



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Giving in Gratitude”

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

Compassion is the keen awareness of the interdependence of all things. Thomas Merton

It is not more bigness that should be our goal. We must attempt, rather, to bring people back to...the warmth of community, to the worth of individual effort and responsibility... and of individuals working together as a community, to better their lives and their children's future. Robert F. Kennedy

If you concentrate on finding whatever is good in every situation, you will discover that your life will suddenly be filled with gratitude, a feeling that nurtures the soul. Rabbi Harold Kushner

Story

The following sermon includes references to a story told earlier, “Sedge Hats for Jizō.” It can be found online <http://www.learningtogive.org/resources/sedge-hats-jizo> (Mayer, Fanny Hagin. *Ancient Tales in Modern Japan*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, ©1985. p. 87.)

Sermon

The amazingly talented singer Justin Timberlake released a song a few years back with this repeating chorus line: “What goes around, goes around, goes around, comes all the way back around.”

You probably recognize his take on a familiar saying. The expression tells us that what we give, we get. It serves to warn us that we should choose carefully what we do, for indeed, it will come back to us.

The ancient story you helped tell this morning about the statues of the bodhisattva, or saint-like Jizō, makes the same point. If we give generously, we will be blessed in unexpected ways. Our actions will come back around, they will circle directly back.

We often talk about the ripple effects of our deeds – expanding circles spreading well beyond from where they occurred. But with ever-expanding ripples, we may never know how many people feel the effects of our good or bad deeds.

Both represent truths about life. Both speak to how our actions are felt by others. And both affects can occur from a single action. The old woman gave away her wedding kimono in exchange for fans and by that act gave the fan-maker a happier start to married life. The exchange of fans for a bell increased another's joy. And in turn, the bell made a perfect exchange for a person with hats. Each person's relational circle felt the ripples resulting from each exchange. And each person directly received something in return for what he or she gave.

At first, the gift of hats to the statues, including the one off the woman's own head, seemed to bear no even trade in return. But the snow-covered Jizō statues later showed their appreciation by blessing the couple with the rice cake they had hoped for at the start. With that gift, the woman's actions came full circle. What she began came back to her.

You may think of this story as a quaint myth, maybe even a fairy tale. After all, stone statues usually don't come to life or give out rice cakes.

But in Japan, blessings by the semi-godlike Jizō are an ancient tradition that flourished from the 12th through 17th centuries. If you travel to Japan today you may see a row of Jizō statues in parks and hillsides. Instead of straw hats they usually sport red knit stocking caps and scarves. The Jizō figures bless the living and care for the dead. Japanese Buddhists recognize Jizō statues as religious figures infused with spiritual power.

When encountering a Jizō statue, a Buddhist believer will respond to its spiritual functionality by making an offering to it. This ritual act often takes the form of a hat. The offering is given in hope that person will receive karmic merit. When they give generously, they hope Jizō will generously bless them in either this life or the next.

In Buddhism, generosity and giving are central teachings. According to the recorded discourses of the Buddha, he taught:

If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would the stain of selfishness overcome their minds. Even if it were their last bite, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared, if there were someone to receive their gift. (*Itivuttaka 26*)

The practice of generosity is the foundation of Buddhism because Buddhism offers a path towards the elimination of suffering. And that path begins and ends with generosity, especially the gift of loving-kindness.

As you may know, our all-congregational theme this month is generosity and abundance. According to the Insight Meditation Center's website, generosity means "giving more than is required, customary, or expected relative to one's resources and circumstances."

The Center adds that "the Buddha stressed that the spiritual efficacy of a gift is dependent not on the amount given but rather on the attitude with which it is given. A small donation that

stretches a person of little means is considered of greater spiritual consequence than a large but personally insignificant donation from a wealthy person.” In other words, we all must let go of our stinginess and be willing to give without knowing how, when, or if the circle will come back to us.

Like putting hats on Jizō statues, Buddha believed giving to be a powerful source of merit with benefits both in this life and in future lives. Our personal beliefs about karma and reincarnation may differ from Buddhists, but we know the truth of that idiomatic expression Justin Timberlake sang about. We know we give and in the giving we receive something back, material or immaterial. We also know that unless we give, we may never receive. Flipping the expression around, one who only takes and never gives back, soon finds oneself alone and with nothing.

But lest we think generosity is simply a matter of *quid pro quo*, we should remember giving is a way of being, and it transforms lives—our own and others. As in Buddhism, nothing is more essential to Unitarian Universalism than our willingness to break free of narrow selfish interests and see that we are connected as one. Our Seventh Unitarian Universalist Principle affirms that we are part of an interdependent web of existence. We need one another. And what we do affects us all.

Today is Stewardship Sunday. After each service we plan to celebrate your generosity with a special reception. We are grateful for all the gifts you’ve generously made throughout the year, and not just for the current pledge drive. We depend upon your generosity to make this organization function.

But we’re not here to keep this building open or this organization functioning unchanged. We’re here to make the world a better place for us to live in. We’re here to help each other understand what it means to be human and alive, knowing we will die. We’re here to worship, to ascribe worth to our shared values and differing beliefs. We’re here to show the world how different people of differing circumstances can come together as one. We’re here to appreciate and celebrate life. Together, these form our mission. Your financial gifts support the many ways we meet that mission.

May you generously give to this Fellowship.

May we gratefully offer thanks for your generosity.

May your pledge of time, talent, and treasure be blessed by the many Jizōs of the world. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Share a time you received an unexpected gift. Did it change you in some way? If so, how?
2. When have you felt most connected to others and what contributed to feeling that way?
3. What would it mean to you to be more committed to this Fellowship? What would be different?
4. How does it feel to contribute financial resources to UUFA? What positive and/or negative emotions does it raise, and why? How might this reflect your general feelings about money?