

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website  
SMALL GROUP SESSION  
"ON GIVING AND GRATITUDE"  
First Universalist Church UU, Auburn, ME, Rev. Glenn Turner, March 2017

OPENING WORDS & CHALICE LIGHTING

"Gratitude is inseparable from love. It is what a well-adjusted person feels in response to the love of others. The capacity to acknowledge and accept their love awakens a longing to offer one's own in return."

- from "Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan" by Anthony T. Kronman

SILENT REFLECTION

CHECK-IN: (40-50 minutes)

FOCUS: "ON GIVING AND GRATITUDE"

We're going to use as a springboard to our discussion the chapter "Getting it Right," from the book "*My Grandfather's Blessings*" by Rachel Remen.

In the Mishna Torah, Maimonides, the great doctor rabbi, describes the eight levels of "charity," or ways of giving to others. This was one of the many traditional teachings that my grandfather and I discussed and puzzled over. At the time, he was an Orthodox rabbi, a lifelong student of the Talmud, and I was five years old. When a text was as subtle and complex as this, he would simplify all of it but its most basic wisdom. Here is the way that he told it to me.

At the *eighth* and most basic level of giving to others, a man begrudgingly buys a coat for a shivering man who has asked him for help, gives it to him in the presence of witnesses, and waits to be thanked.

At the *seventh* level, a man does this same thing, begrudgingly, without waiting to be asked for help.

At the *sixth* level, a man does this same thing openheartedly without waiting to be asked for help.

At the *fifth* level, a man openheartedly gives a coat that he has bought to another but does so in private.

At the *fourth* level, a man openheartedly and privately gives his own coat to another, rather than a coat that he has bought.

At the *third* level, a man openheartedly gives his own coat to another who does not know who has given him this gift. But the man himself knows the person who is indebted to him.

At the *second* level, he openheartedly gives his own coat to another and has no idea who has received it. But the man who receives it knows to whom he is indebted.

And finally, on the *first* and purest level of giving to others, a man openheartedly gives his own coat away without knowing who will receive it, and who receives it does not know who has given it to him.

Then giving becomes a natural expression of the goodness in us, and we give as simply as flowers breathe out their perfume.

At the time, it was very important to me to be good and to do things right, and I listened to this description very carefully. "I will only do it the right way, Grandpa," I assured him. He began to laugh. "Ah, Neshume-le," he said to me tenderly. "Here we have a special sort of thing. Suppose we all gave to those around us as the first man does, begrudgingly offering a coat we have bought in the presence of

witnesses to someone who has need and who asks us for help? If we all did this, would there be more suffering or less suffering in the world than there is now?”

I thought for a long time, the need to do it right battling in me with the simplicity of my grandfather’s question. “Less suffering, Grandpa, I said finally in some confusion. “Ah, yes,” he said, beaming, “this is true. Some things have so much goodness in them they are worth doing any way that you can.”

Unquestionably there are ways of giving that may diminish others, stripping them of their dignity and self-worth. We can learn how to give without taking something away, and often we may learn as we go. But according to my grandfather, it is better to bless life badly than not to bless it at all.

#### DISCUSSION:

There are, as in this story, many ways of giving. We could narrow the eight levels to three: giving publicly, privately, and anonymously. We could also look at giving as simply providing help to someone who needs help, giving as a free expression of our love and support of someone, or of modeling the bonds of community through the example of our giving.

1. How do you prefer to give?
2. What are your motivations for giving?
3. Do you have expectations of the one or ones you give to?
4. How important is gratitude to you (receiving or expressing it)?
5. Have you received a gift in the presence of others? (could be a birthday or an honor) How did you feel?
6. Have you received a gift anonymously? How did you feel? Is gratitude a felt response when you receive a gift anonymously?
7. What gifts given to you personally evoke a sense of gratitude?
8. Do you feel a sense of obligation (perhaps unwanted) when given a gift, or helped in some way?
9. How important is giving in the world we want to live in?

#### LIKES AND WISHES

#### CLOSING WORDS:

We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.

— Winston Churchill