



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Giving Away Our Thanks”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

A homily delivered on November 23, 2014

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

*If you knew what I know about the power of generosity,
you would not let a single meal go by without sharing it.* The Buddha

It is more blessed to give than to receive. Christian Bible, Acts 20:35

*At its best, a potlatch was a way to redistribute material wealth rather than
leaving it in the hands of a few.* Joseph Bruchac (Abenaki)

*Generosity is about giving without a guaranteed return –
it is about the ‘giveaway.’* Matthew Fox

Story

“Raven and Crow’s Potlatch,” a tale from the First Nation’s people of the Northwest Pacific Coast of North America, was told before the sermon by Morgan Watson, UUFA’s Director of Religious Education, and some children and youth. [www.eldrbarry.net/rabb/rvn/crow.htm]

Homily

What did you think about the story of Raven and Crow? It’s not an admirable story, is it? Raven tricked Crow, Crow lost his voice, the other animals invited Raven to their potlatch feasts, and everyone ignored Crow. None of the characters acquit themselves well. Usually a trickster pays a penalty for their trickery. Or, fairly harmless trickery serves a good purpose that leaves us satisfied with the ending. But not in this story. Instead of admiring Raven, I dislike him and I feel sorry for Crow.

Most of us don’t like to see others being taken advantage of. Nor do we want to be taken advantage of ourselves. In this story I imagine you, like me, feel empathy for the injured Crow caught in Raven’s selfish plan. We know Crow deserved better and I think that’s the value of this story—it reminds us that we want justice and fairness in human or animal relations, as our Sixth Principle of Unitarian Universalism affirms. And, our First Principle reminds us to treat one another with respect, unlike Crow’s treatment. If you’re not familiar with all seven UU principles they are printed on the back of your order of service.

Feelings of empathy, compassion, and moral right call us to share our abundance. When we give to the Cause of the Month, when we bring food for the Emergency Food Bank, and whenever we share our time, talent, and treasure with this Fellowship, we don't expect an equal return.

But we do get something back. We receive good feelings. We know we're connected to others, we know we've improved someone else's life, and we know we made the world just a little bit better. That's not a transaction but a benefit of our gift giving. Raven's potlatch, in contrast, was a commercial-like transaction.

Traditionally, potlatches were given by those who had something to share. It raised the giver's status because it showed how much they could afford to give away. At its heart, it redistributed wealth. First Nations' people did not value accumulating property. What you had in abundance was to be shared for the benefit of the whole community. Typically giveaways at a potlatch included blankets, utensils, clothing, tools, and other practical gifts. And because food was plentiful, no one went hungry.

Besides gaining status and showing off their wealth, Haida, Salish, Tlingit, Chinook, and others First Nation tribes along the Northwest Pacific Coast held potlatches to create alliances, promote altruism, vanquish rivals, and redistribute wealth. They also took place to observe births, deaths, marriages, and other rites of passage. The word potlatch is an Anglicized corruption of a Chinook word meaning 'to give away'.

Canadian and U.S. governments outlawed potlatches during the late 1800s. Missionaries thought it was un-Christian and wasteful, and others thought it went against an American cultural value of accrued wealth. In an effort to civilize the native people, potlatches were criminalized. Violators could be punished by up to six months or more in prison. In the 1950s these laws were taken off the books.

As we enter into the season of gift giving, the core values of a potlatch are worth remembering: from a sense of abundance one readily shares what they have. We all have something to share—friendship, support, solidarity, and yes, even our treasure.

Sometimes people feel the need to hoard their wealth. But if we fear to share what we have, be it love, compassion, skills, talents, time, or money, we become misers. And that doesn't serve anyone, least of all ourselves.

We are interconnected and we need one another. Our generosity benefits you in this Fellowship and in turn, the larger Athens area community.

May you receive peace and love in abundance this holiday season.

May you receive what you most need in the coming days ahead.

May you and I be grateful for the blessings we have received, and may we be generous in our giving all the year 'round.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Describe an act of generosity that might have made *you* happier than the recipient.
2. What inner voice or divine spirit calls you to be generous? How do you respond?
3. What, if anything, do you expect in return for your generosity? What situations change that?
4. How do you know when you've given enough? Does generosity need limits?