



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Organic Generosity

Clay Nelson © 30 July 2023

My father loved words. The *Oxford English Dictionary* and books on etymology, the study of the origin of words and how their meanings have changed throughout history, were never far from his fingertips. If he couldn't find just the right word for the book he was writing, he had no reluctance in just creating a word that captured his intent. He passed on his love of words to me. That was to my benefit in seminary, where I was required to take two semesters of word study. It was essential to preparing sermons. Our task was to fully understand biblical words in all their meanings, translations and uses in biblical times so they could be applied relevantly in our modern and cultural context. I know it sounds boring and tedious, but thanks to Dad, I loved it.

Today is the time of the year we ask you to consider your pledge to support the church. Frankly, I hate asking for money. It does not feel like my job; despite having advanced degrees from the church in how to make you feel guilty about not giving, I can't make myself go that route. Giving out of guilt is not generosity. You all know that, in our world, we would have to close our doors without your financial support, so why should I belabour the point? Instead, my job is to be the steward of hope. We have been through difficult financial periods before, but in 122 years, we haven't closed our doors yet.

In my position as the repository of hope, I see my task as pointing out that generosity is a matter of the spirit, not your bank account. It is not a one-Sunday-a-year discussion. It is a daily spiritual exercise until it becomes a way of being.

Let me make my case with a short word study of generosity. The word originated in Latin, referring to kin or clan or begetting. It was passed to old French and then to English. Most recorded English use of the word "generous" up to and during the sixteenth century reflects an aristocratic sense of being of noble lineage or high birth. To be generous was literally a way of saying "to belong to the nobility."

During the seventeenth century, however, the meaning and use of the word began to change. Generosity came increasingly to identify not literally with family heritage but with a nobility of *spirit* thought to be associated with high birth — with various admirable qualities that could now vary from person to person, depending not on family history but on whether a person possessed the qualities.

In this way, generosity increasingly came in the seventeenth century to signify a *variety* of traits of character and action historically associated with the ideals of actual nobility: gallantry, courage, strength, richness, gentleness, and fairness.

Then, during the eighteenth century, the meaning of “generosity” continued to evolve in directions denoting the more specific, contemporary meaning of munificence, open-handedness, and liberality in giving money and possessions to others.

This etymological genealogy tells us that the word “generosity” that we inherit and use today entails certain historical associations that may still inform our contemporary cultural sensibilities.

Generosity has not long been viewed as a typical trait of ordinary, or of all people, but has rather been one expected to be practised by those of higher quality or greater goodness.

Generosity — unlike truth-telling or not stealing — is more an ideal toward which the best may aspire and achieve than a “democratic” obligation that is the duty of all to practise.

Generosity may, thus, on the positive side, properly call any given person to a higher standard.

Yet simultaneously (and more problematically), this two-tier understanding may “excuse” the majority from practising generosity because of their more ordinary perceived status.

But what does generosity mean to us today? It refers to *the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly.*

Thus conceived, generosity is a learned character trait involving both attitude and action — entailing as a virtue both an inclination or predilection to give liberally and an actual practice of giving liberally. Generosity is, therefore, not a random idea or haphazard behaviour but rather, in its mature form, a basic, personal, moral orientation to life. Furthermore, in a world of moral contrasts, generosity entails the moral good expressed, and many vices rejected (selfishness, greed, fear, meanness).

Generosity also involves giving to others, not simply anything in abundance but instead giving those things that are good for others. Generosity always intends to enhance the well-being of those it gives to.

What exactly generosity gives can be various things: money, possessions, time, attention, aid, encouragement, emotional availability, and more.

Generosity is not always identical to pure altruism since people can be authentically generous for reasons that in part serve their own interests, as well as those of others. Indeed, insofar as generosity is a virtue, to practise it for the good of others also necessarily means that doing so achieves one's own true, long-term good as well.

And so generosity, like all virtues, is in people's genuine enlightened self-interest to learn and practise.

As you may recall from former talks, the UUA next year will have a final vote to replace the Seven Principles with the six virtues that define who we are. One of them is generosity.

This understanding of generosity is something this congregation gets. So, many of you contribute your time, energy, and skills to make this place a Beloved Community. You understand our kaupapa to make the world a better place than we found it.

In 2010 you set a goal to have a full or part-time minister. Four years later, you hired me. During that time, your generosity has transformed us. I won't name names or list all the ways, but trust me, we aren't who we used to be. I wish I could be around to see what happens in the next nine years, but I examined our finances in February. The pandemic hit us hard. There would be a big hole in the budget, and I'm the biggest

reason. I decided the most generous thing I could do was to retire at the end of August. I notified the finance committee at the time that I would not accept another contract if offered so they could shrink the hole in the budget and get us back on track.

In the meantime, I have been working to prepare the congregation for our next chapter. My retirement does not mean I'll disappear. I will still lead worship occasionally and be a resource when needed. I remain passionate about this church community. And until I can pass the torch, I will remain the steward of high hopes for us. Who would have guessed that those high hopes would result in an incredibly generous gift to restore our organ for our benefit and the community's? Hope has already resulted in enlivening our dreams. Never undervalue the creative force of generosity. It can change everything.

Meditation / Conversation starter

- What act of generosity, yours or others, made a difference in your life?