown together. We are made to recognize what we usually repress**: In the end, it's our vulnerability that connects us.**

The ground beneath us is always moving, shrugging us off — not with a violent tremor, but in the steadiest, most predictable way imaginable: by pushing away from us, traveling forward in time. Every once in a while, the earth rears up and shakes, reminds us of this instability. But it's *always* spinning, never steady. Each day is part of

that rolling, miraculous, disaster — and every day we have another chances to see how it is that we are all in this together.