

“The Joy of Sharing Our Gifts”

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Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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One of the holiday traditions my family has come to adopt on Christmas Day is the Yankee Swap, also known as the White Elephant.

I imagine many of you are familiar with this game of exchanging gifts. Everyone brings a wrapped item to offer to the collection of presents. Each participant draws a number which indicates their order in the sequence of gift grabbing. To make things exciting, most versions of the game allow you to “steal” a gift from someone else that has already been opened. The game continues until the last person has had their chance to choose or steal their gift.

Most of the time that my family plays this holiday game, people use it as an opportunity to pass along items they already have that they may not find a use for any more. A sparingly used cheese grater. A set of candle sticks. A dusty tea set. And, everyone once in a while, there is a gift that is so enticing that it is stolen round after round. In recent memory our family, this has included an oil painting of a peaceful water scene as well as a beautiful ceramic batter bowl.

In this ritual of gift exchange, I have had the joy of receiving gifts that have brought me great pleasure. (I did end up with the ceramic batter bowl that year.) But, more joyful yet, has been when the gift I have offered has been received with delight and happiness.

More important than the actual gift given or received is the spirit of generosity and joy that the act of both giving and receiving can bring forth.

And, while the giving of material gifts has come to mark this holiday season, it is the giving of the intangible gifts that we hold that I believe can even more profoundly bring about joy in ourselves and in others.

A few years ago, some of you participated in a workshop led by the staff of the New England Region UUA called Claiming Our Spiritual Leadership. In the workshop, the facilitators describe a gift as “a genius we carry, an inner power.”

A claim of the workshop was that recognizing and centering in the intangible gifts we hold is a way of living more fully into the spiritual leadership that is called for in these times. Indeed, recognizing that we each have something to offer and then sharing the gift of who we are with others can help address the anxiety and sense of loss that is so prevalent in these times.

Often, it’s easy for us to recognize gifts in children or other people. Think for a moment right now of a young person in your own life, someone whose presence brings a smile to your face. And, as you think of that young person, name for yourself a gift that that young person possesses - maybe it’s the gift of creativity and imagination, maybe it’s the gift of noticing those who are left out, maybe it’s the gift of asking good questions, perhaps it’s the gift of taking delight in the simple and ordinary.

Now, I invite you to call to mind an adult person in your life whose presence brings a smile to your face. It could be a close friend. Maybe it’s someone you don’t know that well but admire from afar. Perhaps it’s a spouse or family member. And, as you did with that young person, name for yourself a gift this adult person possesses.

And, now, I want you to think about yourself. Turning your attention inward. What is a gift that you possess?

This may have been a harder task for you. For some of us, it is just not comfortable to focus on ourselves or to recognize our own value and worth, or to think of ourselves as having genius or inner power.

So often, we conflate “gifts” with skills or talents. We think our gifts are those things that we are good at doing. Or, we think that “gifts” are somehow extraordinary. This language is sometimes used in schools when we talk of “gifted” students. In some places, entire school curriculum are tailored to these students deemed to be set apart from the rest.

A “gift” thought of in this way is something to prove we have; it is an isolated part of who you are that is deemed to make you exceptional in some way.

I don’t think this really captures the full potential of what it means to have a “gift.”

“Gift” speaks to the wholeness of who we are - our motivations and interests, passions and dreams, our life experiences. The particular combination of all these aspects of oneself makes you unique and uniquely gifted. It is out of this wholeness that our own genius or inner power can emerge.

There are many other examples of the gifts that we possess and may, at times, be hesitant to name or truly embrace, but that can also bring more life into the world.

Some of you have the gift of...

- Bringing people together into a team
- Sifting through facts to make decisions
- Making decisions using your “gut”
- Being reserved and observant
- Being gregarious
- Being focused on relationships
- Having lived through many significant, historic events
- Connecting especially with animals and the natural world
- Singing, rhyming, playing beats
- Drawing, painting, sculpting
- Paying attention to details
- Taking in the big picture
- Being enthusiastic
- Being thoughtful
- Being aware of the magical
- Knowing what others need
- Healing through food or touch or song

Your unique make-up of how you show up in the world is a gift. Living into our gifts, we become more fully who we are. We are more alive and tuned in to our inner sense

of calling and more connected to the world and the universe which needs the blessing of our gifts and feeds our joy.

In order to truly tap into that inner power or gift, we have to have somewhere and some way to deliver those gifts.

It is in community that we become more aware of our gifts and that we can feel the joy of our own unique calling and the ways that others are called to share their gifts.

Community can become a place of freely and joyfully exchanging those intangible, spiritual gifts of who we are.

I also believe that the joy that comes from sharing our gifts comes when we share them unconditionally.

In the book, Economy of Grace, the theologian Kathryn Tanner describes unconditional giving as “giving that is not obligated by the prior performance of the recipients and that is not conditional upon a return being made by them.” She further states, “The more unconditional that giving was—the giver had no prior relationship with you, the giver could have avoided having anything to do with you, you hadn’t done anything for them, and so on—the more wondrous the sense of gratitude and joy.”

It is in community that this kind of unconditional giving can be fostered. Community can become its own “economy of grace” as we freely and unconditionally share of our gifts. In this economy of grace, we relate to one another and meet one another’s needs through the gifts that we share without expectation of that gift being reciprocated in any particular way.

It was a joy to me to witness and experience this kind of gift giving at the Holiday Fair Concert last weekend. Musicians from within our church community awed us with the beauty and creativity of their music. John Poeton, the concert emcee, provided warm, welcoming, and affirming hospitality to audience members and musicians alike. I was especially taken by the creative brilliance of a re-written holiday tune by UCM member, Sandal Cate, and sung by Paula Gills. If you missed that, I encourage you to check it out. The video will be on our YouTube page in the next few days.

There are so many ways that I witness you employing and expressing your gifts in ways that bring more delight, humor, and joy into the world. You share your gifts to express caring, to call out injustice, to bring people together in common action. You share your gifts of listening deeply, of planning strategically, of remembering history. You share your gifts of helping others feel valued, of welcoming the stranger, of not judging other people or their circumstances.

There is no shortage of need in our world right now for each of your gifts.

Within the smallest sphere of your life, I assure you there is someone who will benefit from you sharing your genius and inner power. And, in the greater world, there is pain that can be healed, there is injustice that can be made right, there is suffering that can be alleviated when your gifts are given away unconditionally and with joy.

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I invite you to reflect for a moment on your own gifts and on the question, “What is a gift I wish to share unconditionally and with joy?”

In a few moments, we will give you the opportunity to share with others in conversation about this question. *(The congregation went into breakout rooms with some participants staying in the Main Room.)*

May the recognition of your gifts be a blessing to you, and may your sharing of your gifts be a blessing to the world.

So may it be.