

Reading from Isabele Allende

Give, give, give -- what is the point of having experience, knowledge or talent if I don't give it away? Of having stories if I don't tell them to others? Of having wealth if I don't share it? I don't intend to be cremated with any of it! It is in giving that I connect with others, with the world and with the divine.

Sermon c. Rev. Vail Weller

Sunday, April 10, 2011~ Celebration Sunday

There's a saying in my household. "This is just what we do in our family." This saying is often uttered when there has been some complaint registered by one of the smaller people in our family. If the reminder has been given that chores need to be done before watching TV or playing a video game, and great gnashing of teeth ensues, you will hear, "We do our chores first. This is just what we do in our family." If someone is reminded to sit back down at the table because people are still eating, bringing on great moaning and thrashing, you will hear, "We eat dinner all together. This is just what we do in our family."

If there has been a skirmish, and one small person is attacking another small person, requiring an intervention, this will surely be part of the conversation that takes place: "We don't hit each other. We try our best to be kind. That is just what we do in our family."

And there are other things we just do as a family: we go to church on Sundays. We pause for gratitude time before we eat. We give away 5% of what we earn.

"That is just what we do in our family": this statement is a way of sketching out the boundaries of the family expectations. And, if there are small people who time and time again need to be reminded of the expectations, they will also be reminded that they will be invited to go out and live on the play structure in the back yard, with the wolves, if they cannot observe the family rules. In actuality, this statement about sending them out to live in the back yard is not entirely true. There are no wolves back there. (Don't tell my children that, though.) Seriously, though, I would not actually send my children to live on the play structure in the back yard, no matter what they did (or did not) do. Part of being in the family means you are part of the family, period. But it is helpful though to know what the established framework of the family is.

I know that I feel good when I am helping to make our family function more smoothly. I know that while I may have an initial internal grumble when I see the pile of laundry that needs to be done, or the dishes that need to be washed, or the bills that need to be paid, but truth be told, it actually feels good to do my part and help out. And it is clear that the only way the family functions smoothly is if we are each doing what we can to help. This is an important lesson for our children, and in all honesty, I am sometimes the one that needs the reminder.

I don't refer to our congregation as a family. Here are some reasons why. You have to be born into, or must marry into, a family. The boundaries of a family are not flowing and open, the way I would hope the boundaries of a church would be. We are a different group every single Sunday. We are constantly growing, changing, evolving.

And this next reason may come as a surprise to you: families are not always healthy. In fact, there are some families that are even dysfunctional! Or worse: some families are abusive, unhealthy, and sick. I am sensitive to that fact.

While all congregations surely have times of chaos and conflict, I do not want church to be a place where those extremely damaging and problematic elements found in unhealthy families can be found. The fact is, we are not a family. We can have close relationships here, and we can be enriched by our love for one another.

But we are freely choosing to be here, not only for our own spiritual sustenance and the nourishing of our children, but for the greater good of the world. The connections we share with one another are important, but they are but one part of the complex set of circumstances that draw us into religious community.

There is a framework that holds us in this faith. While we are free to seek, define and refine our personal religious beliefs, we do covenant to affirm and promote the seven principles listed on the back cover of your order of service. We also are held by the mission statement that you'll find there, as well as the Congregational Covenant of Right Relations.

Inside your order of service, you'll find the list of Expectations of Membership that are shared with people who are considering committing to our church. While these are readily available on our website and discussed at the Getting to Know UU (preparation for membership) class, I thought it'd be helpful for those of you who are already members, or have been members for quite some time, to be reminded of what membership in our congregation asks. So you see that while we are not a family, we do have a way of saying, "This is just what we do in our faith community."

Today is one of those special mornings when we get to make explicit our commitments to the church. Perhaps you think it might be nice if we didn't have to do this once a year. But I believe that it's actually a great thing to reflect upon the place of the church in your life, and to have the opportunity to re-commit. Why? Because otherwise, we might take everything we receive from the church for granted. We might have the best intentions to do something generous for the sake of the spiritual community that benefits our life, but we might just plain forget, or we may choose to do the equivalent of playing the video game before doing our chores.

What we know is that it feels good to do our part. It is good that the church gives us the opportunity to do our part, and invites us to do some soul-searching at least once a year about what our level of support will be. That should be re-examined, re-evaluated, and our level of commitment should, over time, grow. *Our level of commitment should, over time, grow.*

I experimented with a new aspect of generosity this past year. My monthly pledge amount comes directly out of my bank account and automatically is sent to the church. Therefore, I had been letting the offering plate pass me by on Sunday mornings, because my pledge payment had already been made. I challenged myself this year to put cash in the plate, so I've been putting \$20 in each Sunday. I wanted to see how it would feel, to stretch my giving. I can report to you that it feels good! You might want to try it, too.

UU lay leader Peter Henrickson says, "We need generosity of spirit: It is part of our spiritual presence to be responsive to the needs of others. There are those in our churches who need more than they give, whether spiritually, emotionally, or financially. In truth, none of us is generous all the time; we each have moments of need. We practice a generous spirit to remind ourselves of how we wish to be treated in our dark times."

It is appropriate to have the time when one can give a great deal to committee work, and activism, and leadership. And then there are other times when the spiritual ember is flickering and one just needs to be held, nurtured, restored.

The beauty of this community is that it exists to support both purposes: to offer the inspiration to and opportunities for involvement, as well as a place to be restored and recharged when the spirit needs to be healed. There is a time to give, and a time to receive.

In our consumer culture, we are surrounded by messages that tell us that we can never have enough. The culture tells us that we need a new wardrobe, cell phone, laptop or car in order to have arrived. That we will be truly happy if we just have that one more

vacation. That when our bank account is just a bit more full, we will be able to relax and enjoy our abundance. The culture that we live in tells us that we will never have enough.

It is the church that reminds us that there are other things that deserve our attention: our spiritual lives, cultivating gratitude, discerning our true calling, helping others, using our gifts to bless the world, making and keeping promises, seeking wholeness and silence and sacred space, admitting our mistakes, offering forgiveness and celebrating all of our blessings.

This religious community tries to remind us, week after week, that we have all we need, in the largest sense. All We Need. Really. And that we do not actually own any of the things we have, including our money. We will not ultimately get to keep anything at all. It is all temporary. The happiest people I know are those who give as much as possible.

Arleen Henricksen was one of those people. One of the last checks she wrote in her life was for our New Building Fund. I believe that she knew her time was at hand, and she was thinking to herself, “How much can I possibly give to the church which has meant so much to me?” She wrote me a letter, and sent a check for \$1000. I am so inspired and emboldened by such acts of generosity.

It is out of a similar sense of gratitude that I hope we all give to support this congregation generously. When we are nourished by this place, we give, not as *little as we possibly can* in order to feel good, but we give *as much as we possibly can*, to ensure that this congregation not only survives but thrives into the future.

It is an extraordinarily important moment for each and every one of us to make a strong statement of commitment to this church. I ask you to give 5% of your income, and to work your way up to 10%. Give to support your music program. Give to support your religious education program. Give to support the justice work done by this congregation. Give to support your leaders who love this community. Give to allow the beautiful strong foundation of this church to be strengthened even further.

I say all of this as your minister. But I also want to say this, as your minister: give to enlarge your own heart, to enlarge your own sense of what is possible. Give to support something that blesses your life and for which you are immeasurably grateful. **And please hear this: whatever your gift to the church is, we celebrate and appreciate it.**

Remember: “[W]hat is the point of having experience, knowledge or talent if [we] don't give it away? Of having stories if [we] don't tell them to others? Of having wealth if [we]

don't share it?...It is in giving that [we] connect with others, with the world and with the divine.”

May it be so.