

A Handful of Rice

Or

Learning to Ride a Bicycle

Sunday, March 17, 2013

Pledge Drive Touchdown Sunday
UU Society of Sacramento, CA

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The bike I choose for my daughter's 6th birthday is purple and glittery with butterflies on it. I sort of wish that mine looked like that, but in any case. She has outgrown her older bike, it was time for a new one, and so I pick out this purple glittery bike and present it to her on her birthday. She is very excited to receive it...that is, until we go outside the next day to go for a ride. That's when she discovers it is bigger...much bigger than her old one was. She is afraid. "I don't want to ride it. I don't want to ride!" We reassure her that riding it is the same as riding her old one, and that this one is better suited to her size. After all, she has grown and is now a big girl, and this is a big person's bike. "I don't want to. I don't think I can!" But we reassure her, and remind her she already knows how to ride. She is very leery, but with wide eyes, she gets on and wobbles into a starting position.

At first, we guide her, walking beside her with a hand on her back to help her feel our presence and to know she is not alone. And so she rides. Nervously. But she rides. Then, life gets a bit busy, and we don't go out on the bike again for quite a while.

Many weeks pass. A beautiful day dawns. I suggest a ride. She is as nervous as if she had never ridden the big bike before. I remind her of how big she has gotten, and assure her that it will be even easier this time. She moans. She groans. But all the while she is getting on her jacket and making her way out to

the bike. She does really want to try again. She does really want to ride.

And it's like magic. She **has** grown, remarkably. She **does** remember how to ride it, and much better than before. She rides along, now bravely turning and even going down hills. She is beaming brightly, sooo proud, feeling her own growth and maturity.

There is no way to learn how to ride a bike other than to do it. Reading the owner's manual will not teach you how to ride. You just have to climb on and try. You will likely fall a few times when you are new at it, and it is tempting to give up at that stage. But if you persevere, you will be rewarded by actually learning to ride the bike.

There is a joke told about Unitarian Universalists – perhaps you have heard it. Outside the pearly gates, there are two signs. One says “heaven” and points that way, and the other says “discussion about heaven” and points the other way. The joke is that the Unitarian Universalists will choose the discussion of heaven rather than the real thing, every time.

This joke really does point to something true about us! We like to think about ideas. We like to learn. We like to discuss (and it's true, we even like to debate). But the point of the religious life is not to learn about being kind; it is to BE kind. The point of the religious life is not to intellectually consider theories of love; it is to BE loving.

The point of the religious life is not to read about being generous; it is to BE generous. But, like riding a bicycle, we cannot read a manual and “get it” – in other words, we don't learn to be generous by learning about it in theory. *We learn how to be generous by doing it, in practice.* The only way to “get it” is to do it, to be generous.

How is it that we, who have so much, can act as if we have so little when it comes to giving? We live

in a culture, of course, which tells us that we can never have enough. That we can never KEEP enough. But the goal of religious life, as all of the sages have told us through history, is to experience an unclenching of the fist, an unlocking of the heart, an opening of the hand, to share. There are many ways to practice the art of generosity.

Be generous with your attention. If you are busy making dinner and your child is trying to talk with you, pause from the cooking and turn to your child as if they are the most important person in the world and listen for 3 minutes. Or when you are standing in the airport, put down your phone, and look around you. Make contact with the real live human beings all around you. Give the gift of your presence.

Be generous with your spirit. When the temptation arises to be angry, or stay angry, with a co-worker, a friend, or a family member, experiment with stepping out of the emotional stream. Cultivate a sense of compassion for them, and for yourself. You are both sacred beings, sometimes wounded, but always precious. Gift the gift of softening your own heart.

Give the gift of your money. I invite you to do something uncharacteristically generous this week. If you go out for lunch after church on your way home, leave an extra-generous tip. The point of this experiment is to do much more than you would ordinarily. See how it feels. Buy a co-worker's lunch. Pay for the person behind you in line at the coffee shop and leave without them knowing you did so. Again, give with a level of uncharacteristic abundance. See how it feels.

Find ways to practice the art of generosity. These are practices which will nourish your spirit. The poet Maya Angelou says, "I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver."

In Northeastern India, we have a huge number of Unitarian churches. In this very humble setting, they have found a way to support the church financially that is quite inspiring. Before cooking

each meal, a handful of rice is put aside. At the end of each month, a representative from the Unitarian Women's group visits each Unitarian home, and collects the gathered rice, which is then sold.

(75% of the money from the rice collected goes to support the local church, and 25% to support the national Unitarian body, the equivalent of the Unitarian Universalist Association.) If each household had been asked for money, they would have struggled. Yet we all have something to give. Carley Lyngdoh, the (former) General Secretary of the Unitarian Union NE India says: "Even the poorest families feel proud that they [can] offer something out of their daily food to the works of God."

The villagers in North Eastern India surely don't have much disposable income. They have far, far less than we do, of that I am sure.

And yet, even in the most humble of circumstances, they take a scoop of rice out first, before feeding their own family, to support the faith movement that has enriched their lives. "Even the poorest families feel proud that they [can] offer something out of their daily food to the works of God." Can you even imagine giving that generously? I am still working with this one. Recently, I had cause to stop and think about it, and I realized that I have never felt my heart so opened that I have given from the core of my being, and not just from the cream on top, and I am the poorer for it. I think we have a lot to learn from the level of generosity practiced by our Unitarian friends in NE India.

(An aside: Did you know that statistically speaking, Unitarian Universalists are the second-highest earning religious group? That is statistically, now. And do you know where we fall compared to other religious folks in terms of our giving to support our own faith? Want to guess? DEAD LAST. We can do better. We **must** do better.)

When I served as parish minister in San Mateo, California, we had a partner church in the Philippines, and I was fortunate enough to travel there to visit.

You can't imagine a more rural setting. In the village, there is no running water, no electricity, no passable road. There are no diapers for babies. I also visited the Unitarian Universalist congregation that meets in the slum area of Manila. The setting there is anything but rural, but the poverty is just as extreme. When I met with both of these groups to worship, we sang Spirit of Life, listened to prayers and a sermon, and when the time came for the offering to be taken, every person present put money in the plate. Every person! I wondered what they were doing without in order to support the church. And I also realized how much it meant to them to be able to give. They gave joyfully, and proudly. Giving is part of the way they express their faithfulness, open-heartedly enriching the spiritual community that nourishes them.

Theologically, the Unitarian Universalist church of the Philippines brings freedom in an overwhelmingly catholic culture. Our Universalist strain which historically emphasized the love of God is mostly what I heard preached on in the Philippines.

I understand that living in a harsh reality with the constant presence of violence and poverty must make the presence of a loving god extraordinarily welcome. The local church also provides learning for their children, character education in the form of teachings based on our principles, and food. The church in our village runs a meal program, which ensures that the people in the village – not just the church families but all families – eat a nutritious hot meal once a week. Their bodies and spirits are nourished, and they give of their abundance, truly generously. Our Unitarian Universalist friends in the Philippines are great teachers for us.

My colleague Rev. David Usher told me about when he was sent by the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists to visit with the UU group in Kenya, Africa.

(When a group somewhere in the world discovers Unitarian Universalism, and goes far enough into our tradition to want to actually affiliate and call itself Unitarian Universalist, the ICUU sends someone to meet with them, to help them with

leadership development, get to know them, and generally help them to learn more about what it means to be Unitarian Universalist.)

These folks discovered our faith within the last four or five years. They were nearly all unemployed or just scraping by. They are on fire about Unitarian Universalism! They are so excited that they are free to believe what they believe, and not be told what they have to believe. They can be fully who they are. It is life-giving, life-affirming, live-saving for them. They are on fire! They want everyone in Africa to know about this faith they have found, and they are doing their best to spread it, as evangelism comes naturally to them and (again) is culturally expected. In Kenya, religion is central to the culture.

It is core to their identity as Unitarian Universalists to do for others. They run schools, orphanages, cottage industries of all kinds, micro-lending groups. Again, let me repeat, they are all nearly unemployed or just barely scraping by. And these justice and outreach efforts are not “in addition” to whatever else they do, it is absolutely core to their identity.

Rev. Usher confessed to me that he felt embarrassed when they had asked him how many members he had in his local church, how many social justice projects they ran, how much money they gave to the local church – not because his congregation wasn't doing anything, but they were much much larger than the Kenya group, and their tangible service to the world didn't hold a candle to what the Kenyan Unitarians were accomplishing. He came home from that trip realizing that while ICUU had sent him to help the Kenyans learn more about what it meant to be Unitarian Universalist, they had actually been the ones who had been teaching him. (I love stories like that, when our expectations are turned on their heads.) The Unitarian Universalists in Kenya are great teachers for us.

David Bumbaugh is Professor of Ministry at Meadville Lombard Theological School and Minister Emeritus, the Unitarian Church in Summit,

NJ, and he writes about the invitation that Martin Luther King, Junior had sent out to clergy, asking them to come to Selma, Alabama to help with voting rights.

“I did not for a moment believe he meant me,” Bumbaugh writes.

It never occurred to me that an invitation to the clergy to come to Selma meant me, too. I did not go.

Then came the terrible news that James Reeb, one of our Unitarian Universalist ministers who did respond to that call, had been clubbed to death in the streets of Selma. Another call went out—this time from the Unitarian Universalist Association, urging as many ministers as possible to go to Alabama for the last stages of the march from Selma to Montgomery. I read the call, but once more, it never occurred to me that I was included.

The next Sunday, as I was about to enter the sanctuary, two members of my congregation stopped me and asked if I was going to Alabama. I must have looked very confused. I explained that we had a small child and another child on the way, and I really did not have the money to spend on a plane ticket, and.... They interrupted my ramblings to say, “We have the plane ticket; will you use it?” And suddenly I knew that all the sermons I had ever preached, and all the sermons I would ever preach, would be hollow and empty unless I walked through the door they had just opened for me. And so I went to Alabama.¹

Isn't it true that we live like this, so often? While hearing the latest news about global warming, we think to ourselves, “Someone should do something about that!” When we are reminded of an injustice, we think, “Someone should do something about that!” When pledge season rolls around and we hear that the church is asking for generous support, we

think, “Yes. Yes!” But I am not sure that our agreement always translates into our own generous giving.

My ministry now focuses on Stewardship and Development. I travel around the country and meet with generous, committed Unitarian Universalists to help their dreams come true.

When people have resources to give, and they care a great deal about our faith, they WANT to use their money to support their highest values. People assume this is unpleasant work. Nothing could be further from the truth! I have found that people *love* to give to something that they care a lot about. When pledge time rolls around, we are invited to give out of our core, to reflect on how central the community is in our lives. Then we are asked to stretch – to be truly generous – to pledge from the heart, to match the place the church and the faith have in our lives.

It is not a coincidence that I am involved in stewardship ministry and I have also done a lot of international work. Meeting fellow Unitarian Universalists from around the world - from Transylvania in Eastern Europe, from the Khasi Hills of India, from England and Germany and Africa, from the slums of Manila in the Philippines – meeting fellow UUs from around the world has taught me first-hand just how much we have to give.

My international work inspires me to experiment with greater generosity in my own life, and to preach and teach about stewardship in this context, which is in a culture that tells us over and over again that we don't have enough, we can never have enough, we can't possibly have enough, yet finds us easily adopting the latest technology, traveling regularly, purchasing many things without a second thought, barely registering the level of abundance that we are blessed with.

The wisdom traditions throughout time have taught us that being generous, truly madly deeply generous, is a fundamental aspect of nourishing the

¹ From “Cherish the Dream” available online at <http://www.questformeaning.org/page/reflecting/how-do-i-live-a-good-life>

spirit. "Giving liberates the soul of the giver," the poet says.

And so, I invite you to try it. I am not inviting you to talk about it, or read about it, or even to do a lot of thinking about it. I am inviting you to **be** generous. And like the call to Selma that David Bumbaugh didn't think was for him, let me be clear: I am talking to YOU. To ME. To US.

For the sake of people we have never seen, will never meet, and can only imagine: we must strengthen Unitarian Universalism, to help heal this hurting world. We must do this! The stakes are very high.

There is no way to learn how to ride a bicycle without just getting on it and starting to ride. No matter your circumstances, it is possible to scoop out a handful of rice. Just try it, and see how you begin to see the world, and your own life, differently. I close with the words of Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School for the Ministry.

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.

Friends, your lives are a blessing.

This community is a blessing in your lives.

Your gifts, generously given, serve this community

which in turn helps to transform the world.

Choose to bless the world.

Get on that bike and ride!

Amen!

Let us sing together hymn #151 – I Wish I Knew How.