



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Has the Fount Run Dry?”

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

*With gentleness, overcome anger. With generosity, overcome meanness.
With truth, overcome delusion. Gautama Buddha*

*That's what I consider true generosity: You give your all and yet
you always feel as if it costs you nothing. Simone de Beauvoir*

*We all are so deeply interconnected; we have no option but to love all.
Be kind and do good for anyone and that will be reflected. The ripples
of the kind heart are the highest blessings of the Universe. Amit Ray*

Sermon:

I imagine you've heard a version of “Stone Soup” before. Though sometimes the story features a single traveler, the tale usually centers on three soldiers returning home from war somewhere in Europe. Given that yesterday was Veteran's Day, that version would have been fitting. However, the oldest known version of the story featured two Jesuit priests knocking on doors. In 1720, Madame de Noyer, a French writer of some note, first published the tale. It's not clear to historians whether the tale was original to her or not because no prior reference to the story has been found. Most likely the story circulated in oral tradition long before it first appeared in print.

Since I'm drawing from Buddhist wisdom today, I chose to use the Chinese-flavored version by artist-author Jon J. Muth featuring three Zen Buddhist monks, perhaps his nod to the early French version. However, in Buddhist countries where wandering monks are common, I imagine this story might have played out differently.

In Buddhist cultures, if a monk begs for alms, whether food or coin, it is considered to be an act of compassion to offer some help. Beyond being a simple act of kindness, it follows one of Buddhism's Eightfold Path practices to end suffering—right action. The one who gives reduces suffering and in return, the giver receives good karma. Both persons are blessed and made happier by this single right action.

In the Buddha's "Discourse on Happiness," the *Mangala Sutta*, the enlightened one responds to the question, "What is the greatest blessing?" Buddha suggests a variety of actions for which the doer is blessed or made happy. These include not associating with fools; performing good deeds; being disciplined in learning and speech; giving selflessly; looking after relatives and friends; restraining from evil and intoxicants; following Buddhist teachings; and more. He ends by saying, "Those who have fulfilled all these are everywhere invincible, and they [will] find well-being everywhere; this, to them, is the greatest blessing." [buddhasadvice.wordpress.com/mangala-sutta/] This text is sometimes called the Buddhist Beatitudes, a reference to the Beatitudes in the Christian 'Gospel According to Matthew' in which Jesus recites a list of what it means to live a blessed life.

In "Stone Soup", blessings and happiness came to the community because they shared something each of them possessed—a potato, a carrot, a mushroom. In return, they gained more than they gave up, one clear message of this ancient tale. That working together creates community is another. But I believe this story holds even greater wisdom.

When each villager claimed they had nothing to share and closed their doors on the monks, they acted out of a sense of scarcity. They believed they didn't have enough for themselves, so they wouldn't share with strangers. They held tight to what they had out of fear of losing even that. Their minds, hearts, and hands—their spirits—were not generous.

I think we often operate from these same feelings of scarcity and distrust of others outside our community or tribe. I believe this contributes to this country's polarization. Politicians feel constrained not

to give ground on policies or issues out of a fear they'll lose power or position. Republicans and Democrats each fear the extreme wing of their parties. As a result of their unwillingness to give something up or compromise we have a government that can't govern. By holding tight to their high ideals, they make even minor change or improvement impossible. Nothing gets accomplished because both sides shut their doors to the other. Whenever there is distrust, suspicion, a quickness to judge others, anger, indignation or contempt for people who are not like us, whatever defines 'us', indicates an absent spirit of generosity.

I think we need a new understanding of compromise to help us out. It doesn't mean I give in to you 100%. It doesn't mean we only work with where we find common ground. Instead, compromise means each party sacrifices something they have for some greater gain. It means meeting somewhere in the middle. It means each party or person contributes something to the communal pot. It means neither side gets everything they want. But it also means everyone knows they're getting something they otherwise would not have if they kept their doors closed.

Turning away seems a common response if we believe we don't have enough resources to meet the demand of the moment, whatever that demand may be—emotional, spiritual, or material. A scarcity mindset makes us live in fear and that's not good for anyone's spirit.

The villagers' curiosity over a strange idea, soup from a stone, brought them out from behind closed doors. And each realized they could let go of what they had to make something

larger, something all could share in. Scarcity turned into plenty, and all were blessed. By pooling their resources they met the challenge before them. Their slumbering spirit of generosity was awakened and all benefited. Perhaps our political leaders will awaken soon.

I know generous spirits are alive and well here. You prove that each Sunday when you bless this Fellowship with your presence. If you said each week, 'I don't have enough time. I'll stay home,' then you would never know what difference your contribution of presence might make. You might have been the one who smiled at someone feeling lonely, making their day. You might have been the one who picked up some trash on the floor, making our sanctuary more welcoming. Or you might have been the one to receive a kind word or hug that inspires you to share the gift of compassion with others.

I know you don't close your doors when asked to contribute some of your resources or talent. Many of you donate food for Fourth Sunday lunches and for coffee hour on Sunday. (By the way, there's always room for more contributions, just let Jane K know.)

We all share in the blessing of your gifts: your musical talents, teaching and organizing skills, technological abilities, creative ideas, and numerous other ways you simply lend a hand. All gifts are valued equally. By giving just a little, you bless, you are blessed, and you create lots of good karma!

Blessings shared serve to connect us to each other, to the universe, and/or to our understanding of the divine. Blessings help us affirm our First and Seventh UU Principles—that we are each worthy and we are interdependent.

Not everyone may be comfortable with the word blessing. In Buddhist terms it simply means an antidote to suffering, a way to foster happiness. Acts of kindness, compassion, even compromise, can bring happiness to giver and receiver. Blessing, gift, generosity, or by any other name, I think we know life is better when we share. Giving makes us feel good!

For me, being generous with something I hold dear, like money or treasured objects, means I have to engage in the deeply spiritual work of letting go. Even sharing with others who I really am inside and what matters most to me, is spiritual work. It doesn't come easy. Because no one has to, and because it isn't always easy, when we share our lives here, I consider us blessed.

When we hold back and stop giving to others, whether friend or stranger, we stop that flow of generosity. Those in the village who didn't contribute to the communal soup, likely went to bed hungry because all they had was a meager one potato or handful of mushrooms. They starved, while others had their fill. Let's not follow their behavior, let's be sure our hearts, minds, and hands are open, our spirits generous.

We need one another. Together we will accomplish great things. All it takes is a readiness to give, even to give more of something than is strictly necessary or expected. All it takes is for us to act with kindness and compassion toward others. All it takes is to be free of meanness or smallness in mind and character. We have what it takes, but I believe there's likely room for growing our generosity even more.

Rachel Naomi Remen, in her book *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging*, echoes that thought. She writes:

The capacity to bless life is in everybody...A blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind of relationship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth, and strengthen what is whole in one another. ...When people are blessed, they discover that their lives matter, that there is something in them worthy of blessing. And when you bless others, you may discover the same thing is true about yourself.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Share a time you gave up something (material or emotional) you really felt attached to. What made that generosity possible? And how did you feel about it afterwards?
2. What contributes to people growing more distrustful, quick to judge, angry, and intolerant towards others? Do you feel these qualities are growing in yourself, and if so, why?
3. How can you be a blessing? How can UUFA help cultivate a greater spirit of generosity in ourselves, the Fellowship, or in the larger community?