

How Giving Transforms Us

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“Come on! Let’s go! Let’s get the bikes on the car!” I said enthusiastically to my husband.

It was a Saturday afternoon in late June two years ago. Bart and I were at General Assembly, the annual gathering of our Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Which—by the way—is in Columbus, Ohio this year. This year’s assembly focuses on interfaith. Registration is open, and we need delegates. See me, Rev. Maria Cristina, or a member of the Parish Committee if you are interested in serving as a delegate.

Anyway...so it’s the end of a long week. I had come to Providence for the assembly nearly a week earlier, and by Saturday I was ready for some fun and good exercise.

Bart and I put our bikes on the back of our car and drove over to the East Bay Bike Path in Providence, Rhode Island. We had been there one time earlier that week. I think it was Tuesday. That first day it had been quiet. In fact we were nearly alone as we rode our bikes alongside the harbor.

Not surprisingly, this was not the case on this beautiful Saturday afternoon. It was crowded—the path teemed with bicyclists, joggers, people roller blading and pushing baby carriages.

We had gone several miles riding side by side, navigating the congestion quite well. We crested the top of an incline and came down a sloping curve. As we rounded the corner, it became abundantly clear that there were simply too many people on too narrow a paved surface.

The asphalt was smooth, but there were no shoulders. On each side of the pavement there was an immediate drop of about one foot. Marshes to the left, and the Narraganset Bay out further to our right.

Coming straight at us were a woman on a bicycle and a man jogging—not together—but side by side.

In an effort to prevent the impending crash Bart sped up and pulled ahead of me. I watched as he cut over in front of me, his rear bike tire grazing my front tire.

I knew it was happening as it happened. I couldn’t believe it, and there was nothing that I could do to stop it.

For a period of time that felt like minutes—but I’m sure was moments—time stood still.

Then our tires locked. My body flew off my seat, up into the air, out several feet and onto the asphalt. I landed (after years of yoga) in an upward dog position. My elbows jammed into the ground pushing my face and chest up to safety. Coming to a bit, and realizing that I was safe, I rolled over into a fetal position on the ground. I couldn't see. I was bleeding, a lot, from many injuries. Everyone around us reacted; well actually, freaked out. Bikes were dropped and people began yelling.

Bart quickly let it be known that our car was miles away in a parking lot. A doctor (don't you love how they are always there when you need them!?) intervened. She stood guard over me and sent her adult son with Bart to get their car which was closer than ours. I lay on the pavement, wanting everyone to stay away, holding my left elbow instinctively like a newborn baby. (It was indeed very broken and required serious reconstructive surgery).

I just wanted Bart to come back. I was blessing the woman doctor who was keeping all the well-meaning people from touching me or pouring water on my cuts.

Then out of nowhere, he appeared. Not Bart. A man showed up driving a golf cart—from where I have no idea—he must have worked for the park service or something. He pulled quietly up beside me. The doctor told him where the parking lot was that I needed to be driven to. Gingerly several people lifted me into the cart and the man began to drive me away.

As we left, I could still hear the doctor reassuring concerned onlookers that I would be fine. I also heard the man who was “the jogger” in the story. Someone asked him if he had been running when this happened, and he responded with an irritated, “Well, yes. I *thought* I was going to get a run in today.” Clearly this accident was not on his agenda.

As we pulled away, I turned my head ever so carefully to look at the person who was driving me. I was struck at once by the look on his face. The compassion and love in his eyes was like nothing I had ever seen before or since. I don't know who he is, or what he believes, but he *WAS* love.

As it turns out he had a speech disorder and was unable to speak. His entire means of communication with me was nonverbal. Yet that did not hinder his ability to show his love and concern. In fact, I think it actually made it even more effective.

Driving the cart slowly he kept one eye on the road and the other on me at all times. He communicated solely with his eyes. With just his eyes. He told me... “You are okay. I am here. I love you. I am sorry. You are okay. I am here....” Again and again.

I cried as one does when you are in that state, meaning very carefully. One tear at a time slowly rolling down my cheek. His tears began to match mine. In unison. A tear down my right cheek, and one down his. We made it to the parking lot where Bart and help were waiting. Bart will attest that he too has never seen such love and compassion in a person. Not ever.

As I was driven away to the hospital, I watched my new friend's image get smaller and smaller. His lifted his hand and it stayed in the air until we turned out of sight.

He’s come to be known in our home as my guardian angel.

Many people gave of themselves that day. Their kindness was remarkable. I can relate to all of them.

The onlookers, distraught and wanting to help. The doctor—professional, responsible, and in charge. The jogger, who just wanted to get out and take a run—probably some desperately needed time for himself—frustrated by this turn of events.

I am *all* of those people.

Wanting to help but now sure how; responsible and in charge; self-absorbed, frustrated, begrudgingly helping. *All of them.*

But the guardian angel. Giving of himself with no words, no way to express himself. Not asking for anything in return. The power being only unselfish love in action. That kind of selflessness, of that I am less familiar in myself.

Rev. Eliza Blanchard, one of our affiliate ministers, uses a quote in her email signature that I love. It is a Japanese proverb and it reads: "One kind word can warm three winter months."

That man’s love, his smile and most of all the love in his eyes, warmed me through many months after that accident. His eyes carried me as I lay on the stretcher in the hallway of the hospital emergency room, and later as we stayed for hours behind the drawn curtain in our little hospital area. The love in his eyes carried me through surgery and pain, recovery, physical therapy, discouragement and fear. I found myself thinking of him at the most unexpected times. I still do.

Dr. Seuss wrote, “To the world you may be one person, but to one person, you may be the world.” That may be self-evident when it comes to people that we love, our children or partners, but what about all of those times and people that we don’t know. It can be those people, too.

So who do you identify with in this story? The onlookers—overwhelmed and wanting to help, not sure what to do?

The doctor—responsible, competent, who interceded and took control of the situation? Putting a plan in place and letting others know what to do?

Or perhaps the jogger—trying to take care of himself, and having no space for another’s needs or life problems?

Or like me, can you identify with all of them?

How about my guardian angel? The man who without being asked, did what he could do, drove the cart, and most of all gave his love, viscerally, unconditionally and wholeheartedly. The man who opened his heart enough to let his tears match mine?

I said that I didn't know if I loved like that... but then...

I was at a recovery meeting a couple of Saturday nights ago. New to town, in the city nonetheless. Knowing no one. I happened to sit in a chair that faced the doorway. Midway through the meeting, a man came to the doorway. He walked with a medical cane. I smiled at him and thought little of it.

At the end of the meeting as I was leaving the building, he stopped me. “Thank you,” he said. “Thank you. I haven't been here in a while. I had a car accident and ended up getting hooked on pain pills. It was hard to come tonight; I wasn't going to come in. And then I saw your smile. That was just what I needed to step inside the room. I had been ready to turn around.”

I wonder.

If I hadn't smiled.

I think of all the times that I haven't smiled.

We have no idea of how interconnected we are. Of how our actions impact others. We will never know. But of this I can be certain. If we choose love, choose to give of ourselves, to the best of our ability, we cannot help but to be of service.

I fear that we think what we do doesn't make a difference or isn't enough or important. Take philanthropy, as an example. Investopedia, defines philanthropy using these terms: “Charitable giving to human causes on a large scale. Wealthy individuals...establish foundations to facilitate their philanthropic efforts.”¹ Many people think of philanthropy that way. That it is only for “rich people” or only for “famous people.”

In fact, the word philanthropy, taken from its Greek root of *philanthrōpía*, is translated as “love of mankind.” Today we say “love of humankind.” But it is about love. Not money. Most definitely it is not only about lots of money.

As many of you may know, I was a professional in the field of fundraising, or development, for 29 years before moving into the ministry. The most important thing that I learned over all that time is that it is all about people. Relationships. Empowering people by connecting them and helping them be a part of organizations and causes that they believe in.

There are two phrases that I never used in fundraising. One is “should” and the other is “I'm sorry.” No one *should* give money. It does not matter how much money they have or don't have, where they work or don't work. It is an individual's prerogative and privilege to make that choice themselves.

¹ <http://www.investopedia.com/terms/p/philanthropy.asp?partner=asksa>

At the same time, we never apologize for asking people to support organizations that they care about. Philanthropy and nonprofit organizations are part of the fabric and history of our country and democracy. It is one of the ways that we give. And from that giving we are transformed and we help to transform the world.

Giving, falls into a category of words and concepts that I call the “opposites.” These are things that are generally the opposite of what we want to do, especially at times of struggle or pain. Giving, of ourselves, our love, our attention, when we are stressed, or hurting or depressed for example is counterintuitive. It is the opposite of what our survival instincts tell us to do.

There is a definite need for feeling our feelings and for self-care and setting boundaries. Absolutely. And...there is a need...a big need...for giving and connection.

In her book, *29 Gifts*, Cami Walker tells the story of how she overcame debilitating depression and chronic pain as she lived with multiple sclerosis. She had been living with unbearable pain and flare ups of her illness. At the time she was unable to work and spent large amount of her time in bed.

At a doctor’s visit one day, her doctor said to her; “Cami, I think you need to stop thinking about yourself.’ ‘Thinking about myself?’ I howl. I start in on her about what a wreck I am, what a wreck my body is, telling her that I don’t have room to think about anything except myself right now.

“I know, that’s the problem. You are making it worse by putting of all your attention there, Cami. You are falling deeper and deeper into a black hole. I’m going to give you a tool to help dig yourself out”²

The doctor went on to encourage to give away gifts of herself for 29 days. I did this once before and having been doing it lately. It’s wonderful. These gifts can be acts of kindness, like singing someone happy birthday, or sending positive mental thoughts or prayers.

I want to conclude this morning by having us give each other a gift. You each chose a stone when you came in this morning. You are now going to use that stone to give someone else a gift. You won’t know who you are giving it to though, and that’s part of the beauty of it.

I’ll walk you through a mindfulness moment in a moment where you will be imbuing your stone with your positive mental gift. Then at the conclusion of our service, you will place your imbued stone in one of the baskets by each of the entryways. As you place your gift and its energy in the basket, take another stone that has been left there by someone else. Keep that stone with you, knowing that you are carrying its love and gift with you as you leave here today. Knowing that you can call on that gift at any time in the days, months and years ahead. If you are a parent, then you have taken stones for your children. Please imbue as many stones as you have and take as many from the basket as you leave there.

² Walker, Cami, “29 Gifts How a Month of Giving Can Change Your Life”, Brightside Communications Inc., USA, 2009 pg. xxv

We will now imbue the stones and close with words from Mary Oliver. As we sing our closing hymn, hold your stone, filling it even more with your love and your gift. So, too, as we say our benediction. Then you can exchange your gifts as you leave the sanctuary using the baskets by the doorways.

So, holding the stone or stones in one of your hands now, place your other hand over the stone. Cupping the stone between your hands, feel its weight and smoothness. Hold the stone and imagine the most important thing that you would like to give to another person.

This may be love, or courage. A knowing that they are important and cared about. Strength or healing. Clarity. Joy or humor. Serenity. Enough food to eat, and material means to meet their needs. Imagine whatever comes to your mind. If you have more than one thing, that’s fine. If you are having trouble settling on something, ask yourself; what is it that you wish someone could give to you? Comfort? Peace. Fill your stone with that!

Holding the stone I will give you a minute to do this.

I close with words from Mary Oliver’s poem that we read early this morning, “The Buddha’s Last Instruction”:

No doubt he thought of everything that had happened in his difficult life.

And then I feel the sun itself as it blazes over the hills, like a million flowers on fire—clearly I’m not needed, yet I feel myself turning into something of inexplicable value. Slowly, beneath the branches, he raised his head.

He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd...³

Let your light shine.

Please rise as you are willing and able and join in our closing hymn; hymn number # 1030 Siyahamba.

³ “The Buddha’s Last Instruction” by Mary Oliver, *The House of Light*, 1990.