

Words matter, therefore, the definition of words make a difference. My words this morning are intended to focus on generosity. I seek to elicit generosity, on your part, as we begin our stewardship campaign. I seek to encourage you to be generous as you make a decision to financially support our faith community. (I'm just being up front, that's the truth of what today is about.)

As I was preparing my sermon and thinking about generosity, I thought I should ground my remarks in a clear understanding of the term. So I consulted the dictionary. Because the definition of words matter.

I discovered the word munificent as a synonym for generosity. I then had another word to gain clarity about. Munificent means very liberal in giving or bestowing; lavish; characterized by great liberality. I knew I was on to something...we being a liberal religious community.

I also discovered other synonyms for generosity: bountifulness, nobleness and magnanimity. All positive attributes. The antonyms listed for generosity were: stinginess, pettiness. I knew I was home free at that point. All I had to do was to ask you to choose which camp you'd prefer to be in: the one with all the noble liberals, being magnanimous or the group defined as stingy and petty? But, relax, I've decided to take the high road and not ask that question. In the courts, they call it leading the witness.

Generosity is the *habit of giving* without expecting anything in return. It can be the giving of time, assets or talents to benefit others. Generosity is equated with charity and is seen as a virtue, seen by society as a desirable trait. In addition to the "*habit of giving*", generosity can also be the actual giving or spending of time, money or labor for the benefit of others, but again, without the expectation of reward in exchange.

A broader definition of generosity includes the giving of emotional support, giving respect, genuine listening to another, the demonstration of care and concern. This is the giving of self---not just resources you can put in an envelop or box and place in the mail...this is genuine human interaction, interconnectedness, emotional connection.

There's another component of generosity that caught my notice. Generosity includes the notion of intentionality. The term connotes a purity of intent. The purity of intention to benefit the common good, the greater good. It's a particular type of giving that comes from the heart. Perhaps that's why generosity is one of the Ten Perfections in Buddhism, seen to contradict self-absorption, an antidote to the self-imposed poison of greed.

The etymology of the word generosity is fascinating. The word comes to us from the Latin word *generosus*, meaning "of noble birth". The stem of the word, "gener" means kin, clan, stock. The Indo-European root "gen" means "to beget"; such as in genesis, gentry, genital, genealogy, and genius.

Into the 16th Century, the English use of the word, generous, had to do with an aristocratic notion of noble lineage. So to be generous was an act of nobility. During the 17th Century, the meaning started to shift away from a connection to lineage and heritage, to a notion of nobility of spirit; those admirable qualities that could now reside in any person, regardless of their family of birth. So over time, the term came to be associated with the many traits of character and actual behavior that had historically been reserved for true nobility, such as gallantry, courage, strength, riches and fairness.

These are all terms of virtue. And it's this aspect of generosity that I want to particularly focus on this morning. Because these traits are generally not held by those who are faint of heart. Gallantry is not a singular act. It must be a trait in order to be seen as a virtue. The typical image of gallantry is the man removing his coat and laying it down over a pool of water, so a lovely lady can walk without getting her feet wet.

In order to be gallant in such a fashion, it seems to me, one is either wealthy enough to own two coats or has the strength of character to navigate the world in a dirty wet coat! Speaking of dirty wet coats, I'm reminded of the woman who, in her zeal and love of dogs, is seen either as virtuous or as a silly, neurotic.

I suspect you've seen or know of the type I'm talking about. It's the woman (and it is generally a woman) who has an unending commitment to the welfare of dogs. No scrap of meat can be thrown away. It must be saved for the dogs. I say dogs, because you can't just have one; every dog must have at least one playmate for when they are left at home alone. And it is only when they are left alone, because when the owners are home, there is always a lap, couch or bed to be shared.

The house is never without doggie treats, nor the car or pockets. There are rawhide chews and doggie toys everywhere. People like this, have an unrelenting commitment to dogs, any dog, anywhere and at any time. They'll stop the car on any street to check to see if a dog is lost or a stray.

They contribute to any cause that is said to benefit dogs. They are an easy mark, as they say in the sales office, for any ad with a picture of a dog in it. They collect scraps of cloth, old towels and linen, to be taken to the kennel during their numerous visits to provide loving care for the dogs in cages.

In the most positive sense, these are acts of virtue. These are acts of generosity of spirit, generosity of time and generosity of assets. These are determined people. They will not be swayed from their commitment to the welfare of dogs. No matter how often they may be ridiculed. No matter how silly they may look traipsing after a dog they fear is lost or abandoned. No matter how much money, or how little they may actually have.

These people demonstrate a strength of character. They live the courage of their convictions. They share the richness of their spirits. They share of themselves. They are genuinely in-relationship, with what they love.

There are numerous studies that have been done on the subject of generosity. Scientists have sought to identify the source of generosity; just what drives it? Sociologists have looked for patterns associated with generosity. Is generosity in equal proportion across different demographics? Are some people more inclined to be generous than others? Are religious people more likely to be inherently generous than those who define themselves as non-religious? Or is it, that a religious affiliation draws out or causes one to become generous, or more generous?

Some studies have sought to prove the hypothesis that says, acts of generosity, acts of kindness or altruism can in some way be contagious. They suggest that generosity can spread across groups of people. In other words, they've set out to prove that "if I am generous to you, you will be generous to others." If you receive generosity, you'll be more inclined to be generically, more generous, not merely generous to the person from whom you received generosity.

I have every expectation that they'll be able to document the truth of that hypothesis. I certainly hope they do, as I believe it's true. I believe if one is generous to another person, that person is more likely to be generous themselves. I believe generosity breeds generosity. Just like yawning tends to induce others to yawn. People who smile tend to elicit smiles from others. And a generous person tends to kindle a generous spirit in those who receive generosity.

As I've said before, generosity is the *habit of giving*, without expecting anything in return. Such a habit, such behavior, can rightly be called a spiritual practice. It's the repeated effort of giving of time, assets or talents for the benefit of others.

Separate from the "*habit of giving*", generosity can be a simple act; an act of giving or spending time, money or effort, on behalf of others. In the broadest sense of the term, generosity includes the giving of emotional support, treating others with respect, genuinely listening to another person; it can be the demonstration of care and concern.

That's the definition of generosity I'd like us to adopt. That's the generous contagion I'd like us to share. I'd like generosity of spirit to be a spiritual practice we all engage in, share and learn from each other.

The last point I want to make today is to challenge the notion that generosity is only for the benefit of others. I do believe *true generosity* must have the fundamental intentionality of benefiting others. If an act is not primarily for the greater good, then it is self-aggrandizement, it serves the purpose of stroking one's ego.

But true generosity, does more than benefit the greater good. It benefits us as individuals as well. We are a part of that interconnected web of life. Anything that benefits the common good, benefits us as well. So generosity, like all of the virtues, is in our own genuine, enlightened, self-interest to learn and practice.

That is especially true for us in this community of faith. Being generous, in all its myriad dimensions, helps to sustain and enhance this vital resource of ours. This building and our faith community provides us a sanctuary from our government's ugly politics, from the gloom and doom of the mundane. This faith community is a haven from the work-a-day world, a cradle for our cares and concerns. It's a community of nourishment and support, a loving community that challenges us to grow.

Ours is a community of genuine, human potential. It's a community of universal human nature, both good and bad, joyful and irritating.

A fellow UU minister once said: "you know you are truly a member of a faith community when you return even after your feelings have been hurt, and your ego has been scraped by the interaction with others. That's when you know you are a member of a faith community!"

And I would add, one that hopes to enhance your generosity of spirit.

May it be so. Amen