

Giving Like the Berries

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Readings

From chapter 51 of the *Tao Te Ching*

Tao gives life to all beings.
Nature watches over them,
 Develops them, shelters them,
 nurses them, grows them,
 ripens them, completes them,
 buries them, and returns them.

Giving birth,
 nourishing life,
 shaping things without possessing them,
 serving without expectation of reward,
 leading without dominating:

These are the profound virtues of nature,
 and of nature's best beings.

From *Braiding Sweetgrass*

by the botanist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer (a member of the Potawatomi tribe):

I don't know the origin of the giveaway, but I think we learned it from watching the plants, especially the berries who offer up their gifts all wrapped in red and blue.

When berries spread out their giveaway blanket, offering their sweetness to birds and bears and boys alike, the transaction does not end there. Something beyond gratitude is asked of us. The berries trust that we will uphold our end of the bargain and disperse their seeds to new places to grow, which is good for berries and for boys. They remind us that all flourishing is mutual. We need the berries and the berries need us. Their gifts multiply by our care for them, and dwindle from our neglect. We are bound in a covenant of reciprocity, a pact of mutual responsibility to sustain those who sustain us.

Sermon

I love Robin Wall Kimmerer's speculation that the Potawatomi tradition of the giveaway may have been inspired by the berries, the berries who know – in whatever way that berries know – that “all flourishing is mutual. We need the berries and the berries need us.”

But the exchange is not a buying and selling of commodities. Rather, as she writes, it is a circle of reciprocity.

A circle that is sustained by trust, as Kimmerer put it elsewhere:

We are showered every day with gifts, but they are not meant for us to keep. Their life is in their movement, the inhale and the exhale of our shared breath. Our work and our joy is to pass along the gift and to trust that what we put out into the universe will always come back.

Can you, after all, keep the gift of a sunrise... or a spring breeze...?

Can you keep happiness, whatever the source or cause? The Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron affirms that “happiness is contagious” – so we actually can’t keep it only to ourselves even if we wanted to. But why would we want to? Instead, we quite naturally share the gift.

You see, gifts of life and love cannot be hoarded for another day, they are meant to be shared, passed along – and we don’t lose any of the gift ourselves as we do.

But if we don’t pass the gifts along, they wither on the vine.

A year ago this very week we shared our first so-called virtual worship service – livestreaming on YouTube from the Parish House, since we didn’t yet have WiFi here in the Meeting House. Everything happened so fast that week, as we all remember vividly; our world, our lives changed quite literally overnight as we collectively and individually struggled to begin to adjust to life and work and church in the midst of pandemic. It was disorienting to say the least. Far worse than disorienting for all too many.

One thing, though, that didn’t change here at Old Ship was the culture of generosity in our community – our own giveaway culture, if I might put it that way. And I’m mostly not talking about our financial generosity, though that too has been extraordinary – both in support of Old Ship itself, as well as in support of the many organizations to which we give through our outreach collections.

But this said, I’m mostly talking about other forms of generosity and outreach, our reaching out to one another – largely this past year, given the need for safety, through calls and emails and notes – virtual (but real!) hugs you might say. In short, we have generously sustained our connections with one another. Perhaps even strengthened them.

It is a beautiful thing... how we’ve generously cared for one another this year.

We are not perfect human beings, not a perfect community. So we may have faltered and failed along the way in our mutual care, but I hope not often or seriously.

In any case, I don’t believe or observe that any of this generosity, whether financial or spiritual, has come with expectation of “return on investment.”

Instead, I believe we have been giving like the berries, seeking, whether we would put it this way or not, to align with the Tao, the eternal Way of life and of nature. Nature, which, as we heard in the first reading, nourishes life because that’s what nature does, serving without expectation of reward, as the reading put it.

Further, as we just heard...: “With trust that what we put out into the universe will always come back.”

Circles of giving and receiving, receiving and giving.

Among other things, then, this means that if our experience has been and is that our Old Ship Church nourishes our spirits, whether through worship, through classes for all ages, though sharing in community... well then of course we are moved to give what we can (each of our circumstances different) financially and otherwise... to give like the berries not as transactional exchange, but as part of the circle of reciprocity.

Giving to the church, after all, is not about purchasing worship or a class or religious education for our children, certainly not about purchasing spiritual well-being. It is, rather, that we give like the berry plant that gives all that it is able to give each season, sometimes more, sometimes less depending on the conditions – but, again, with trust (if we can say a plant has “trust”) that the circle will come around, will always come around. Because, in fact, it always has.

Do you call your neighbor when she has had an accident and expect something in return, or so that she’ll call you if you have an accident?

Do you drop off cookies or a casserole to a church friend who is home from the hospital or grieving so that you'll get a casserole someday too?

Of course not!

Even though this is pretty much how it works – if we don't short circuit the circle.

To return to the garden metaphor: when we water our houseplants or spread compost in our garden, we do so without counting the hours it takes or the cost, but rather with faith that growth and health will come and will give pleasure and nourishment in return for the care we gave.

So it is as we nourish the congregation with our pledges, our checks, our gifts (this is after all the time of our annual Stewardship Pledge Drive): doing so with faith that spiritual growth and health in our Old Ship community will be sustained by our shared gifts – not just for our benefit, but for the benefit of many in ever widening circles. In our time, and in time to come.

When I was considering the vocation of parish ministry a long time ago, I had a long talk with my father, during which I voiced concern about the value of church: You could, I said, probably find more compelling speakers or lecturers outside the walls of the church; you could find beautiful music elsewhere at concert venues or symphony halls; if you were in trouble you could find a trained therapist to help you through; and if you wanted to change the world, be part of justice-making and peacemaking, healing the earth, well there are plenty of organizations dedicated to these causes that you could join.

I said all that... and then still I continued on my path to parish ministry.

And what I've discovered and experienced during the past thirty-four years among you here at Old Ship, and never more powerfully than during this past year, is that though there were grains of truth in all those thoughts of mine almost forty years ago, I had left some things out, the biggest things of all.

I had left out the beauty and sustaining power of caring community:

I had left out those casseroles in the midst of someone's grief or illness. I had left out the insights in a circle of conversation about things that matter, a circle of people who care about each other more than they care about the subject of conversation. I had left out the ways in which we inspire one another by example to elevate ourselves to our better selves, each and all seeking (to paraphrase Henry David Thoreau) to affect the quality of the day and the quality of our world.

In short, I had left out love – the highest of the many values we cherish in our faith – love manifest in a community of souls giving in so many ways, giving like the berries.

And it will – of course – be love and care that sees us through the remaining months of pandemic time as together we chart our shared future – each of us, here at Old Ship, in our nation, and on our Earth home.

Yes, we need to pay the bills here at Old Ship – so our financial gifts (I say "our" because we pledge along with the rest of you) are actually very important. Yet our gifts don't just pay the bills. They support all the values we cherish... the greatest of which is love... that we might continue to help and heal one another, and continue together to help and heal our world.

Amen. So may it be. Blessed be.