

## Transforming Gifts

The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen and Marc Renault<sup>1</sup>  
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley  
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*The gift is to the giver, and comes back most to him — it cannot fail.*  
Walt Whitman

## Opening Words<sup>2</sup> Marc Renault

As Unitarian Universalists we don't do anything because we "ought" to. We are reflective, individual, maybe even a little skeptical. These characteristics are born of our independence. We're not afraid to be different from the rest of the crowd. We are the captains of our own fate! We scoff at the idea that we would kowtow to some culturally imposed demand that we "ought" to behave in a certain way or we "ought" to believe in certain things.

So, with that in mind, let me talk about stewardship.

This is a great community. In this room we share joys, we share sorrows. We chat with friends and (in the other room) we eat snacks. Our children learn here. Not just school facts, but about life values that are important to us. Have you heard a sermon that made you think? Have you heard mu-



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<sup>2</sup> ©2011 Marc Renault, Boiling Springs, PA

sic that lifted your soul? You're here right now - why are you here?

Any gift given out of a sense of "ought" is going to be a poor gift.

Yesterday Tara and I helped some friends move bricks for about 3 hours. It was a nice day, we visited with our friends, and I was happy to help (even though I'm sore now!) I didn't go because I felt social obligation, and at the end I didn't say "you owe me!" I helped because these are my friends-- there was no "ought" about it.

If you believe that the friendships fostered here have value, if you believe that we have an important message to deliver to central Pennsylvania, if you believe that UUCV is worth something, well, then do something about it. UUCV has bricks to move. Can you lend a hand?

### **Reading**

from *Childhood and Poverty*

Pablo Neruda

*Pablo Neruda was born in 1904 in Temuco, a frontier town in southern Chile. One day when he was playing behind his house, he found a hole in the fence. He writes:*

I looked through the hole and saw a landscape like that behind our house, uncared for, and wild. I moved back a few steps because I sensed vaguely that something was about to happen.

All of a sudden a hand appeared — a tiny hand of a boy about my own age. By the time I came close again, the hand was gone, and in its place there was a marvelous white toy sheep.

The sheep's wool had faded. Its wheels had escaped. All of this only made it more authentic. I had never seen such a wonderful sheep. I looked back through the hole, but the boy had disappeared. I went into the house and brought out a treasure of my own: a pine cone, opened, full of odor and resin, which I adored. I set it down in the same spot and went off with the sheep.

I never saw either the hand or the boy again. And I have never seen a sheep like that either. The toy I lost finally in a fire. But even now ... whenever I pass a toyshop, I look furtively in the window. It's no use. They don't make sheep like that any more. ...

### **Sermon<sup>3</sup>**

Duane Fickeisen

Pablo Neruda reflected on the gift of a tattered toy sheep. He said the mysterious exchange of the sheep and pine cone — the gifts given between strangers — had settled deep inside him. He told an interviewer:

“I have been a lucky man. To feel the intimacy of brothers is a marvelous thing in life. To feel the love of people whom we love is a fire that feeds our life. But to feel the affection that comes from those we do not know, from those unknown to us, who are watching over our sleep and solitude, over our dangers and our weaknesses — that is something still greater and more beautiful because it widens out the boundaries of our being and unites all living things.

“That exchange brought home to me for the first time a precious idea: that all humanity is somehow together.

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Maybe it was nothing but a game two boys played who didn't know each other and wanted to pass to the other some good things in life. Yet maybe this small and mysterious exchange of gifts remained inside me also, deep and indestructible, giving my poetry light."<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes gifts have great leverage. Their power of transformation lies beyond their commodity or market value. For the gift is not just the thing that was given, but something more — the thought behind the gift does count. The intentions of the giver, the circumstances in which the exchange takes place, and the response of the recipient all influence the power of the gift.

Perhaps you have been the recipient of a gift from an anonymous benefactor. If so, how did that feel? Did either the gift itself or the experience have a lasting effect on you?

Maybe you have given an anonymous gift. If so, how did that feel? What motivated you to give without expectation of the return of anything more than the satisfaction of having given?

Consider this story about Howard Thurman, an African American who was born in 1899 and was raised by his grandmother, a former slave, in Daytona, Florida. The schools for black kids in Daytona only went to the seventh grade, but his grandmother arranged for him to go to high school in Jacksonville. They scraped up just enough money for train fare, but when he got to the station, the station master refused to accept his trunk as baggage since it had no handle on which to attach a tag. It would have to be shipped express at an extra charge, but he had no money left. He sat on the platform and

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<sup>4</sup> Palbo Neruda. Quoted in *The Gift*, by Lewis Hyde (New York: Vintage Books, 2007) pp. 367-368.

cried in despair. A black man in overalls asked the trouble. He took Howard to the ticket window and paid the shipping fee.<sup>5</sup>

Thurman graduated from Morehouse College as the valedictorian of the class of 1923. Martin Luther King, Sr. was in that class. Thurman studied with Rufus Jones, a Quaker pacifist, at Haverford. Under his tutelage, and a decade later when he met Gandhi in India, Thurman learned about and embraced principles of nonviolent resistance. He mentored his classmate's son, Martin Luther King, Jr., and his friends and encouraged them to adopt nonviolent resistance as a strategy in the civil rights movement.

The gift of the shipping fee made possible a vocation that impacted the core of the quest for racial justice in America. Thurman paid the gift forward by mentoring young black men who were passionate for justice.

Have you received a gift of assistance from someone you didn't know and wouldn't have expected to help you? Has a modern day good Samaritan given you aid in an emergency? Or someone gave you a boost that helped you follow a dream? Maybe the donor considered it a small thing, but it made a big difference to you. How did that feel? Have you paid it forward?

I grew up in a working class family. Dad was a self-employed carpenter, Mom was a homemaker. We lived in a modest house my parents built on a hill that overlooked a yacht club. Our family saved money to buy a boat and eventually had enough for an old 28-foot cruiser. It was in sad shape, but we worked to rebuild the cabin, keep the ancient engine running, and patch the hull.

The members of the Bremerton yacht club did most of the maintenance on their boats and the docks themselves. They were quick to offer help and expertise to one another. But one in particular stood out.

Reo Mitchell drove a milk truck, making deliveries to stores, schools, and institutions. He owned a wonderful old 50-foot wooden ketch. Reo almost always had a few half-pint cartons of milk or Dixie cups. Remember them? The little plastic cup of vanilla ice cream and orange sherbet in a yin-yang swirl. They came with a tiny wooden paddle. He handed out milk or Dixie cups to kids on the docks.

As our family loaded up our boat for a two-week cruise, Reo asked about our safety equipment. Did we have a ship-to shore radio? Yep. Spare parts for the engine? Check. An extra anchor? Nope. Well, he said as he went back and dug through his locker, "Take mine. You might need it." He was always generous with gear and help.

Once he asked me to crew for him in a sailing race. His old wooden boat was slow, but steady, and most often came in last or nearly last in these races. He was out to enjoy a day of sailing, not necessarily to win.

Reo was patient as he explained how to raise the sails and trim them as we slowly moved through the water with a very light breeze.

At one point I looked down and saw clamshells. Alarmed at the shallow water, I called out a warning. He knew these waters very well. We were fine, he said, "and if we go aground it will be the first time this season."

He was a great teacher. Calm and clear. Never seemed to get flustered, and responded to mistakes and adversity with

equanimity. I learned to sail from him, but more importantly, I noticed his demeanor and generosity.

A year later in a similar race, he was in the lead when suddenly his sails started to luff, flapping in the wind. Reo had been sailing alone that day.

A physician sailing nearby discovered that Reo had suffered a heart attack and died at the helm. Back at the dock, I was asked to help carry his body to the coroner's van. Even at 16 or so, I understood the privilege of doing this for someone I cared about. I had lost an important mentor, but I knew his lessons would last. Almost 50 years later I'm still striving to be more like him.

Perhaps you've had a mentor in your life. Someone who cared for you and nurtured your development, who showed by example and explanation how to live a full and fulfilling life. How did the gift of her or his attention and care feel to you?

Maybe you have been a mentor to someone else. Perhaps it is in our Coming of Age Program. What was it that awakened your compassion and inspired you to offer the wisdom of your experience? And how does that feel?

Just after I had decided to apply for admission to seminary, I was laid off from my job. The next several months were very lean ones. I drew unemployment, sought out odd jobs — mowing pastures, pruning grapes for the local winery, house painting, monitoring sewer gas. When there was no other work, I walked the roads of Bainbridge Island picking up litter.

One day I came home to find an envelope on the door. I was tired, so I set it aside unopened and went about fixing supper. The phone rang. It was someone I knew from the con-

gregation. She asked if I had found the envelope. I told her I had, but had not yet opened it. Inside was a note and a check from her for \$1000 to help with living expenses in Berkeley.

I was incredulous. It was a big gift — one I had never imagined. I had sold my car for the first semester's tuition. I had barely enough money to get myself to Berkeley. The unexpected check made a real difference.

In her note, she said that she believed in my ministry and had faith that I would serve our movement well. She said that it was a heart-felt contribution to our movement as well as a personal gift, and that she felt good about it.

Today marks the formal beginning of our annual stewardship campaign. Our theme, "Rooted and Growing," reflects both the rich past when we together have put down solid roots of liberal religion here in the Cumberland Valley and the yet-to-unfold future you will grow into after Judy and I retire in June.

Your leaders are asking you to make a generous pledge to support the operating fund in the fiscal year that begins on July 1. Members and friends of the congregation should have received a letter from Dan and Joan Bechtel two weeks ago announcing the campaign and inviting you to attend one of three luncheons that will be held today and on March 20th and 27th.

Even if you didn't get the letter, you are invited to participate. At the luncheons you can learn about the proposed budget for next year and some of the ways your support will matter. Even if you are not yet ready to make a financial commitment, you are welcome to come and learn how we do things here, as Joan says.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this year's campaign is to attract an experienced and skilled interim minister to walk with you through the transition in pastoral leadership, to help you stretch from this well-rooted past into a bright and sunny future for your congregation — to “bloom where you are planted.”

Your leadership hopes to raise enough funds to provide the required match so that we can take full advantage of the gift of the Laws Music Fund endowment.

Our form of congregational polity means that members have a responsibility to each other and to the mission and vision. It's tempting to say that you own the congregation, in the sense of being responsible stewards, but I don't think owning it quite captures the whole truth. The congregation belongs to something larger than any of us. Our founders' vision was to create it to give away as a gift to the Cumberland Valley. It belongs not just to you who have signed the membership book and fill these pews, but also to strangers who have not yet come through these doors, indeed, who may not yet be born.

Except for an occasional small grant, we do not receive funds from the denomination. The proposed budget for next fiscal year is \$284,000. By far the most important source of income is the pledged income from members and friends. Since we have almost no cash reserves, a deficit budget is not a possibility. A shortfall will mean painful cuts to staff and programs or hobbling your interim minister search committee by offering a compensation package too low to attract an experienced and accredited interim minister.

You have been generous employers and good stewards of this historic building, and you have sponsored projects around the world that have made a difference. You've seen the growth of our programs and watched as children have become youth

and young adults, as elders have offered wisdom and as we have celebrated their lives and grieved their deaths. You've watched as marriages have been celebrated and babies born.

The presence of this congregation and the difference it makes in individual lives and in the world will continue into the future, with your generous support.

Consider the gifts you have received in your lifetime. Recall how it has felt to give a significant gift — one that has truly made a difference, both to you as the giver and to the recipient.

And then I ask you to pledge without holding back. Make it realistic for your household, and make it generous. Give enough to feel good about it. If your circumstances change later, you can modify your pledge. Together you can sustain this community with your gifts.

Howard Thurman wrote:

"The movement of the Spirit of God in [our] hearts often calls [us] to act against the spirit of [our] times or causes [us] to anticipate a spirit which is yet in the making. In a moment of dedication, [we] are given wisdom and courage to dare a deed that challenges and to kindle a hope that inspires."<sup>6</sup>

May you be given the courage to rise to the challenge and kindle a hope that inspires.

May it be so. Amen.

*Image:* Sculpture by Char Klein. Image ©2009 Duane H. Fickeisen.