

“Giving Away”

By Rev. Duffy Peet

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Today is Easter, so I will begin by wishing you all a happy, and a healthy, Easter. With the ongoing concerns about COVID-19, many common practices that accompany this holiday aren't occurring today. Most church buildings, which would typically be filled with people attending Easter services, are empty. And Easter egg hunts have been cancelled. This Easter, therefore, is very unusual. During this time of physical and social distancing I invite us all to think about the reason Easter is a holiday.

Easter is one of the most important holidays in the Christian tradition. The holiday recognizes and celebrates a miracle that is written about in each of the four Gospels as well as in the book of Acts—namely the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb three days after he died on the cross. In the mainline Christian traditions, Jesus is understood to be both the son and the human embodiment of God. In these traditions it is believed and taught that God, the Father, gave Jesus, his only son, the task of living and dying in order to redeem the sins of humans. According to these traditions, it is only through such redemption that humans are able to be reconciled with God, who is considered perfect in all ways.

Before I go any further, I want to state clearly that Unitarian Universalism is not a mainline Christian tradition. For centuries, Unitarians and Universalists have been on the fringe of or even beyond the fringe of commonly held Christian beliefs and perspectives. Going back to the first century BCE, Universalists have contended that God's first and foremost attribute is love. From this perspective, Universalists have been unwilling to accept or worship a God who would intentionally create imperfect humans and then condemn some of those humans to eternal damnation because of their imperfection. Universalists therefore reject the idea that Jesus' death was an act of redemption for humans. And as early as 300 BCE, Unitarians have rejected the concept that God was three parts or a Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For Unitarians, Jesus is not commensurate with God. Jesus was a great spiritual teacher and some Unitarians believe he was a messenger of God.

Today, most Unitarian Universalists in this country do not believe that Jesus gave his life to redeem our sins that we might be reconciled with God. Yet a significant number of UU's look to the teachings and life of Jesus to find guidance about how to live in a manner that is moral and ethical. In biblical writings about Jesus and his teachings, giving away is mentioned multiple times. The Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 10, verses 17 through 22 offers an example of the importance Jesus put on giving away. Here is what is written there.

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and ask him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. This is just one example of many where it is written that Jesus taught about the importance of giving away.

Christianity isn't the only religious tradition that teaches about giving away. The story we heard earlier, titled "Uncle Ry and the Moon," is a Zen Buddhist tale. In this story, a robber, intent on stealing something, enters Uncle Ry's small house. But Uncle Ry turns the table on the intruder. Instead of responding with fear or anger, Uncle Ry greets the intruder warmly, thanks him for coming to visit, and gives him a gift, the only robe Uncle Ry owns. And at the end of this tale, Uncle Ry laments that he couldn't have given the robber the moon. Clearly, this Zen teaching tale invites us to think about what we consider to be the appropriate way to respond to a thief. It also offers an example of radical hospitality in Uncle Ry's penchant for giving away, even to a would be robber.

As our the reading from *Seven Arrows* points out, to *Give-Away* is an important aspect in the spiritual beliefs as well as the culture of several Native American tribes of the plains. At most if not all pow-wows, it is common to observe rituals that demonstrate how important this concept of the *Give-Away* is. For those of you who have never attended a pow-wow or had an opportunity to be present when a *Give-Away* is held, I will share a bit of what might be involved. Frequently a *Give-Away* is initiated by, or held in honor of, a person who has reached some milestone in life. Such milestones might include a person graduating from school or achieving some honor. A *Give-Away* may also be held as a remembrance of someone whose life has ended. When a *Give-Away* is held, the individual, and/or their family, give gifts to those who have offered support and assistance along the journey of the person's life. The ceremony makes clear that while the individual reached the milestone, the milestone was achieved because of the caring, the time, the energy and the dedication of a significant number of people. Such a ceremony provides a reminder that none of us reaches significant milestones without the support and assistance of many other people.

So far my focus has been on giving away and the significance this concept holds in various religious and spiritual traditions. Now I want to have us consider how this idea of giving away relates to the current situation we find ourselves in. I would propose that in response to the emergence of COVID-19, people in our community, across our country and around the world are being encouraged to give away. Let me give you a sense of what I am saying here. It seems evident that this pandemic requires us to give away or give up our regular routines and our assumptions about how things are. One such assumption, that is common to many of us, is that we have the freedom to go where we want, when we want—and that we can generally do what we want as long as our behavior is legal and within cultural norms or expectations. With the Governor's recent order to stay at home or at one's place of residence, that assumption of freedom has been challenged. As I mentioned previously, churches throughout our community and across our state— churches that would typically be packed with people on this Easter holiday, sit empty.

As each of you access this service via the internet, you are giving away. You are giving away your usual way of doing things. And through giving away in this manner, you are helping others. By staying at home you are reducing the likelihood that you will contract this virus or that you will contribute to its spread. By staying at home as much as possible, you are reducing the demands on our healthcare system and healthcare

workers, both of which are doing all they can to assist people who are in need of care. I want to thank each of you for how, through staying home, you are giving away and helping others through your action. And I want to thank all of those who are working to treat those in need of care and support, even though the work they do poses a threat to their own health and wellbeing.

I can think of many other ways that the situation we are currently in is providing opportunities for me and for us to give away. I know that members and friends of the congregation have given money, time and energy to help people who are struggling to make ends meet during this challenging time. And I am aware that there are a significant number of congregants who are sewing masks for healthcare workers as well as others—masks that can reduce the likelihood of spreading the virus.

And there is another aspect of the situation we are currently in that seems to connect with something in both the reading from *Seven Arrows* and the scripture verse I quoted a few minutes ago. In the scripture verse and in the reading from *Seven Arrows* there is a mention of a quest. As Unitarian Universalists, we recognize the importance of being on a quest. Our Fourth Principle calls us to “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Clearly, this Principle is about a quest.

Let’s look at the two readings I mentioned and consider the quests that are spoken of in each. The man who approached Jesus was questing for the way to gain eternal life. It would seem that he wanted it all—all of his possessions **and** eternal life. In the reading from *Seven Arrows*, Storm tells us that the quest we must engage in, the “*Vision Quest*, or perceiving quest” is necessary “to discover ourselves, to learn how we perceive of ourselves, and to find our relationship with the world around us.” A *Vision Quest*, as I have come to learn, involves separating oneself from one’s normal way of life, spending time alone, generally while engaging in a fast, and being open to new ways of perceiving and understanding.

This time when our usual way of life is significantly disrupted offers us an opportunity—the opportunity to consider what we are questing for. Are we questing for a return to life as we knew it with an expectation that our way of life will continue for eternity, or at least as long as we can imagine? Or might the quest we are engaged in be for greater understanding—understanding of ourselves and understanding of our relationship with the world we are a part of? The choice of what we are questing for belongs to each of us.

As our activities and our time in public spaces continue to be restricted, it is my hope that we might all set aside time for introspection, time to think about the purpose and intention of our quest. May we also take time to reflect on the current situation. What might it have to teach us? What might it indicate for the future? Through our time of introspection and reflection, may we come to new awarenesses. And may we develop a deeper appreciation for the significance that giving away has had in our lives and will have in the days ahead.

So may it be.