

Heed the Generous Impulse
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

“Stand by This Faith” by Olympia Brown

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it.

There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals. Which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful.

Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message. That you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost.

Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments I their contemplation, always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves.

“To Be of Use” by Marge Piercy

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Sermon

I shared with the children earlier the story of how my banjo-uke came into my hands, our neighbors just showing up at the door one day with the instrument they had picked up at a yard sale – with the thought (the generous impulse) that I was the right person to have it. Their gesture has stayed with me as long as the banjo-uke!

And the story continues.

I've now had the banjo-uke for something like thirty years. I play it now and then, just for fun, though I'm no ukulele expert.

But about ten years ago the generosity of the gift took on fresh life when my mother needed to be in a nursing home during her last months. As she became less and less able to carry on much of a conversation, music became more important to my daily visits. And rather than carry around my inconveniently bulky and relatively heavy guitar or banjo, the banjo-uke served the purpose perfectly. It fit into my backpack and its sturdy construction makes it difficult to damage.

So it was always in my pack which was always in my car which meant it was always ready to accompany my singing of old familiar songs to Mom.

The generous gift in other words kept giving.

There's more. Now and then something like this would happen – the circle getting wider: I emerged from my mother's room late one night holding the banjo-uke – not tucked into my backpack, instead quite visible. A number of residents were sitting out in the hall by the nursing station, and one fellow looked at me and looked at the banjo-uke and asked, "Can you play that thing?"

Well, I was tired at the end of a long day. But what could I say. Certainly not "sorry, I'm tired." After all, there was I, and there was the evidence of the banjo-uke.

So – the obvious choice: "You are my sunshine..." and then "Yes sir, that's my baby..."

Smiles all around. The residents. Me. A no longer so tired me.

That's what even heeding a pretty easy generous impulse does for you: lightens your load, lifts your spirit even as you are lifting the spirits of others. Circle of generosity, caring, and love ever expanding... *ever* expanding... if you let it, if you heed the generous impulse.

So the generous impulse of our neighbors bringing that banjo-uke turned out to be like the "Magic Penny" in the song, generosity that spawned generosity that spawned generosity.... Maybe not huge or world-altering in this case, but who knows how lives are touched, moved, even changed, transformed? Who knows how the ripples spread?

Time to talk about Mary Niles, since my sermon title came from her.

As you may have seen in our newsletter, "Heed the generous impulse" – variously phrased – was, in the memory of all of us who knew Mary, sort of her mantra or north star. And it was inspiring to all who knew her, not only because of the words, but because we observed over and over again that it was not just about the words for Mary. It wasn't just about money either. For example: It was before my time, but I'm aware, as some of you are, of the work that Mary did back in the 1960s or 70s against the real estate practice of redlining designed to keep

families of minorities out of Hingham. This was heeding a generous impulse to help some of those unjustly discriminated families.

This said (and there are many other examples of Mary's generosity of spirit, quietly helping individuals or pitching in around here)... this said, most of the financial manifestations of Mary's heeding the generous impulse were anonymous. I suppose many suspected who was behind this or that large gift to the parish for this or that purpose – and they were often correct, though not always since there are others among us who live according to the same mantra. In any case, Mary surely did not want the source of her gifts to be general knowledge.

Well... these many years after Mary's passing, I will share a bit about one of her generous impulses, one that is I think more than suspected by now.

Some years ago Mary found at her doorstep a wooden finger labyrinth – the same or similar design as the labyrinth at the Cathedral of Chartres. Maybe eighteen inches square, grooves in the wood so you could run your finger along the pathway.

She had no idea who had left it there. I was one of the suspects, but it wasn't me. I believe we still don't know.

But Mary, who hadn't had any particular interest in labyrinths up until then, was intrigued. Intrigued enough to begin thinking that maybe our old and worn Fellowship Hall tiled floor could be replaced with a beautiful new floor in the design of a labyrinth. Wouldn't that be nice!

Long story short. One generous impulse led to another. Bernie Gregoire heeded his generous impulse to become the clerk of the works for the installation of the labyrinth – not because he had had any particular interest in labyrinths (he was not a warm and fuzzy spiritual type), but because Mary had asked and he knew he could help.

Then Mary Thomas came along and heeded her generous impulse, learning all about labyrinths and becoming the spiritual force behind frequent labyrinth evenings for many years.

And now we are seeing a revival of labyrinth activity, as Karen Churchill and Santjes Oomen-Lochtefeld, consulting with Mary Thomas, and others have been heeding their generous impulses to give their time and skill to help us once again make good use of this gift – this gift which is right under our feet during coffee hour every Sunday.

In other words, once again, on a larger scale than a banjo-uke, generosity spawning generosity spawning generosity. Some of it having to do with actual money (the labyrinth itself) and most of it having to do with other gifts – of time and skill.

Well, as you know today marks the opening of our annual stewardship pledge drive – so no surprise that I'm talking about generosity. And though, yes, generosity does have to do with much more than money, today we are talking about the financial needs of our beloved First Parish in Hingham, Old Ship Church. We are talking about how we, each of us and all of us together, can ensure that we meet those needs, which in turn will ensure that we continue to live and expand the vision of a congregation that nourishes the spirit, that helps and heals, a congregation that is partnering with others to relieve suffering in the world, to create more justice and peace, a congregation that is helping our world become more ecologically sustainable.

Tall orders?

Maybe. But maybe not so tall.

Not if we each heed the generous impulse.

Recently I've asking some folks how they decide what to pledge to Old Ship each year. A couple of families have told me that unless it has been a particularly tough year for them financially they aim to give between 8-10% of their income. Wow! And these are not, so far as I can tell, families anywhere near the so-called 1%. But Old Ship means enough to them that they are that generous.

Can their generosity inspire us? I hope so. Goodness if we all gave anywhere close to 10% of our incomes we'd have no financial worries whatsoever. Even if we all pledged and gave according to Unitarian Universalist guidelines of between 2-4% of income, many of our financial troubles with vanish.

As for us – the Read-Browns? We have always given about 3-4% of our income to Old Ship, and more when we can.

So... maybe more of us can be more generous than we might think. It would matter a lot to the health of this congregation we love – particularly since there are dedicated members on fixed income, with essential expenses that can't be reduced, who may not be able to give any more this year than they have already been generously doing.

Here's another way of looking at pledging and giving to Old Ship. It is not like giving to most other good and worthy causes or organizations – giving from us to some entity over there. Rather, it is more like a household or family pooling resources for shared purposes.

But however we each think about and plan for our pledge... *does* this financial generosity matter as much as I'm suggesting? Well, why does it matter that our First Parish Unitarian Universalist is here at all?

You will each have your unique responses to such questions, ranging from the quite personal ways in which Old Ship has nourished your spirit, inspired your living, taught your children, or perhaps helped to heal you in the midst of grief or challenge or hardship... to the ways in which we value Old Ship for the beacon of justice it represents to the wider world.

But whatever the way we would each articulate our reasons for pledging and giving financial support to Old Ship... it's all about love, isn't it? Not a sentimental sort of love (though maybe some of that) but a love grounded in an understanding of how deeply important Old Ship is to our lives and to the community and larger world.

Bring to your mind's eye in some way the interwoven life of our Old Ship community and then the ways in which our community is woven into to the wider community, indeed into the world.

There is so much that can't be measured in this continuing flow of love and commitment and caring that is our community and our community's connections to the wider world.

So let me offer another metaphor: It's as if we breathe in each week in worship or in a class, nourishing ourselves, getting the spiritual oxygen we need to keep on... and then we breathe out into the rest of our lives, helping each other close at hand, serving in our chosen work or volunteering, voting, speaking up and speaking out. There *is* no way to measure how much our lives influence, sometimes even transform the lives of others, much of it indeed growing from the nourishment we get here, from the inspiration and guidance of the Unitarian

Universalist values we share, and the examples we set for one another. But... the influence, the ripples, are inevitable and unstoppable.

And mark this well: None of this is trivial or unimportant. In fact, all of this may be more important than ever in this year 2020 – this year of a momentous presidential election, the health of our democracy at stake; this year another of the hottest years on record, the health of life on earth at stake.

Look, no one of us can do everything. No single congregation can do everything. But *together*, adding our value grounded efforts, our love grounded efforts, well... that's another thing altogether.

So let's keep the love flowing, keep the arc of the universe bending towards justice, breathe out our care for the ecological balance upon which we all depend.

And may we know that our generous giving, yes of talent and time, but also yes of whatever measure of treasure is possible for each of us... will ensure that we keep the love flowing, reaching ever closer to our vision of a continuing vibrant, life-giving, love-giving congregation.

As we, in Olympia Brown's words, continue to "stand by this faith," and as we, in Marge Piercy's words:

jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows

...do what has to be done, again and again.

move in a common rhythm

For, this "thing worth doing well done" that we call the ongoing life of our parish... is indeed as the poet wrote "work that is real" and that *matters* – matters deeply to each one who passes through those doors, and to the wide world around.

May we, then, live not with the closed fist that all too many bring to life in our nation these days... may we live with open hands and open hearts.

So may it be.