“Gifts Freely Given”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/.

Reading

“Choose to Bless the World” by Rebecca Parker[1]

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be
—
can be used to bless or curse the world.
The mind's power,
the strength of the hands,
the reaches of the heart,
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining,
seeing, waiting
Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
bind up wounds,
welcome the stranger,
praise what is sacred,
do the work of justice
or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door,
hoard bread,
abandon the poor,
obscure what is holy,
comply with injustice
or withhold love.
You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?
Choose to bless the world…

None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility, waiting.

Sermon

A few years ago I learned that my blood type - O positive - is in high demand both because it is the most common blood type and because it can be received by any one with a positive type. Blood donations of all kinds are in short supply, and the O positive type is highly desirable as a great utility player when it comes to blood donations.

[1] The whole reading can be found in Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now, Robert Hardies Ed. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2006), 163-165.

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Earlier in life, I donated blood very occasionally. Then, a friend was diagnosed with cancer and got very sick. On one occasion, from her hospital room at Mass General in Boston, she shared an update on social media and asked friends to please donate blood whenever they can.

I felt pretty helpless in the face of her terminal illness, but donating blood was something I knew I could do.

There are a lot of things I find inconvenient and unpleasant about donating blood - how much time it can take, how it can sometimes leave me feeling woozy, how many phone calls I get reminding me that there is an urgent need.

But, this small act of generosity is also something I know I can do that can make a difference. I knew I couldn't save my friend, but I can give something to the world that can be a blessing to someone else.

The Italian psychotherapist and writer Piero Ferrucci states: "The true benefit of generosity, for the giver, is not a material advantage but an inner revolution. We become more fluid, more willing to risk. We place less store on possession and more on people. And the boundaries between us and others become less drastic, so that we feel part of a whole in which it is possible to share resources, emotions, and ourselves."[2]

Whether it is donating blood, spending a few extra minutes listening to someone share their story, or some other small act of generosity, I feel that inner revolution that Ferrucci talks about. I feel more part of a whole in which I can share my resources, feelings, and my whole self.

Several years go, members of this congregation joined 30 or so other Unitarian Universalists from around the state for a workshop on "Claiming Your Spiritual Leadership." It was hosted right here at our church and we filled the Vestry with our UU energy and enthusiasm.

One of the main principles of spiritual leadership that we touched on together was centering in gifts. The workshop leaders describe a gift as "a genius we carry, an inner power." Too often, our gifts go unrecognized, yet it is from our gifts that we can "choose to bless the world," as Rebecca Parker writes.

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[2] Piero Ferrucci, The Power of Kindness: The Unexpected Benefits of Leading a Compassionate Life, Trans. Vivien Reid Ferrucci (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, New York, 2006) 114.

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Centering in our own gifts and freely and generously offering our gifts to others can be a way to remember the truth that we are, indeed, a part of a whole.

Right now, it might be hard to see the beauty and goodness in the whole of humanity. There seems to be an awful lot wrong with how we treat one another and fail to be our best selves. There is violence, dishonesty, rancor, abuse of power, and incivility at every turn, and witnessing this can make us quite cynical.

Yet, we know this is not the whole truth of who we are. It is just a piece of the truth. Recognizing and centering in gifts is a way of living more fully into the spiritual leadership that is called for in these times. Living from a place of generosity can help address anxiety and despair, cynicism and hopelessness.

And so, one of our tasks is to look for the gifts and to look for the ways others are choosing to bless the world and to choose to do the same.

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 or 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.

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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.

Yet, “gift” really 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 that our own genius or inner power can emerge.

Here again are the words of Piero Ferrucci: “All that is dear to us, all that arouses emotion in us, is important and beautiful, not only for us, however talented or untalented we may be, but for other people, too. No life is banal. We are all interesting, and, even if we do not realize it, we all have a story to tell. To know we have stories, emotions, ideas, dreams, which are not interesting only to us, but can nourish and inspire many others as well—this is generosity.”[3]

Take, for example, Heather Harper. Ms. Harper recently shared her story on the radio series, My Unsung Hero.[4]

Ms. Harper shared the story of facing one of the hardest losses of her life. She was pregnant with her and her husband’s fifth child. The pregnancy was going well for month until the baby’s heart stopped working. Ms. Harper had to be induced and deliver the baby. She and her family buried their son two days later.

The weeks that followed were incredibly difficult. Eventually, Ms. Harper forced herself out of the house and one of the first places she went was her church.

She says that many people were afraid to speak to her or even look at her because they didn’t know what to say. One day she was so overcome with grief that she left the chapel and sat on a sofa in the foyer to be alone for a few minutes.

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[3] Ferrucci, 119.

[4] Laura Kwerel and Brigid McCarthy, In a time of profound grief, a woman at church acknowledged this mother's pain, September 21, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/09/21/1200318705/pregnancy-loss-grief-church.

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Shortly after, an older woman she didn't know very well sat on the other end of the sofa. They sat quietly for a few moments and then the woman said in a loud and clear voice, "My baby died 35 years ago and not a day goes by that I haven't thought of her. Don't ever let anyone tell you that you are grieving for too long."

Ms. Harper says that those words and this fellow churchgoer's willingness to share about the most painful and intimate thing in the world were what she needed in that moment of her life.

Your vulnerability is a gift.
Your honesty is a gift.
Your recognition of the pain of another is a gift.
Your compassion is a gift.

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 and healing into the world.

Some of you have the gift of…

- Knowing what other's need
- Healing through food or touch or song
- Bringing people together into a team
- Sifting through facts to make decisions
- Making decisions using your "gut"
- Being reserved and observant
- Being gregarious
- 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

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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.

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

Let me dare say that this congregation is such a place. One of the gifts of a religious community is that it is only constituted as the sum of its parts. All of your gifts - all of who you are - gathered together makes this community whole.

I already see you employing and expressing your gifts in ways that bring more delight, humor, and joy into the world. With generous hearts, You share your gifts to express caring, to bring people together in common action, to take turns and allow one another to rest. 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.

It is in community that we become more aware of our gifts and that we can share generously our own unique calling and way of being.

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. There is someone for whom your generosity could make all the difference. Maybe they're sitting at the end of your pew.

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 freely given.

I invite you now to turn to someone near you and say to them "Neighbor, you are a gift." "Don't be afraid to let your light shine." "Choose to bless the world."

So may it be.

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