

THOU SHALT CULTIVATE A GENEROUS HEART

Sermon V in the Year-Long Series, "10 Commandments for the 21st Century"

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I like to think of myself as a generous person...but every once in a while, I must admit, generosity is a hard commodity for me to find in my heart. I will confess that this reluctance of the heart happened to me (in a way that particularly caught my spiritual attention) during my last cross-country charity bike ride across America a couple of years ago. One of the riders – we called him "Berkeley Bill" because we had three "Williams" on the ride, and so to keep them straight in conversation, we dubbed each by where they came from, "New Jersey Bill," "Canada Bill," and the man in question here "Berkeley Bill," because he hailed from Berkeley, California. Anyway, Berkeley Bill was in the habit of doing something that I (and many of the other riders) found very irritating...he would often do something called "drafting" behind other cyclists... without permission or reciprocity.

Now...let me explain to all you non-bikers both the etiquette and technique of "drafting," which is no small thing amongst serious cyclists.

Often when a group of cyclists is riding a long distance together (as we did that Spring across America, and this photograph was taken – in fact -- on that particular 120-mile-a-day ride), they will form up into highly synchronized groups (it's called a "pace line" formation) and ride close together, wheel-to-wheel, one following the other in a straight, unbroken line. The idea is to break the wind for one another like Canada geese do when they fly South in the Autumn, so that the whole group can go faster, using less physical energy, as they push toward their destination.

Now...in cycling etiquette, the way a pace line works is that all the participating riders (one at a time, in sequence) take their turn "pulling" – that is, being the cyclist at the head of the line who actually breaks the wind and creates the efficient "V" for the others. The lead rider "pulls," usually for no more than a mile or so, and then he or she peels back to the right to give the second rider his or her turn...and so it can go, on down the line, each rider pulling in turn, in group effort, sometimes for many, many miles. The key "ethic" or rule to a pace line (beyond paying very close attention so you don't inattentively crash into other riders!) is that every rider takes his or her turn doing the hard work of pulling upfront, for the benefit of the whole group. Well...Berkeley Bill loved to get into pace lines, but he would never take his turn up front! Sometimes when I was riding with two or three others in a pace line, we would pass Berkeley Bill, but as we moved by him, he would pick up his pace just a bit, and sneak onto the back of our line...and just hang there – in the sweet spot of the "V" others were creating – mile after mile!

Now this habit of Bill's really irritated me (and many of the other riders) for obvious reasons. For the first couple of weeks of the trip, every time Berkeley Bill pulled this stunt, I found myself having ungenerous and unkind thoughts toward him...and found myself generally avoiding him at lunch, or in the evening as the group formed into dinner companions. But over time, I didn't like the way this spiritually felt, and so I slowly decided that – with what proved to be little cost to my pride (and soul!) – I could be generous toward Bill and tolerate this one breach in his behavior. What helped me get to this more generous place of the heart was realizing (and this conclusion was certainly true, as it is so often true – in human affairs -- when people disappoint

or irritate us) that Bill was doing about the best he could.

He was an older and somewhat awkward rider who simply wasn't in the physical shape to handle the rigors of our fast-paced, hard-driving, 120-mile-a-day cross-country ride...and so drafting behind others and never taking his turn in the demanding front of the line was one way for him to get through the day with a measure of dignity, energy, and pride. Once I got my head around the idea that his hanging back and not taking his turn was "the best he could do" (and, in fact cost me and the other riders almost nothing, because we were creating the V formation anyway), I relaxed...my resentment melted away...and I could enjoy conversation and camaraderie with Bill as we moved across America. The generosity I finally found and placed at the center of my heart made the trip more pleasant for both me and Berkeley Bill.

This morning, I continue my year-long sermon series here at UUFVB on "10 Commandments for the 21st Century" with a reflection on the absolute spiritual importance of cultivating a generous heart...or, said differently, practicing generosity on a regular basis in your life. This is especially important for us as Unitarian Universalists...for I honestly have a hard time believing that you or I can truly be Unitarian Universalists unless we are regularly cultivating generosity in almost every dimension of our living. As I thought about generosity as a key commandment for living, I came to realize that there are really three distinct-yet-interconnected kinds of generosity we need to regularly cultivate in our lives:

- 1) Everyday emotional generosity – the kind of basic, heart-generosity I finally found for Berkeley Bill on my cross-ountry ride,
- 2) Spiritual (or theological) generosity – philosophical generosity toward humanity as a whole, which is what our liberal faith must always be about, and,
- 3) Financial (or charitable) generosity – the kind of tangible monetary generosity we (and the rest of our culture) usually think and talk about when this topic comes up.

Let me take each of these crucial aspects of generosity in turn, first, everyday emotional generosity – the kind of generosity which I already alluded to in my cycling story about Berkeley Bill and me. Emotional generosity, I think, is simply the quality of being kind and welcoming and understanding of persons around you...most especially when you bump up against their limitations, flaws, expectations and imperfections. Possessing this kind of generosity first and foremost means (I think) that you are aware and accepting of your own limitations, flaws, expectations and imperfections, and can thus be understanding and tolerant when you encounter the limitations, flaws, expectations and imperfections of others.

Having emotionally generosity in your heart means that you give other human beings the benefit of the doubt...that you cut them "some existential slack" as you interact with them...and thus you are slow to be harsh, condemning, dismissive or judgmental. Back to Berkeley Bill for a moment. By the clear and rather dogmatic rules in the cycling world, I had every right to be indignant and angry by my fellow rider's free-loading at the back of the line...but I finally – emotionally and spiritually – figured out that – literally and figuratively – there was no milage for me (or the other riders for that matter) in being judgmental and dismissive to Bill. In fact, the opposite was true...the generosity I was finally able to find in my heart freed me in significant ways to enjoy even more the ride that I was sharing with the others.

So...the first thing I want to affirm about generosity this morning is that the emotional generosity we exhibit toward others is a lovely and liberating thing...a lovely and liberating thing that not

only frees us up to more fully enjoy our own lives, but that affirms the inherent worth and dignity of others, even though they may be making – most often unintentionally, remember – our lives more difficult than they need to be.

You know I'm right on this, friends! Just think back to the last time your mind was filled with ungenerous thoughts...or your spirit was filled with ungenerous emotions...or your hands with un-generous actions directed at another. Not only did your lack of generosity diminish the person toward whom your hardness-of-human-being was directed, it also diminished your own sense of ease, satisfaction and enjoyment in life. Emotional generosity bestowed upon others is an amazing two-way lubricant of the heart and soul which makes everyone's lives run more smoothly. Emotional generosity is the good, everyday platform of the heart from which all other kinds of generosity flow...which brings me quickly to the second kind of generosity we need to regularly practice in our lives, that being: religious (or theological) generosity.

When you think about it, our liberal faith (Unitarian Universalism) and this liberal congregation (UUFVB) are all about nurturing and extending the human quality of generosity. We proudly call ourselves "a liberal religious congregation," and if you look up what it means to be a "liberal" in any dictionary or philosophical reference book, the first definition given is simply "one who is generous." I like the way writer Steve Kangas puts it. "Liberalism," he writes, "has been defined as generosity, tolerance, openmindedness, and a willingness to give." And another writer says it this way, "At its core, modern liberalism is rooted in generosity and compassion."

It is precisely this generous and caring and humane spirit that has always animated our liberal faith, Unitarian Universalism. Indeed, my colleague Burton Carley (who serves the Uu Church of the River in Memphis, Tennessee) asserts that the very purpose of every UU congregation is first and foremost to create evermore generous lives. I really like that simple spiritual idea...we gather here each Sunday, in this house of human aspiration and hope, to create more generous lives – within ourselves, within our children, and within one another – so that we can reach out to the wider human community with care and compassion. I quote Rev. Carley, "The purpose of our church is not to give you [as some churches promise] the formula or secret to receive the generosity you believe you deserve from on high, but [rather] to create generous lives. The adventure of faith for us is not to have a strategic plan for obtaining blessings [for ourselves], but how to live a life that blesses others."

I think my colleague in Memphis has it just right. This congregation was founded 30 years ago on a liberal spirit of generosity. Our liberal theology, which asserts "the inherent worth and dignity of every person" and believes in "justice, equity and compassion" for all, is generous, compassionate and inclusive towards all persons.

Let me give just one quick example from today's headlines if I might. Many in the nation, over the last year or so, are screaming – often at the top of their lungs – that our society cannot afford to provide health care protection to all our citizens, most noticeably the poor and under-employed of whom there are many millions. While cognizant of the costs, and concerned about our national deficit, the congregations of our Unitarian Universalist Association (by votes at our annual General Assemblies) have urged that universal health care become a national priority...not because we like spending money willy-nilly, but because we have a generous impulse toward all in real need. Our Unitarian Universalist faith – by its history, instinct, and very nature – calls upon us to be generous toward those in need of this and other basic human protections.

One way of thinking about this religious place is that this is, in literal fact, the house which generosity built. And I hope that whenever you come in through the doors here at the fellowship – whether it is to attend Sunday worship, participate in an adult enrichment class, prepare meals for homeless families in our community, work with others to clean up our grounds, or bring your kids to Sunday school to ensure that they are exposed to the religious and moral values that will help them to live good and caring lives – I hope that whenever you come here you understand yourself to be on a purposeful journey of trying to create a more generous and compassionate life for yourself and others.

This is why we give our Sunday plate collection away each week to a worthy community service organization here on the Treasure Coast...this congregation exists to encourage and embody spiritual and theological generosity.

And thus I arrive at the third (and last kind of generosity that I believe is essential for all Unitarian Universalists – that, of course, being financial generosity.

Hey, come on, don't act surprised...today is Stewardship Sunday, for God's sake...you had to know I was going to find a way this morning to affirm the importance of the generosity we express through our checkbooks! So just relax and listen...I'm not going to club you over the head...or sneak into your wallet while you are not looking...I just want to say a word about the importance of financial generosity in our personal lives!

I believe that the third noble pillar of human generosity is, simply, financial generosity. In my book "Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life" (which is, I'm proud to say, has been a "UU best seller" for the last 20 years now!), I included an entire chapter on charitable giving, written by my Colleague Tony Larsen, which talks about the importance of each of us striving to at least tithe, the ancient biblical practice of returning 10% of all that we economically earn and own, back to the human community and those in need.

Tithing back to the world from your personal assets and abundance is a yearly spiritual practice which Collins and I (along with many other folks here at UUFVB) faithfully practice, and I sincerely recommend it to you. The really neat thing about tithing every year is not only that doing it makes us feel good (because we know that in so doing we are directly contributing personal assets to the building of a more just and humane world), but it's also that tithing is so incredibly simple and straightforward! All Collins and I have to do to successfully tithe each year is: 1) calculate what our total income for the year is likely to be, and 2) then get busy about writing checks that total at least 10% of that amount to worthy organizations and causes that serve humanity. Now I will admit that some years this spiritual practice is easier than others. All of us have financial ups and downs (including, among other things, periods with unexpected medical or other expenses)...and some years are scarier than others (like these last couple of years of economic uncertainty and downturn which, for more than a few of us has meant there has been a significant loss of personal assets). But, like most of you, I try to discipline myself to live well within my means each year so that I still have discretionary income, a portion of which I am free each year simply to give away, compassionately, for the benefit of others. Tithing is really the simplest form of generosity available to all of us.

Now...with all this said about the virtue of financial giving and the spiritual practice of tithing, I fully realize that for some of you the goal of giving fully 10% of your earnings back to the wider human community (of worthy organizations and needy individuals) may not be fully possible at various times in your lives – like when you're simultaneously putting two grandkids through

college, paying massive medical bills for a sick spouse, or living on a fixed or shrinking pension or portfolio. But I would be spiritually remiss if I did not at least encourage all of us – in this community devoted to helping us create more generous lives – of the virtue of always moving toward the goal of tithing, or beyond. I hope that charitable giving is in your life, a spiritual practice that brings you satisfaction and a sense of living responsibly and well in your world. Oh, and a final quick aside here...in a recent edition of *Newsweek* there was an article that presents new scientific evidence that charitable giving actually makes you a happier person! I quote from that article, “There is now abundant evidence supporting what philosophers and [the great religious] teachers have told us since ancient times: that the [generous] person is also – typically – a happy person. A survey of 30,000 American households found that those who gave [generously] to charity were 43 percent more likely to say they were ‘very happy’ than those who did not give.” I suspect this is true with all kinds of generosity in our lives. Being generous (whether it is emotional or theological or financial) rewards you with happiness and satisfaction...it’s just that pure...and just that simple!

Before I close this morning, I want to briefly talk briefly about UUFVB and our needs as a congregation, for after all this is Stewardship Sunday. Last night, for the first time in this congregation’s history, we gathered for a festive Stewardship Dinner...with wonderful food, drink, and entertainment...and a great time was had by all! After dinner, Woody and Jennifer Sutton, our Stewardship chairs this year, articulated the goals of our campaign and the needs of our congregation, and asked all the members and friends of UUFVB who are in a financial position to do so to increase their giving by 15%. Your entire Board of Trustees has already all substantively increased their pledged giving for next year. Collins and I have personally increased our pledge for the new year by 20%....and we have already received many other generous pledges from many members and friends of the congregation. All this is by way of my asking you (if you have not already made your pledge for next year) to please be just as generous as you can.

UUFVB is a strong and purposeful and compassionate congregation that deserves and needs your support if it is to continue its mission of service, compassion and care both within and beyond these walls. The simple truth is that we need every last one of you who values this place (and the work of our religion) to make a generous pledge of support for the coming year.

So...in closing this morning, I hope you will always keep in mind the three kinds of interlocking generosity that have such power to bless and enrich our lives:

- 1) Everyday Emotional Generosity -- that bigness of heart we evermore express to those around us in all the little ways that count,
- 2) Spiritual or Theological Generosity -- that compassionate care we as Unitarian Universalists extend to all human persons in need, and
- 3) Financial (or Charitable) Generosity -- directed to organizations and programs that are working to make our world a more humane place.

I pray that you will always keep this precious commandment of the heart at the very center of who you are as a human being. Not only will your life then be a blessing for those to whom you are generous, it will also make your own life a thing of astounding satisfaction, purpose and joy.

Amen.