

Journey of Generosity
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My parents had a few stories from my childhood that they used to tell me from time to time. You know, the kind of story that you cringe at, and you think, "I could have gone my whole *life* without ever knowing about that embarrassing thing I did when I was too young to remember it." Did that ever happen to you?

Yeah, my parents used to think it was really cute to tell me about a time we went to visit my mother's cousin Bess and her family on their farm in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. We got in late at night, after Bess's kids had already fallen asleep. I had just turned two, and was thrilled to get a big double bed *all to myself* in one of the big old farmhouses' many bedrooms.

The next morning, Bess's little boy, who was just a little older than I was, learned he had a cousin visiting. With all the enthusiasm of the very young, he opened the door to my bedroom and sang out, "Good morning!" And I woke up, *according to the story*, and looked at him standing in the doorway, and said, "My doorknob!"

Of course, I don't believe it.

OK, maybe I do.

Now, my parents really weren't trying to be mean. I realize that now. They never, ever, even hinted that they thought it was awful of me to not want to share "my" doorknob. They obviously told the story because they thought it was super cute and to illustrate a typical two-year-old behavior.

I mentioned in my Perspective column this week that I believe the urge to be generous is an inborn characteristic in our human species, and I do. I mentioned a story of one of my own children, when he was about two, holding the door open for me with all his two-year-old might, when he saw me struggling with an arm full of groceries.

We also have a self-centered, selfish side to us, as well, the "my doorknob" side.

The question is, which side will win?

As we get older, some people grow more and more selfish, territorial, and stingy. They are the Scrooges, gathering as much money, power, and false security as they can. They are so afraid that if someone else has something, it means less for them. They live in Scare City, that scarcity mentality that sees the specter of disaster around every corner.

Some people, on the other hand, live open handed, open hearted lives. They give what they can, when they can. They offer their umbrella to a stranger. They are ready to give their last loaf of bread to someone who is hungry. If someone admires something they own, they give it away, like the old woman with her gemstone. They move from "My doorknob!" to "Good morning, cousin!"

Most people, I think, are like me, sometimes still staking out my doorknob, but trying to keep the door open for more generosity in my life. I am definitely not “generous to a fault,” as the saying goes. I am always aware of the need to keep a roof over my head, and save for retirement, and put food on the table. But, I do like the feeling I get when I can help someone out, add a little happiness to someone’s life. And every time I do, I find that I am not just still OK, but I actually end up more blessed and more happy because I have cared and shared with another.

Studies show that when we are generous, it us happy. People’s brainwaves change when they are doing something kind for someone else; their pleasure centers light up. It just plain feels good to give.

I think that is one of the reasons people are drawn to Unitarian Universalism. That Universalist part of our heritage, the one that staked their identity to Universal salvation, is the most generous theology on earth, I think. Universalists weren’t stingy about heaven; it wasn’t an exclusive club, it didn’t have to be earned repenting on your knees for a thousand miles. No, you could let your warm animal body love what it loves, be kind to yourself and everyone else, and everybody gets to heaven. Everyone, everyone, everyone deserves respect and a fair shake in life. All of the whole wide world, every person and creature and growing thing and body of water and ecosystem, the entire web of life and existence, is valuable and worth protecting. We Universalists are *generous* with our love and regard.

This is the burning torch, the high ideal of Unitarian Universalism, and in every instance when we are able to live out this radical generosity, it makes us happy.

Of course, when we see all the ways in which the world and the way it’s set up tends to let people down, disrespect them and this earth we live on, cause hunger and want and suffering, this is hard, because we have such a shining vision of what could be. Of what should be. But let’s not let all that’s wrong with the world make us live in Scare City, where danger and sorrow are always ready to pounce.

Instead, let’s pack our bags mentally and move on out of that Scary Place.

Because all the sorrows and sufferings of life offer us the opportunity for generosity. All our problem-solving skills can be put to use trying to find creative ways to be kind, to help the situation, whether it is through giving a person a loaf of bread, or a gemstone to ease their financial worries, or a safe place to stay, or more protection under the law, or more hope for the future. We can find ways to rescue animals, to protect the earth’s riches, to bring computers to a remote village in Mozambique, to pick up trash beside the road. There are so many opportunities to take some little corner of the world and contribute to making it better. And not only does this help others, giving of our time and money and caring enough to do something pays us back by giving us a happier outlook on life. Pretty cool, huh? I love win/win situations. I think the Universe has set this up just right. Be generous, be happy.

It might just be an idea that can change the world, one generous act at a time.

May it be so.