

“Celebrating Our Gifts”
February 9th, 2020
Rev. Laurel Gray

A few weeks ago, I was driving home from work and decided that stopping for Chinese takeout sounded far better than cooking dinner. I walked Henry around the parking lot as we waited for my dumplings and noodles, and then headed home with my dinner. One of my favorite things about getting Chinese food, perhaps unsurprisingly, is the fortune cookie that comes at the end - it seems they're either non-sensical to the point of hilarity, or they're surprisingly apt. Often they're more the former than the latter. But on this fateful day, my fortune cookie read “If you continually give, you will continually have.” And then the second fortune cookie said, quite succinctly “Hallelujah!”

If you continually give, you will continually have. This, I believe is true both as a collective and for each of us individually.

Congregational life is a matter of collective giving, collective abundance creating more than any one person can make on their own. Last week we heard so many beautiful testaments to how this community has created more joy and belonging and meaning in your lives. And that gift, that gift of getting to be part of a community like this, it's something we can only create together. No single person can make a congregation - the word is, by definition, about congregating, about coming together with what you have to create something more than the sum of its parts.

And that is no small task, as we know from all the calls for volunteers to shovel snow and host coffee hour and teach RE and serve on the board - the list goes on. Part of the beauty of congregational life is that there are

infinite ways to contribute - all skills and pledges are needed and all are welcome to give of themselves.

Some of you are good at organizing volunteers, others at accounting and making spreadsheets, still others of you offer your gifts of teaching, of cake baking or sandwich making, your skill with technology and sound systems and event planning. Thank goodness we're all different, that we all have particular gifts and skills and talents, that our light shines differently, because in showing up with our whole selves and offering those gifts, we build a community together that none of us could create or sustain alone.

This is a place where you are needed and wanted and valued, and all that you offer, all of your nuance and effort, creates an extraordinary abundance that profoundly touches the lives of this entire community. As our reading so beautifully described, it is in our giving of ourselves - our kindness, our heart, our hospitality, our material comfort - it is in our giving that something new begins to form. "May this table be a space of beauty where together we create a series of miracles, and where all that we share is sacred."

What a gift. If we continually give, we will continually have. Hallelujah!

It is also true that giving makes us happier, it is an act that creates abundance, not only for those around us, but also for ourselves. There's a blog I love written by Eric Barker called *Barking Up the Wrong Tree*, in which he summarizes all kinds of psychological and sociological studies about various topics. Here are some of the findings he covers in one post called "Happy Thoughts" about things that are proven to make us happier.

One is to do what you are good at as often as you can.

See it not only matters to the collective that we offer our particular gifts and talents to this community, it contributes to our own happiness. Perhaps you already know this, have felt the particular joy of finding that your talents have a home here. That some peculiar skill of yours has been put to use.

Perhaps more surprisingly, Barker writes that, “giving makes us happier than receiving. In fact, it can create a feedback loop of happiness in life. Volunteering makes us happier and can therefore be the most selfless way to be selfish. Helping others reach their goals brings joy. Doing nice things for others today can literally make you happier for the rest of the week.” End quote. I wonder if you have felt this as a part of this community. The sweetness of having helped someone else, of giving, particularly in a place where we so clearly see the impact of our generosity. For this congregation is entirely funded and sustained with your participation and effort. What a joy to be part of a community where we know that what we give matters.

In fact, Barker cites a study that found that “mortality was significantly reduced for individuals who reported providing instrumental support to friends, relatives, and neighbors.” But fascinatingly, “receiving support had no effect on mortality.” Generosity is, perhaps, the fountain of youth.

If you continually give, you will continually have.

Another study looked at whether there was a “positive feedback loop between spending money on others,” which they call prosocial spending, and happiness. They found that “prosocial spending increases happiness which in turn encourages prosocial spending.” Which is to say that financial giving, like we do when we pledge or pass the offering plate, can contribute to our happiness. But there is something critical here, because in my experience obligatory giving really isn’t a joyful

experience. That's why I think it's so powerful to remember that as Unitarian Universalists we don't make stipulations. You are not required to give of your time or talents or resources. And yet, as so many of you shared last week, it is through your contributions to this congregation that your connections deepened. There is richness to be found in giving.

One of the final ways that Barker says you can increase your happiness is by practicing gratitude. As I preached in November, we know that gratitude is also good for resilience, for recalling our own sense of agency and increasing our stress tolerance. So let's take a minute and appreciate the strong foundation we have built as a congregation:

We own our own building. Hallelujah!

We only have a small loan and have both a financial surplus and Reserves. Hallelujah!

We have a spiritual home that embraces us as we are. Hallelujah!

We have a solid core of talented volunteers. Hallelujah!

I want to pause here to fully celebrate all that you give to this community.

Ritual of Gratitude

We did this last week to recognize how long all of you have been members and friends of this congregation, and today I want to celebrate all the ways you contribute to this home of collective abundance. As each group stands, let's all say a collective thank you and applaud each other for all the ways you give.

If you have ever served on our board of trustees or as one of the officers of the church. Please stand to be recognized.

Thank you!

If you have ever served on any committee here, please stand to be recognized.

Thank you!

Anyone who has ever taught RE or OWL, please stand to be recognized. And we know that many of our teachers are downstairs right now, so please thank them when you see them.

Thank you!

Anyone who has ever offered your hospitality by hosting an event or coffee hour, or acting as a greeter, please stand to be recognized.

Thank you!

Now anyone who has participated in any kind of building and technology work, from wall paper removal, to cleaning chairs, to fixing the sound system and pruning the garden, please stand to be recognized.

Thank you!

Anyone who has participated in a fundraiser, pledge campaign, service project, or social justice event, please stand to be recognized.

Thank you!

And lastly, if you've ever shown up for someone in a time of need, offered a hug or kind word, lit a candle on Sunday morning, made soup or sent a card, please stand to be recognized.

Thank you!

For all that you offer, for all of your time and talent and financial generosity with this congregation, we are thankful. Your presence here is a blessing.

If you continually give, you will continually have. Hallelujah!

As a congregation you've focused in the last few years on creating a solid financial foundation, in making sure that what you're creating and sustaining is steady. You've done that well, which is why the pledge campaign theme for this year is building on our foundation. The goals, as Bruce explained, are to expand our ministry, share our principles, and plan for the future.

As we celebrate all of the gifts we bring to this congregation, and kick off this year's annual pledge campaign,

I want to end where we began, with our opening words from Kristin Collins.

We give to remind ourselves how many gifts we have to offer.

We give to remember that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

We give because we believe in music and sacred space.

We give with the faith that, together, we have enough.

Let's keep building on our foundation, giving what we can as an act of celebration, as an investment in our own happiness, as an expression of the knowledge that we are all profoundly connected.

If you continually give, you will continually have. Hallelujah and amen.