

"Cycles of Helping"
by Reverend Kent C. Matthies
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Reaching out, supporting and helping others are a wonderful way to live. Ironically it often does as much if not more for the giver than it does for the receiver. It is also important to learn how to receive and ask for help. Sometimes receiving is harder than giving.

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Importance of Giving

Most of us have heard many times about the Biblical injunction that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We owe much to the people who give generously of themselves. People give to many causes and institutions, which make life more liveable and enjoyable as well as more honorable and just. We are in deep debt to those who have given so freely; parents, teachers, friends, artists, poets, police, fire fighters, the armed services, doctors, nurses, and counselors, as well as friendly strangers who have helped at critical points in our lives.

One of the ironies of giving is that many times the person who gives receives as many, if not more benefits than the person who receives. We feel good when we give. I hope that we all have family members, neighbors, co-workers or fellow members of this congregation to whom we look as role models in how to give selflessly. My guess is that we would be hard pressed this morning to find people in this room who don't believe that being generous is an important goal or ideal for human beings. Sometimes we don't feel like we have much to give. Sometimes we feel like we have given too much recently. But overall most of us want to be generous.

People don't like to ask or receive

At the same time I also believe that many of us struggle with asking for and receiving help. I recently read a story about how a store owner responded to the outreach effort of a local school service project. This story may represent some of our tendencies in not wanting to receive help. A teenage girl was organizing the project, which was called "small acts of kindness." She approached several neighborhood grocery stores and laundromats for permission to do specific services.

On one call, the employee who answered the phone hesitated, and then said, "Can you hold for one moment please? I'll need to ask the manager, but first, let me make sure I understand: You want to clean up the parking lot, retrieve shopping carts, hold umbrellas for customers, and you don't want anything in return."

"Yes, that's right," the teenage girl replied.

After disappearing for a moment, the employee returned to the phone. "I'm sorry," he said, "we can't let you do that because if we let you do it, we'd have to let everyone else do it, too!"¹

Reflecting on our own experiences in life the shopkeeper's reaction towards the small acts of kindness project probably highlights many of our hesitations in receiving help. We may think that if a person helps us people will think that we are overly needy or don't have our act together. Or the person offering help already has too many things to do, "I don't want people to waste their time helping me."

We all know people who are so obsessed with giving to us that we cannot give anything to them. For some people compulsive giving becomes a wall which isolates them from us. This can serve as a hindrance to love.

Asking for Help: Weakness or Strength?

In different shapes and forms many of us have been socialized to believe that asking for help is a sign of weakness. This type of thinking, especially when taken to extremes, is often a signal that we need to work on our ego. Ironically many of the people we look upon as the strongest and bravest in our world have achieved success by asking for and accepting assistance. The Hurricane, is a movie which came out a couple of years ago with the true story of professional boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter's life. Denzel Washington was excellent playing Rubin Carter. At the height of his boxing career in the 1960s, Carter was falsely accused of murder by a racist police force and sentenced to prison for the remainder of his life.

In the movie, while Carter is in prison, he is befriended by a young boy, Lesra, who has read Carter's autobiography. Their friendship deepens over time, and the boy introduces Carter to a few of his adult friends. This group becomes convinced of Carter's innocence and commits themselves to helping as his amateur lawyers and detectives. After some 20 years in lock-up, Carter, at 50 years of age is granted a new trial. While awaiting the verdict in his prison cell, Carter and Lesra share their thoughts.

Carter says, "We've come a long way, huh, little brother?"

Lesra nods in agreement, pauses, and says, "Rubin, I just want you to know...if this doesn't work, I'm bustin' you outta here."

"You are, huh?"

"Yeah, that's right, I'm bustin' you outta here."

After a moment of silence, Carter emphatically states, "Hate put me in prison. Love is gonna bust me out."

Lesra responds, "Well, just in case love doesn't, I'm gonna bust you outta here.

Carter laughs. He reaches out to touch Lesra's face and wipe away a tear. Clenching Lesra's hand, Carter responds, "You already have busted me out of here, Lesra."²

Reflecting on this story you can take note of the fact that previously Hurricane Carter made a living beating people up in the boxing ring and now he has spent decades in a violent and macho prison system. Yet he found it in his heart to receive the help and love of a young man he never knew before going to prison. I think this story points to the fact that learning how to receive help is often a sign of emotional and spiritual health and strength.

I recently found another story of two friends who have benefited greatly by immersing themselves in cycles of helping each other. In the summer of 1989, Mark Wellman, a paraplegic, gained national recognition by climbing the sheer granite face of El Capitan, which is 3,604 feet high, in Yosemite National Park. The two friends spent seven days and six nights together in their efforts to get to the top. Accompanying the headline in a local newspaper was a photo of Wellman being carried on the shoulders of his climbing companion Mike Corbett. A subtitle said, "Paraplegic and partner prove that no wall is too high to scale."³

In preparation for this activity Mike Corbett scaled the face of El Capitan twice before helping Mark Wellman pull himself up once. Would any sane person think that Mark Wellman, a paraplegic, was spiritually or emotionally weak because he asked for and accepted help from a friend in achieving the dream of a lifetime? Obviously both of these men showed tremendous endurance and courage.

Ask and Ye Shall Receive?

When one reflects upon the theology of asking and receiving there is a teaching of Jesus, which is commonly cited. At one point Jesus tells his disciples, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish and it will be done for you."⁴ This statement sits at the core of centuries of Christian theological debate. You will find endless opinions on what it means. What is the true meaning of Ask and Ye Shall Receive?

I will start by telling you what I think it does not mean. I think we should not literally interpret this to mean that if we are spiritually fit we can expect all of our wishes to be fulfilled. The world contains too much pain and cruelty for us to believe that we can simply ask for it all to go away. If the world were that simple all the parents living in poverty around the world could simply ask for enough food, clothing, shelter and medicine for their children and shazam there it would be. And that world truly would be paradise. But we don't have that world. What we have is complicated--tragedy and comedy and everything in between--at times mixed up, and at times confusing. What I would like to believe that Jesus was saying to his disciples is more general and open. As

in our reading today (John13:1-17) Jesus is essentially saying that it is also blessed to ask and receive.

If you ask for life to give you gifts you will receive. Actually I believe that if you don't ask for life to give you blessings you will still receive. But in his teachings Jesus was clearly pointing to the importance of asking for and receiving help. When we find humility, admit we don't always have the answers, or the capacity to get everything done on our own we open ourselves up to receive grace. We must admit that we often stumble, and sometimes fall off of the path. At times we need to say we don't know what we are doing or which way to go.

Early in my ministry I had one of what have been many lessons in the importance of asking for and receiving help from others. In Annapolis, Maryland I was asked to create a young adult group within a congregation. Things were going well with our new group and we decided to organize a weekend spiritual retreat in a large house in the woods. I was excited and nervous as we coordinated programs, worship services, food and travel logistics for 25 young adults, most of whom were newly involved in that church. On the day of our travel I was hit with a bad flu. By the time we had all the cars assembled in the church parking lot and ready to roll I had a temperature of 101. I was shaky and had strong body aches. I was supposed to be the primary caregiver in this group, but as a leader I was feeling relatively powerless to help. I told some of the young adults about my condition and asked that they takeover. They did so with great care and skill. A young man named Paul put me in his car and told me to sit back and sleep on his pillow. For most of the weekend I was knocked out and unable to engage people in in-depth conversations.

On and off in my sickness I kept trying to resume the role as "the minister." I was focused on this meaning "a person serving others." But in general I had to let others serve me. I resisted this for a while, but I soon came to realize that this was what Unitarian Universalist Communities are all about. The spiritual retreat did not go like I had planned, but I was deeply touched by the care and compassion I received from others. We are here to serve each other and the world. But if we are only involved in serving and not involved in receiving help, we are not helping others to fully realize their humanity. We deny our own humanity. If we don't receive help we don't realize our own fullest potential.

People who get into the habit of asking friends for help and guidance often find that an irony develops. Many times the more we ask for help the better off we become. You might think the opposite. You might think that if somebody is asking for lots of help it must imply they are struggling with many difficulties. But try thinking of asking for and receiving help as spiritual disciplines. We need to practice and experiment with ways in which we as individuals best ask for and receive support. As we improve we often become more centered and balanced, stronger, happier and more peaceful.

When we ask for help we let go of a little bit of our pride or desire to control and we open ourselves up to the flow of unconditional love. Almost all of our theologies are centered

in this thing the Greeks call Agape. We call it love. Dr. King said it is the most powerful force in the universe. Ultimately you cannot control it or shape it. I believe unconditional love is like a giant river, which flows through our world with great song and power. We can tap into it to irrigate our bodies and souls. At times we can ride it on a raft taking our time to view the most majestic mountain peaks.

Sometimes we get locked up in the prison cells of our own lives. Whether it is hate, or pride or jealousy or greed...we get caught in places that will not allow us to grow spiritually. Just like Hurricane Carter, we know that unconditional love can bust us out. We may have a huge granite mountain that we wish to climb, but we cannot do it on our own. In order to achieve our wildest dreams we need to ask for a lift, or advice, or a companion. We need to take hold of the outstretched hand of another. We will never be perfect in our efforts to accept life's gifts, but let us not forget that it is blessed to give, and to ask and receive.

Closing Words

The world needs those who give. But just as desperately it cries out for those who have the strength and love to accept and receive. Ann Morrow Lindburg said of a friend, "He knew how to receive so graciously that the gift was enhanced by its reception." Let us go out into this day enhancing all the blessings, which come our way.

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[1] Ann Jeffries, Kansas City, Kansas. Christian Reader, "LiteFare."

[2] Citation: The Hurricane (Universal, 1999), rated R, written by Armyan Bernstein and Dan Gordon III, directed by Norman Jewison;

[3] Greg Asimakoupoulos in Fresh Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching (Baker);

[4] John 15:7