

75 and Going Strong!  
Annual Fund Drive Kick-Off  
March 18, 2018

READING "The Generosity Plan" by Kathy LeMay pp 1 – 6.

Today is about generosity. Not just toward this sacred community, but in all areas of our lives. This book, "The Generosity Plan" guides one through a process that discerns how to give of our time, talent, and treasure to maximize not only impact in the world, but impact in our personal being - so that we can experience the benefits of being generous as much as possible. Like so many things in life, it involves creating "a plan" . . .

PRAYER # 494 W.E.B. DuBois

SERMON

So what do I remember about giving in my family when I was growing up? Did my folks volunteer, and did we talk about those in need. Did my family encourage giving back? What was my first volunteer experience?

These questions are hard for me to look at, because I don't have flying colors answers for them.

I don't recall talking about giving in my family, unless it was Christmastime, or someone's birthday. Giving was something you did in the family, not toward strangers. My extended family did not live instate, so I didn't get to read to a dying aunt, either. What did I do?

Coming up short on these answers is puzzling to me, since my father dedicated his career to the non-profit world, after deciding not to become a Methodist minister. The social service agencies he managed and for which he raised lots of money provided affordable counseling services to youth and families, or for after-school programs for poor children in the inner city of Chicago.

Thing is, he never talked about his agency's clients – never in any type of personal way. I certainly never met any. I think he was too far removed from them – it was the social workers he managed who worked with the people in need. My dad was at the top, managing the whole enterprise. He's always tended to measure his self-worth and happiness based on how well he was doing at his job, which boiled down to how well he was raising funds and expanding services. At his longest-running job, over 35 years, he did this very well and it's how he managed to make a very good living at helping people. It's a big reason why I followed in his footsteps, to a large extent, working in the non-profit world, leading an organization that exists to serve people and the cause of emotionally intimate community.

It's not like my parents *never* volunteered. In fact, the one place they have volunteered off and on as long as I've been alive is church! The church I grew up in and they have belonged to for almost 45 years. Currently my mother is like our member Sue Witkofsky, they both Chair the Endowment committee, though back in IL they call it the Trust Fund. It's actually a lot of work for my mom as there are many disbursements for several projects they fund. And my dad has served on various committees, notably a Search Committee to find a minister back in the 80's, and a Committee on Ministry. Having almost become one himself, he has an affinity for supporting the minister. And to answer *this* question, the first volunteer experience I remember is when I was in Sunday School, as part of the same church.

We did what they called a social service project – I must have been 12 or so. We went in mini-vans and picked up other kids our age who had severe disabilities and were in wheelchairs, mostly due to cerebral palsy. I remember a lot of drooling, and being a little frightened. But I also remember how good it felt to pay attention to these kids who were so different from us. I could tell it brought them some joy, to be taken on a walk in a forest preserve. At one point we were told to just hang out and strike up conversations with the disabled kids. As I was writing this sermon, I actually burst into tears recalling this, realizing how oddly formative it was.

What I remember is the able-bodied kids – the other kids in my Sunday school class – they were too afraid to do it, to talk with these disabled kids, and they basically didn't, they hung back. But I did it! Even though the boy with cerebral palsy couldn't talk very well, he could a little, and I sat with him and we smiled, and we even laughed about something. Now, I know everyone has a terrible middle school experience, by and large, but I had an especially bad one, and what I recall is that seeing the other kids' failure at compassion, right when an opportunity to practice at it was handed to them, made me realize that my ability at it, to overcome my fear, was something special, and it gave me a burst of self-confidence that lasted for months and for years! It may have even lasted up until now.

So – even though we (my parents, brother and I) NEVER talked about giving to those in need, at least they got me to the church that did – and man, I wish my church had facilitated such programs a lot lot more, and it's one reason we are fund-raising so hard this year, so we can ensure that our amazing new Director of Religious Exploration can *establish* these kinds of programs for *our* children and youth. Talk about talents, we have so much talent on our staff! But we are not out of the woods until we are able to *sustain* our staff at our current capacity. While I share stories this morning, I also insert these important pieces of information, that I hope will inspire everyone here to pledge generously to our annual fund drive. If you pledged last year, we are asking you to raise your pledge by 25%. I know that's a big number, but with big dreams come big numbers, and if we all work together to dig deep, we can achieve this goal.

To this day, my home church where I grew up has an annual Rummage Sale – almost without fail, it raises \$10 – 15,000 dollars, which is a brilliant little fundraiser,

except for all the work it entails, but every year when I was a kid, my mom would say, “oh goodie it’s rummage sale time, let’s get rid of some crap!” Clutter is the immortal enemy of my mother, and *that* was really the focus for the rummage sale for us, it wasn’t, let’s figure out what we can do without, so we can help those in need to buy nice things at low cost.

I share all this with you because, for me, recognizing that I have gaps of consciousness when it comes to generosity was a big part of my becoming a more mature adult. It’s true I am financially generous now because I have the means to be. However, being generous in terms of my time, talent, and treasure came much later for me – I suppose in the last 5 years especially - which I’m a little embarrassed about, since the myth is that if you don’t have money to give, you volunteer your time and talent. It’s a myth because limited income persons actually give a much bigger percentage of their earnings, as well as volunteer more time than their better-healed cohorts. People with less money are literally more down to earth, and spend more time with people who have less.

My parents were never down to earth in this way. They preferred working with their like-minded folks at our very suburban Chicago church, helping keep the institution strong. To this day, I think they still give money generously too, about \$2500 a year or so – the kind of pledge that makes a difference. If I sound critical toward my parents, it’s only insofar that I feel my mom especially would personally benefit from volunteering farther afield, building new relationships and friendships along the way. For example, for years her mother, my grandma, used to volunteer by visiting women in prison, in the quad cities of Iowa. This, however, is just not my mom’s sort of thing. She is happy to write the checks.

My point is that, while our upbringing may influence our giving in our younger adult years, especially when we have a lot less money, as we get older, the good news is that we get to decide for ourselves what generosity means to us, and what generosity looks like. For me it’s a combination of financial giving and my volunteer time serving on the board of a progressive grass-roots organization in Pasadena.

But I need more than this, I’m realizing. As I read through the stories of “The Generosity Plan” I realized I miss the hands-on types of volunteering I used to do. I would love to read to an elder person, and make my kids do it, too. Also, when I went to Seminary, I took a full-time two-week course from some Catholic nuns about how to massage the homeless. It’s a 20-minute massage sequence you can do where the homeless person sits in a chair, fully-clothed. In fact, massaging the homeless is the most powerful and holy volunteer work I’ve ever done - so why the heck did I stop? Since Seminary, I’ve trained folks at two UU congregations to go out and do this work, too - we went to drop-in centers and food banks, offering it up. The need is even greater today, as our homeless population in LA County sky-rockets. Massaging the homeless doesn’t fix anything more than reading to a dying woman does. This kind of giving is more about giving a moment of love, peace, and compassion.

If I'm honest, I probably stopped because I was brought up to not value that sort of thing, at heart. I struggle with having discipline in this regard, caring for caring's sake. I was taught to strive and get ahead, and work my ass off. If there's no time and energy after work and child-rearing, that's just how it is. But – I want to change this, and maybe some of you do, as well.

It's true that I get to serve folks constantly as part of my work as a minister, but one of my concerns here, and at any UU church I might serve, is that UUs tend to limit their time and talents to keeping their own institution growing. We feel the pressure of the necessity to do so. I can tell you the strain is great on myself and my colleagues to keep our congregations in healthy financial condition. I do go into this year's annual fund drive with some anxiety, because even if we do make our ambitious \$150 K pledges goal to keep all our staff and programs going for next year, we are still looking at a sizable (currently 30 K) short-fall if we continue with our budget as is. In other words, currently we are spending beyond our means, which is one reason I'm a little concerned.

So why are we talking about volunteering time and talents as much as raising money for our annual fund drive kick-off? Because if I only talked about money, I would sound even more anxious, and anxiety is not inspiring. I know that. We come here to soothe our anxieties, not make them worse. So: if it's true that the more people volunteer their time and talent, the more they also give financially, then this is an important correlation that I hope *does* inspire you. If anyone would like to have a one-on-one with me, where I ask you the questions I read earlier about "going back to your giving roots" I would love to! It's a great way to figure out how to add a volunteer commitment that may be life-changing.

We have a lovely tri-fold brochure that is in everyone's pledge packets, that gives you some ideas and inspiration for how you might want to volunteer here at the UU Church of Studio City. We are in large part a volunteer-run organization, and it's something you might want to discuss as part of your conversation with your visiting steward. This year, everyone who pledged last year or is a new member, has been assigned a Visiting Steward, whom you will hear from this week. Next Sunday, we will post all the assignments so you can see who yours is if you haven't heard from them yet. If you are relatively new, and would like to have a conversation with one of our 19 Visiting Stewards, then please let me know. At this time, will all our Visiting Stewards who are present please stand up?

19 of us are willing to give of our time to have these very important face-to-face conversations. This is a chance to talk about our habits of generosity, be they in terms of time, talents, or treasure. More than this, it's an act of community-building; it's a fun way to get to know one another, and have a satisfying interaction about our giving and how we feel the church is doing, and what we might improve upon.

In terms of the ask, the cat is already out of the bag. We need to increase our overall pledge giving by 25% this year, so you already know that part. We understand that not everyone can increase by 25% and so we ask those of you who are able to consider raising by 50%. Maybe some of you could even double your pledges. My husband and I are committed to raising our pledge by 50%, from \$1200 to \$1800, because with some discipline, we can give at the Sustainer level, which begins at \$150/month.

We are planning to have a Sustainer Appreciation event this year, which includes folks who sustain the church in terms of their time and talent. This includes elected volunteer positions, as well as committee chairs. We want to thank those of us who are just that – sustainers of everything we do here. If it weren't for these folks, we couldn't be here, doing what we do year after year, for generations to come. We hope that becoming a "Sustainer" might serve as a worthy goal for many of us to work toward. I know I feel good about becoming a "Sustainer."

So this service today is meant to get your juices flowing when it comes to generosity – not just in dollars, but in how we give with our heart and our souls too. All of us can get better at ministering to one another, caring for our larger community's animals and eco-systems, spending time with the very old and the very young who lack connections – I hope we all find a way to add a volunteer role that is unique to our own life experiences and talents.

If we had to sum up what this place is about, it's about generosity. Having the opportunity to be generous, and to *receive* in generous amounts the things we just can't get anywhere else: inspiration to be our better selves and grow our values; community warmth you can count on Sunday after Sunday to help us get through the lonelier week; one-on-one spiritual, emotional care with your fellow members and friends, or your minister.

Life can be hard, and the answer is to be generous. There are not too many things I feel comfortable promising you all – I'm a good religious liberal that way. I like to say questions are more profound than answers, if you recall. But lean in: here is something I can promise you. One never regrets being generous. If ever you regretted a generous act, I would like to hear that story. Generosity of time, talent, and treasure is a good way to live, and the truth is, even people like me tend to forget this. It's the way I was brought up, it's the society I live in.

So let all with ears to hear heed the good news: it's never too late to discipline a selfish heart. I've learned this lesson myself, and sometimes I need to re-learn it.

Like the Grinch, may we all experience what it is when our heart grows a few sizes bigger, that we might know what it means to not only sustain me and mine, but what it is to sustain each other, in this precious community yes but also, most importantly, in the precious life every being shares together, on this one, holy planet.

May it be so.