

GENEROSITY, A HEART CONDITION

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, October 13, 2019)

In her book *Smile Anyway*, Richelle E. Goodrich writes, “Every sunrise is an invitation for us to arise and brighten someone’s day.” Today, how are you going to brighten someone’s day? What act of generosity has brightened your heart this past week?

There is a First Nation’s man that may be homeless who spends a good deal of his time in the Brentwood area. I see him often sitting in or outside of Starbucks or sitting on the benches outside of Safeway. He is always minding his own business, not asking anyone for anything. Periodically, I see him sitting and talking with people in friendly discussion. When I go into Starbucks, and he is there, sometimes I buy a coffee for him and perhaps some food. He is always surprised and sincerely grateful, and maybe by that small gesture, his day was brightened.

A Safeway cashier mentioned to me the other day that a senior woman had come to her till with groceries but was six dollars short on cash, with no other form of payment. Three people in line immediately behind her each gave her two dollars enabling the woman to buy all her groceries. According to the cashier, such generosity was rare. Most often, people are impatient and grumpy if they are held up in line

When particular situations press on us and stress us or irritate us such as a line up at the cashier, a slower driver, or busy traffic, it does so because we think we are the center of the universe when, in fact, not one of us is.

We all have the occasional tendency to put ourselves at the center and see everything in life from the viewpoint of how it affects us, often leading to some unfavorable ramifications, such as feeling sorry for ourselves when things don’t go as planned, doubting ourselves when we fail or getting frustrated when others get in our way. When we believe ourselves to be the center of the universe, we do not live from our hearts;

consequently, we hamper our ability to be understanding, patient, kind, and generous.

When we imagine that we are the center of the universe, we crave and pursue things that benefit ourselves. We seek enjoyment by directing most of our resources towards individual pursuits: security, possessions, experiences, entertainment, and luxury. Meanwhile, significant opportunities for generosity surround us every day and at every turn. To not believe ourselves to be the center of the universe in a consumer-driven world, we need to develop a healthy heart condition, a heart conditioned by generosity.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, let us imagine generosity as being a heart condition because it is the action of a heart that is open, kind, loving, and grateful. Generosity is the response of a grateful heart for the gift of life, no matter what circumstances we must face, a heart that wishes to give back to life, to do something – anything – to show one's gratitude for the miracle of life. A generous heart feels compelled to respond.

Generosity is not just the giving of material things; it also includes the giving of our time, our attention to children or family, or offering a friend a listening ear when he or she is dealing with a difficult situation. Buddhist Zen philosophy teaches, and Jesus showed that giving your presence to another being is the greatest gift you can give.

When generosity becomes a spiritual heart condition, it can change our individual and collective experience of life. How do we do this?

Sharon Lipinski, the author of *365 Ways to Live Generously*, suggests that generosity must be intentional, free and frequent. Intentionality means one gives with no thought of benefitting one's self; giving is solely for the benefit of the other. If generosity is not intentional, it becomes an act of problem-solving. Concerning the First Nations man, I might ask myself, "How am I going to solve this homeless person's problem? At that moment, I can't, but I can do something, so I intentionally do something, I buy him a coffee that might warm him on a cold day.

Giving freely means giving with no pressure, no strings attached, no obligation or expectation. If you are giving because it is your duty, or you owe something, then giving is not a heart movement but rather an act of obligation. What ensures that generosity eventually becomes a heart condition is when it occurs frequently. Generosity is not a thought experiment, and it does not exist until an act of giving occurs and occurs frequently.

When we act intentionally, freely and frequently, then generosity becomes a spiritual heart condition. Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield, quoted in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, writes: "To cultivate generosity directly is another fundamental part of living a spiritual life . . . With practice, its spirit forms our actions, and our hearts will grow stronger and lighter. It can lead to new levels of letting go and great happiness."

Neuroscientist Richard Davidson did an interesting study on the effects of well-being on the brain. He writes, "Based on our research, well-being has four constituents that have each received serious scientific attention." One of these constituents is generosity. Davidson writes, "There is now a plethora of data showing that when individuals engage in generous and altruistic behavior, they actually activate circuits in the brain that are key to fostering well-being. These circuits get activated in a way that is more enduring than the way we respond to other positive incentives, such as winning a game or earning a prize."

He suggests that "when we engage in practices that are designed to cultivate kindness and compassion, we're not creating something that didn't already exist. What we're doing is recognizing, strengthening, and nurturing a quality that was there from the outset." We are already in possession of the tools to create well-being. We must choose to use them. When we nurture generosity, we have the power to reshape our brain and that reshaping can affect the heart in a positive way.

Studies suggest that the more we give, extend kindness and love, we become physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthier, which in turn enhances the physical, emotional, and spiritual health of others.

Generosity is the highest form of reciprocity; it is how one loses the sense of being the center of the universe and enables one to see the intrinsic value of each person, not just one's self. Generosity is how we

honor and express human value, our own, and that of others, so every act of it counts.

In *Simple Truths*, Kent Nerburn states: "Giving is a miracle that can transform the heaviest of hearts. Two people, who moments before lived in separate worlds of private concerns, suddenly meet each other over a simple act of sharing. The world expands, a moment of goodness is created, and something new comes into being where before there was nothing." Generosity multiplies the effect we can have in the world.

Jesus' vision of the Kingdom encompassed the fundamentals of trust, generosity, tolerance, and equality that often put him at odds with those in power. He condemned the selfish, ego-centric accumulation of wealth because it dehumanized and demoralized those who suffered most as a result of it.

In her book *At Home in the World*, Margaret Guenther states: "Jesus' standard of generosity is not the world's standard.' Just give a cup of cold water in my name,' he instructs. So little and so simple as to be scarcely noticed! Like the widow's mite, it is nevertheless a high standard. It demands that we live in awareness of the thirst all around us." Paul encouraged similar fundamentals to sustain the emotional and spiritual well-being of the whole. In Acts we read "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people."

Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist spiritual philosophies teach that within community generosity affirms the personhood of every member, offering genuine care, compassion, love, and acceptance to each member of the community. To practice generosity is to make a conscious effort to give away whatever we can — compassion, understanding, kindness, money, time, food, acceptance — as a way of realizing that what each of us does toward another affects every other person in our smaller communities and the world community.

Over the years, I have witnessed the generosity of the people at St. David's. In this community, generosity is a healthy heart condition. Recently St. David's showed its generous heart to Jonas, who is seeking to become a legal refugee in Canada. He showed up at St. David's a couple of months ago, distressed, anxious, and desperate. This morning Jonas would like to express his gratitude for the generosity he has received from this community of faith. (Jonas speaks)

In his book *Zen in the Art of Writing*, Ray Bradbury writes, "We are cups, constantly and quietly being filled. The trick is, knowing how to tip ourselves over and let the beautiful stuff out." When we tip our cups with generosity, not only do our own cups refill, but the cups of others fill. Generosity ensures that life becomes a state of love, compassion, and care overflowing. This Thanksgiving, I encourage you, if you have not done so already, to develop a healthy heart condition, by conditioning your heart with generosity. According to author John Holmes, "There is no exercise better for the heart than reaching down and lifting people up." Amen.