

November Generosity: more than canned peas
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UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley
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The theme of November in our calendar is Generosity. Generosity is a popular topic in November as the days grow colder and the nights longer. It is a time when we are asked to pay special attention to giving – usually to those in some sort of need.

This is the month when donations come pouring in at food banks and clothes donation sites. Churches and other organizations organize mitten trees and creative ways to encourage people to donate warm clothes to those who may not have cold weather gear.

We sometimes talk about generosity as a spiritual practice, and link it closely with gratitude. When we have enough to sustain our needs, we are grateful, and work to make sure others are sustained and nourished as well.

Generosity does not always mean consumer goods or groceries, though.

I spoke on Friday morning to Rabbi Nina Mandel of Congregation Beth El in Sunbury. Word had reached us that the congregation there was going to move the time and day of the week of their shabbat service, and there was concern that the membership might be worried about security after the national uptick in antisemitic terrorism.

Rabbi Mandel explained that, while her people are aware of, and appropriately anxious, about the national trend, that was not the largest factor behind the change in their worship schedule. Where the synagogue is located, it is surrounded by a number of neighborhoods, some feeling safer than others for worshippers to feel comfortable walking after services on a Friday evening. Traversing that area in the sunshine of a Saturday morning is another thing altogether, and so that's what they are doing.

At the encouragement of the board, I had reached out to Rabbi Mandel to offer our space for them to worship on Friday evenings, and she was

grateful for the offer, but explained that their current location, situated across the street from the Sunbury police station, was as safe as any congregation could hope for, and it really seemed that the move to Saturday would meet the needs of her people.

None of us would likely describe our congregation as wealthy. We are a church, by legal, 501(c)(3) definition, a non-profit entity. We have enough to pay the bills, but not what you'd call a bunch of surplus. Often, we pass a budget that exceeds what we expect to receive in pledge monies, and scramble to find other sources of income to fill the gap. Such is the way of life for congregations and other non-profit groups, large and small.

We don't have a lot of material things, but we were absolutely willing to share what we do have, which is a nicely lit, comfortable space in which our neighbors were welcome to worship. The move was utterly without hesitation. Of course, we will make that offer! Let us know what we can do to support Congregation Beth El!

That, friends, is generosity of the spirit, and it is not as common and automatic as we might think.

When Rabbi Nina stopped by my house Friday morning (with her faithful canine companion Ruth Bader Ginsbark) she shared with me that many of her colleagues around the country are feeling abandoned by their interfaith communities. Other clergy and organizations have sort of evaporated since the beginning of renewed hostilities between Israel and Palestine.

Too many in our world are unable to distinguish between the behavior of the government of Israel and the will of the Jewish people, much like some are unable to distinguish between the behavior of groups like Hamas and the will of the world's Muslim people. To a person, every Jewish person I know does not wish harm to Muslims. And every Muslim person I know, to a person, does not wish harm to Jews.

Muslims and Jews are religious cousins, and, along with Christianity, all three trace the roots of their faith back to the lineage of Abraham in the Holy Bible. This is often a question I get when I talk to UU youth groups. They want to understand how the three claim a single patriarch, and,

perhaps most honestly, what the hell happened to make them all mad at each other.

Brief scriptural side trip here:

Abram was married to Sarai, who was barren.

Desperate to give her husband the son he wanted, Sarai offered her handmaid, an Egyptian slave named Hagar, for Abram to use to bear him a son. Hagar did not have a choice in the matter, which is enormously problematic, but a story for another day.

After she was pregnant, Hagar began to resent Sarai, who mistreated Hagar to the point that she ran away.

The angel of the lord – usually Gabriel in most stories – confronted Hagar in the desert and sent her back to Sarai to submit, promising her that her offspring would be so many that they would be beyond all counting. He also told her that her son, Ishmael, would be a great leader among men:

“You are now pregnant
and you will give birth to a son.
You shall name him Ishmael,^[a]
for the LORD has heard of your misery.

¹² He will be a wild donkey of a man;
his hand will be against everyone
and everyone’s hand against him,
and he will live in hostility
toward^[a] all his brothers.”¹

In the next chapter, the Lord changes Abram and Sarai’s names to Abraham and Sarah, and establishes the covenant of circumcision. Abraham and all of the men and boys in his household were circumcised.

The lord also tells Abraham that Sarah will bear him a son, with whom the Lord will covenant to father 12 rulers, and create a great nation from him.

¹ Genesis 15:11-12 NIV

Sarah, reasonable woman she was at 90 years of age, laughed at Abraham when he told her that the Lord promised her a son, but lo and behold, she came up pregnant and bore a son they named Isaac.

After Isaac began to grow, Sarah sent Hagar and Ishmael away, and they almost starved to death in the desert before Gabriel rescued them and assured Hagar that Ishmael would be a great leader in his day and they lived thenceforth in a desert community, where Ishmael became a great archer.

It is believed in the Muslim tradition that the Prophet Mohammed was descended from the line of Ishmael, thus linking Islam with Judaism and Christianity for all time.

So, getting back to my conversation with Rabbi Mandel... tensions are high all over between groups that support Israel and groups that support Palestine. There are some who support the violence of Hamas in the same way there were some who supported the violence of the Irish Republican Army during the Troubles of the last century, or the violence of white supremacists in the US in the last four centuries.

There are some on both sides of this divide that believe that only the complete eradication of the other side will permit them to have security and peace. Those folks, are wrong, of course.

Security and peace depend not upon the eradication of evil, for that cannot be done. Security and peace depend upon the commitment of all parties involved to stop killing and to work for a shared solution. The nation of Israel was carved out of what had previously been the nation of Palestine by Western nations after World War II. The Palestinians had no say in the matter, and they reacted as I imagine US leaders might react if England decided to give Florida to Spain.

We need to not look away from the conflict in the middle east, AND we must also understand that it is neither a simple nor new war.

Aaaaannnndddddd that's not what I came here to talk about today.

I came here to talk about generosity, and how it is a practice that requires more of us than a simple donation of canned goods growing dusty in our pantry.

Generosity is a spiritual practice, one that requires us to give, but not merely material goods.

When we thought the synagogue needed a place to be, we offered. That is generosity.

If we heard of a local school district seeking to ban books, we would respond with protests and organizing to stop it. That is generosity.

Generosity does not require us to have all our bills paid and larders comfortably stocked for the winter months. Generosity happens when we share of what we have, even if we don't necessarily have as much as might make us secure.

Generosity, I think, does not involve merely giving of our own surplus. Generosity happens when we give of something we hold dear – our time, our funds, our energy, and yes, perhaps our material things.

Generosity is not always the sexy stuff involved with responding to a crisis – like security at the local synagogue. Generosity also involves helping out with the mundane tasks that support communities we care about.

Generosity means volunteering for the inglorious tasks, like washing dishes, or setting up chairs, or volunteering to provide childcare during worship.

While I was here this week in the building, I noticed that there were no names listed on the coffee hour sign up board. None to make coffee, none to clean up after coffee.

I have heard from our religious educator that there are two families with small children who would be attending on the regular if they could only depend on volunteers to staff the nursery during worship services.

Those tasks are not the sorts of things that we get to crow about like big public shows of support for the synagogue or for school librarians or the

like. They're the tasks of everyday life that still need doing, and that need people to do them. Like washing laundry at home. Like doing the dishes, or vacuuming the carpet. They are the things that make our lives comfortable.

We – meaning we, the UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley – have an embarrassment of riches in this community. We have so many smart people, so much knowledge and talent. We are able to leverage some of that knowledge and talent into grant-writing projects to get us some free money to help achieve things we want to make happen.

We will talk more about it after the service, but there is a lot of cool stuff happening here, that has sprung forth largely from volunteer hours and staff and volunteer talent to make it happen.

We've got money from TWO separate grants to replace our faded and limited sign out front. We've got grant money to improve the safety of our building. We have dedicated volunteers working to keep our worship and religious education programming safe and accessible on Sundays.

We've got an opportunity for matching funds with one of those grants that relies on us to raise some cash, which will be matched by the UUA grant funding program.

That's a really cool opportunity.

And.

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And sometimes generosity is exciting things like a new LED sign in front of our building, some times it is matching funds for grants, and sometimes it is volunteering to take one Sunday a month to volunteer in the childcare space during worship.

November is the month when supermarkets give out turkeys or hams, when people make donations to food pantries, when food pantries do their best to make sure everyone has enough food for a thanksgiving meal.

Those are all noble, and necessary examples of generosity.

But generosity that is a transformational spiritual practice is the stuff I want to talk about. Many of us like to volunteer with our super big brains and advanced skills in various areas. That's fun. Not all of us want to volunteer to wash dishes after coffee hour. Not all of us want to do the stuff that anyone could do.

Well, that's where the deepest kind of spiritual transformation can happen, friends.

Generosity, at its core, means prioritizing the needs of others over our own comforts or desires. Generosity of the heart requires us to be willing to embrace and support those who need it. Generosity of spirit asks us to set aside our own stuff – our own desires, our own egos, our own comfort – to help support and comfort others.

Many years ago, I had an elder in my life who would ask regularly “What have you done for your country today?”

She was not asking specifically what sort of patriotic thing I might have done, but what good works had I done that day?

And if I had nothing to report, then I was encouraged – not entirely gently – to examine why I had not done anything that day for someone other than my own self.

How many of us can get through the day and think, “what have I done today to benefit others (that does not also benefit me)?”

Tipping a service worker does not count. That happens because we want good service. It is an investment in our own comfort.

What have we done that benefits someone else?

When I was a child, I used to try to do some sort of “good deed” for someone else, *but in secret*. Like, the good deed didn't count if someone found out about it.

I was absolutely terrible at keeping secrets, though, and desperate for the approval of others, so I always told on myself. I liked being affirmed by the adults in my life, and was willing to abdicate any imagined benefit from

secret good deeds for the much more tangible affirmation of others for something I had done.

We are in the season of gratitude and generosity. Let us consider how we can be generous with things that go beyond the food pantry: with our time, with our energy, with our talents. I have heard church leaders encourage people to give until it hurts, but I want you to give until it feels good. Give of yourself – your heart, your resources – the time, talent, treasure stuff we spend so much time on. Give to the point where you feel a spiritual connection to the thing you're supporting. Give until you begin to feel an *investment* in the thing you are supporting. Spend enough time and attention on a project that you deeply care about its continued health and success.

THAT is the kind of giving that makes a difference. Yes, the loose change in the collection plate adds up and does good stuff, but when it comes to transformative spiritual practice, that requires us to be willing to invest of ourselves.

I've given you a lot to think about this morning.

If I could choose what I'd like you to take away from this hour together, I would love for you to hear in your head, at some point each day, the question "what have you done for your country today?"

Each day.

Because generosity is not a one-time thing. It is a spiritual practice.

What have you done for others today? What will you do to make the world a little bit of a better place?

May generosity or heart, mind, spirit, and all our resources become our regular practice and our prayer.

Amen.