

## WISDOM CIRCLE FOR NOVEMBER 2012

### What Does It Mean To Be a Generous Person?

Giving to others, whether that is material resources, time, attention, help or concern, feels good. Just think about someone in your life who is generous. Notice how thinking about that person makes you feel. It feels good to help.

On the other hand, generosity is a human capacity that can be quite weak until it is developed. We can feel attached to our money, time, energy or things and worry that there might not be enough of these for ourselves. As they often do in our lives, fear, greed and anger get in our way. In order for the benefits of generosity to be realized they must be practiced.

The Buddha described 3 stages of generosity. The first he called Tentative Giving. Here we give hesitantly, fearing that we might need what we give away at a later time and will regret our generosity. The second stage is called Brotherly or Sisterly Giving. At this stage we give willingly, taking the needs of the other person into account and taking satisfaction in meeting his or her needs. The final stage of giving is called Royal Giving. At this point our generosity is so highly developed that we do so effortlessly and spontaneously. We recognize that other's well-being is as important as our own and that what we give comes back to us as greater happiness. It is important to note that all of these motivations for giving are positive in terms of our spiritual development. It is beneficial to give from whatever stage of motivation we find ourselves. It loosens the grip of the ego.

In his book *Essential Spirituality*, Psychiatrist and Philosopher Roger Walsh describes the attitude we can take if we wish to turn service and generosity into a spiritual practice. This is what the Hindus call *karma yoga*, and what Walsh calls awakening service. There are three elements to awakening service. The first is to act for a higher purpose. A traditional Christian way of expressing this is "do everything for the glory of God." A Mahayana Buddhist will take what is called a Bodhisattva Vow, "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to liberate them all." The main thing is that we dedicate the work to someone or something beyond ourselves. This could be as specific as one's family or for humanity as a whole, or even all beings or the planet.

The second aspect of awakening service is to release any attachment to the results of our actions. Walsh writes, "Usually, when we contribute something we have definite ideas about the outcome we want and the recognition we deserve. This is a recipe for disaster. If things work out differently from what we expect, or if we are not lavished with praise, our attachments go unfulfilled and we suffer accordingly." Jesus said, "Whenever you give alms, do

not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do. When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret.”

The third aspect of awakening service is to learn from all that you do. Every act of service or generosity and the results of that action become an opportunity to learn. Whether success or failure or a combination of the two, or whatever emotional reaction we might have, we get feedback for the future. Our mistakes are just as valuable as our successes. This removes the burden of guilt or self-blame.

Walsh writes, “These three elements—dedicating efforts to a higher goal, relinquishing attachments to specific outcomes, and learning from experience—are the keys to effective awakening service. By combining them we create a spiritual technique of enormous power. Through awakening service we simultaneously purify motivation, weaken cravings, serve as best we can, and learn how to serve and awaken more effectively in the future.”

Some UUs report that meditation or other seemingly passive spiritual practices are difficult for them. The advantage of awakening service is that we can turn everything we do into spiritual practice. We need not change *what* we are doing so much as *how* and *why* we are doing it.

## SPIRITUAL EXERCISE: GIVING ANONYMOUSLY

The spiritual exercise we are urging you to explore this month is giving anonymously. This giving can be money or other material possessions, but it need not be. You can give a kind word or compliment to a stranger or do a helpful gesture for someone you don't know.

So, between now and the time your group meets, find at least one occasion to give anonymously. Then observe your reactions and emotions to this act where you will not receive recognition from people you know. Many people will find that this produces a “helpers high.” Use your imagination and creativity to decide how you will do this. Make it fun. What is the perfect anonymous gift you could give some person or cause at this time? One person I know of went to a Starbucks and gave the cashier \$100, and told her to pay for the coffee of all the people who ordered after him until the money ran out. He reported great delight at sitting there nursing his latte and enjoying the reaction of people finding out that their drink was paid for. People whose faces were strained and stressed, left smiling and laughing.

Religious traditions have long extolled the virtues of anonymous giving.

## QUESTIONS TO WRESTLE WITH

These are for you to think about all month. We will discuss them together in our groups, but don't wait until your groups to think about them. As always, the gift of Wisdom Circles is that it asks us to think about things that rarely get attention in the rest of our lives. So pull these questions out early. Let them break into --and break open-- your ordinary thoughts

1. What is the most significant gift anyone has ever given you? Perhaps one that changed your life. Why was that?
2. Think about a gift or service you have given that you didn't feel right about afterwards. Why was that? Compare that with a gift or service that gave you a helper's high. What are the factors that make these experiences different?

## WISE WORDS

Where there is hate, let me bring Love—

Where there is offense, let me bring Pardon—

Where there is discord, let me bring Union—

Where there is error, let me bring Truth—

Where there is doubt, let me bring Faith—

Where there is darkness, let me bring Light—

Where there is sadness, let me bring Joy—

Because it is in giving oneself that one receives;

It is in forgetting oneself that one is found...

Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi

If I am not for myself, who will be?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

If not now, then when?

The Jewish sage Hillel

The only ones of among you who will be truly happy are those who have sought and found a way to serve.    Albert Schweitzer

I awoke and saw that life was service.

I acted, and behold, service was joy.

Rabindranath Tagore, Hindu poet

Don't look for spectacular actions. What is important is the gift of yourselves. It is the degree of love you insert in your deeds.

Mother Theresa

Procrastination is a sin,

It causes endless sorrow.

I really must give it up,

In fact I'll start tomorrow

Anonymous

**Any ordinary favor we do for someone or any compassionate reaching out may seem to be going nowhere at first, but may be planting a seed we can't see right now. Sometimes we need to just do the best we can and then trust in an unfolding we can't design or ordain.**

*Sharon Salzberg*

We would all like a reputation for generosity and we'd all like to buy it cheap  
[Mignon McLaughlin](#)

## BOOKS

Practice 7 in Roger Walsh's book Essential Spirituality. I am doing a sermon on each of the seven practices.

Giving: How Each of Us Can Change The World by Bill Clinton

