



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

## “The Generosity Path”

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The Jewish tradition with its tremendous respect for all we have inherited from previous generations reminds us that we often find ourselves “living in houses which we did not build, drinking from wells which we did not dig, and eating from trees which we did not plant.” In that spirit, I invite you to take a few moments to **recall**:

**a time when someone offered you tremendous generosity.** It could have been a gift of time, intelligence, money, caring, or simply presence. Remember who that person was and what they gave you with as much detail as you can. Remember how you experienced that event and how it affected you afterward. (Ewert 204)

From family and friends, to teachers and camp counselors, to even random strangers, most of us have been the beneficiaries of tremendous generosity at various points in our lives. Sometimes we have the opportunity to pay these generous givers back in kind. More often, our invitation is to “pay it forward” to others: to both literally and metaphorically build houses in which others will live, dig wells from which others will drink, and to help plant trees from which others will eat.

Likewise, I invite you to **recall a time (or times) when you made a memorable gift or donation to an organization about which you feel passionate.** Again, in addition to money, what may come to mind is a generosity of time, intelligence, caring, or presence.

My sermon for this morning is inspired by a new book by Mark Ewert titled The Generosity Path. I will not make you do the opening the activity Mark recommends for small groups reflecting on the practice of generosity since we are in a large group setting. But imagine what it might feel like to take out your wallet (or whatever you carry your money or charge cards in). Then what it would feel like to pass your wallet to the person sitting on your left. And then pass to the left again. Then, Mark invites small groups to sit with the other's wallet for a few minutes. Afterwards, he invites everyone to go around the room and **share what it feels like to hold someone else's wallet or to have your wallet held by someone else.**

There are such complex personal experiences and social histories behind the various ways each of us think and behave about money. And too often messages around money are guilt- or fear-based. But **the invitation to walk the generosity path is to increasingly approach money from a place of inner freedom and abundance.**

From the Buddhist tradition Lama Surya Das writes that, **“Giving brings happiness at every stage of its expression. We experience joy in forming the intention to be generous; we experience joy in the actual act of giving something; and we experience joy in remembering the fact we have given”** (xvii).

Similarly, from the Christian tradition, Henri Nouwen writes, **“Every time I take step in the direction of generosity, I know that I am moving from fear to love”** (xviii).

Or from modern science,

Research from the University of British Columbia and Harvard Business School shows that **spending money on someone else — as little as \$5 a day — can significantly boost your happiness.** Students who practiced random acts of kindness were significantly happier than those who were not given this task. In another study, college students were given money and directed to either spend it on themselves or spend it pro-socially (on activities meant to benefit other people). **Participants who spent it pro-socially were happier at the end of the day than those who spent it on themselves.** (2)

From a UU perspective, we can attribute these findings to the fact that whereas *scarcity*-thinking leaves us isolated and alone, *generosity* makes us more aware in a positive way of our connection to the “interdependent web of all existence.”

Along these lines, if you are a looking for a great resource on having honest conversations about money and generosity with your children or grandchildren, I highly recommend the new book by the *New York Times* “Your Money” columnist Ron Lieber titled ***The Opposite of Spoiled: Raising Kids Who Are Grounded, Generous, and Smart About Money.***

And when we think of some of the most generous givers in history, one word that comes to mind is *philanthropy* from the Greek words for “**Lover of humanity**” (xvi). That etymology is at the core of what we aspire to be as Unitarian Universalists. We sometimes speak of UUism as a theologically liberal religion in the best sense of that word *liberal*: open to new ideas, generous, open-handed, open-hearted, and open-minded. Accordingly, our Seven Principles include tremendously high aspirations of philanthropy: recognition of the “The inherent worth and dignity of every person,” seeking to create “Justice, equity and compassion in human relations,” and “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” And **one of the first steps we can take to help “build the world dream about” is a personal commitment to *take the next step* — whatever that looks like for us individually and collectively — on the path toward greater generosity.** That might look like a generosity of money, but it may also look like a generosity of time, intelligence, caring, or simply presence.

Ewert also emphasizes that the other side of the generosity path: **there are seasons in our life when our invitation is to allow ourselves to *receive*. Using the acronym HALT — which stands for Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired** — he writes that it is difficult to be generous if you are Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired. So if that is the case, your invitation is to stop — to “HALT” — and take care of yourself (58).

Earlier, I invited you to consider a time when someone offered you tremendous generosity as well as a time when you made a memorable gift or donation to an organization about which you feel passionate. Looking to the future, **what are you passionate about in this season of your life? What gifts of time, intelligence, caring, or simply presence do you have**

**to share?** Instead of paying someone *back* for generosity in the past, what might you be called to ‘pay *forward*’ to someone else?

A mentor once told me that, **“Generosity is the beginning of wisdom.”** The prefix of the word *generous* means “birth,” as in the word *generative* (1-2). I took him to mean that **generosity invites us to share our gifts and our self with the world.** That’s what moving along the Generosity Path looks like. And if communities like UUCF have fed you, comforted you, and stood in solidarity with you in times of injustice, the invitation is to give generously out what you have that together we might expand our ability to do likewise for others now and in the future.

As I once heard a speaker say, many organizations that work for social change make a mistake in calling themselves *non*-profits. We need to start seeing ourselves as a “*social profit*” organization. **We invite you to invest your money, time, and energy in this place because we bring *social profit* to this community for building a better world based on connection, compassion, diversity, and justice.** And we have the potential to do so much more beyond the significant work that we are already doing.

I should also say that one joke about the genre of sermon I am preaching this morning is that **instead of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, stewardship sermons are “Sermons on the Amount.”** And many years I don’t tend to preach a “Sermon on the Amount.” Although I do think it is important to speak periodically about the virtue of practicing generosity, I generally feel like the major determination for whether someone gives generously to this congregation is not whether I preach one “Pledge Drive Sermon” per year, but rather the community, spirituality, and support we seek to provide week in and week out.

But I do feel led to speak more explicitly about generosity and stewardship at the beginning of this year’s pledge drive because **we are at a turning point in the history of this congregation.** To briefly trace our history, this congregation was formed 54 years ago in 1961, the same year that the Unitarians and the Universalists consolidated into the Unitarian Universalist Association. At that time, this congregation met on the 2nd floor over the Colonial Music Shop on East Patrick Street. Through the years, other locations included the South End Civic Association and the YMCA. During much of that time, for almost three decades, this congregation was completely lay-led with the exception of two quarter-time student ministers in

the early 80s. That's a tremendous legacy of self-reliance and lay leadership from which we continue to benefit. But a need increasingly began to be felt for professional leadership that could help catalyze programs and growth.

In 1989 and into the early nineties, two other quarter-time ministers served this congregation. And at the beginning that same time period in 1989, this congregation bought the house that still stands today at 1301 Motter Avenue. **We soon jumped to a half-time minister in 1993 and to this congregation's first full-time minister in 1994.** As we grew beyond the 70-seat capacity of Motter House, we moved to two Sunday services, then to Rosenstock Hall at Hood College. Then, **in 2003 we dedicated and moved into this building.**

But starting in the mid-2000s, we went through a period in which we had four ministers in quick succession. Three of them were intentional short-term interims; nevertheless, the result was a lot of transition in a short timeframe. The last of those ministers was hired on only a half-time basis. **Structurally, that was like turning back the clock two decades to 1993, when this congregation last had a half-time minister.**

My sense is that halted trajectory and unfinished potential was why three years ago when this congregation was preparing to call its next minister (who turned out to be me) you all collectively stepped up to fully fund *both* the regular Operating Budget *and* a special Three-year Minister Fund to take a leap back from a *half*-time minister to a *full*-time ministry and return this congregation to its previous trajectory.

At that time, I was at the beginning of moving from nine years as a minister in Progressive Christian congregations to affiliating with the Unitarian Universalist Association. And I'm incredibly grateful that this congregation took the risk both of providing sufficient funding to call a full-time minister and of calling me, who at the time was only an Aspirant to UU ministry.

Three years later, I have passed the UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee and will walk across the stage this summer at the UU General Assembly in Portland, Oregon at the Service of the Living Tradition, which commemorates ministerial transitions. And **three years later here at UUCF, we are in what feels like a new day with a bright future.** And as that three-year Minister's Fund is set to expire this June, our invitation and challenge is to take that

next step of fully integrating the Three-year Minister's Fund into our ongoing Operating Budget. So, **if you have ever felt like you might want to make a financial pledge to UUCF or increase your pledge incrementally — or substantially — this year, at this turning point in our congregational's history, is a time when increasing your pledge or pledging for the first time can make a significant difference.**

Looking at the long arc of UUCF's history, from the vantage point of my third year as your minister, it feels like we are back on the right track as a congregation, and the trajectory on which we are headed is incredibly exciting. And that bright future is about so much more than what I bring to this congregation; it is about the collaborative ministry we share in religious education, music, fellowship, social and environmental justice initiatives, and so much more. As we grow from what is called a "Pastoral-sized Congregation" (50-150 average worship attendance) to a "Program-Sized Congregation" (225-450 average worship attendance), I'm increasingly aware and grateful for all that happens in this congregation with little-or-no-direct involvement from me. We're in this together. And I remain committed to what I told the search committee that called me to UUCF. My plan is to stay at least 7-10 years and potentially longer.

So as we look to our next three years here at UUCF and beyond, I invite you to consider your responses to what author Peter Block calls "powerful questions":

- What *gifts* [of time, intelligence, money, caring, or simply presence] do you hold that you are willing to bring to this congregation?
- What is the *commitment* that you bring to this congregation?
- How *valuable* do we want your involvement with this congregation to be?
- How valuable an experience do you plan for [your involvement] to be?

If you would like to talk further about discerning the various ways you may feel called to be involved at UUCF, I would be glad to set a time with you to talk further in my office either now or whenever the timing feels right.

For now, I'll conclude with the following words adapted from a congregational pledge that invites us to reflect on how each one of us contributes to what this Beloved Community is and can become:

My congregation is composed of people like me. I help make it what it is.

It will be friendly, if I am.

It will be kind, forgiving, and welcoming, if I am.

Its seats will be filled if I help fill them.

It will do great work, if I work.

It will make generous gifts to many causes, if I am a generous giver.

It will bring others into its worship, if I invite them and bring them.

It will be a congregation of loyalty and love, of fearlessness and faith, of compassion, charity and mercy, if I who make it what it is, am filled with these things.

Therefore, I dedicate myself to the task of being all things that I want my spiritual home to be.

I'm grateful to be on this journey with all of you. And I look forward to continuing with you on the path toward ever-greater generosity of heart, generosity of mind, generosity of wealth, and generosity of spirit.

May it be so. And blessed be.