

Why Do We Help?

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Brett and Wendy Raunig

Wendy

Every time an email arrives in my inbox for an opportunity to show up and support our community, I get excited. Now let me clarify, it's not the kind of excitement I get when I pack my bags for a Hawaii trip, it's deeper and feels like gratitude to get yet another opportunity to meet and interact with people. We started volunteering many years ago with the WHO shelter with our daughters, Elle and Mya. Our family would hang out and attend to the food room, setting out dinner, snacks along with hot beverages for the people who we were serving. Some had signed up for a nice hot shower and would ask for our assistance in providing them with the items they needed. By being together in this room, it gave us a chance to visit and interact, listen to their stories about the day they had or some would talk about struggles. Many would talk about their families and those who had children would end up playing with our children, games or foosball. We gladly gave many hours of service to moms, dads and Families who came to receive a nice warm meal in a comfortable space with others in community. I personally have so much fun volunteering and we continue to grab any open slot available. I encourage you to come give it a try with me, it's very rewarding! I can recall the many faces I've met as I go through my memory bank...each with a pleantry to give in his/her own way, you just have to be there to receive that gift!

Brett

I wish at times that I was as outgoing as my wife Wendy; she has a gift that I admire. I'm more introverted and find the act of volunteering to be around people more awkward. However, it always gives me an amazing sense of well-being, spirituality, and connectedness to something bigger than myself.

I agree with Wendy and find a deep sense of gratitude. I think about my own life and all the people who have helped me become the person I am today. I'm not sure I have shared much about my upbringing or past, but I think it's a good thing to talk about with you today. I wouldn't be surprised if some of you have similar stories. In my early 20s drinking, friends, and experimenting with drugs were the focus of almost every weekend. I wrecked several cars, hit a tree on a motorcycle, and was thrown in jail.

The thing that always grabs me when I look back on these years is the opportunity I was given to fail repeatedly by my parents. They never gave up on me, always helped me get back on my feet, and showed me love and support even when I was truly lost.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had no one or family had given up on me. I doubt I would be here if it wasn't for all the people who encouraged me and gave me support and resources. For me, this is an opportunity to give back.

Why Do We Help? Sermon by Shane Scalf

I'm Shane Scalf and want to thank you for inviting me to speak today. It is a privilege and honor to be able share part of my life story and perspectives.

Have you ever suffered? Have you ever been in pain physically or mentally? We all have, right? I believe that through our pain and suffering there is an opportunity for connection, bonding and true empathy. When I was growing up I lived in a house where my mom did the best she could to provide food, shelter and safety. You see, she grew up in foster care and was married to a man who grew up most in an orphanage. They were both in their teens who lived a hippie/rock and roll lifestyle and they had a shared experience of horrible childhood trauma. They had two children soon after they were married then when their destructive lifestyles led to divorce when she was pregnant with me, my father moved away. She later married another man who also had childhood trauma and was an alcoholic who she had two other children with. There was food insecurity, verbal and some physical abuse. She eventually left him after numerous times of being arrested for domestic violence.

As a child I knew what it is like to suffer. Ultimately that suffering led me to want to alleviate suffering for the children we help at Family Promise.

As soon as I was an adult I seemed to seek suffering and came to see suffering as a badge of honor. I joined the Marines where in order to become a Marine I had to endure mental and physical suffering that not many people ever have to experience. That's why the slogan is "the few and proud." Then later after I got out of the Marines I joined the Army. There I excelled and was promoted fast and I was given opportunities for more suffering. I was sent to US Army Ranger School. This was 62 days of pure suffering. Food deprivation (only two meals per day), sleep deprivation (no more than 4 hrs of sleep if a night), and we endured physical challenges that caused our bodies to be in a constant state of decline from the first days until graduation. Now accomplishing all of these were a boost to my ego and essentially, I felt successful which was a better feeling than when I was a child living in poverty. But I was not alone during this suffering. We were successful as a team! We suffered together and were successful together. It was my fellow Ranger students that made the suffering bearable. It would have been much more difficult alone.

I recently watched a documentary called "The Contestant" that shared a story of one man's suffering for a year and three months and he did it alone. In 1998 a young man in Japan named Nasubi, "won" the opportunity to be challenged to live in isolation, naked, in a near empty

apartment with the only means to survive through entering sweepstakes from magazines that were provided. All his food and clothing and any other items were provided only by chance, winning from sending postcards to companies that advertised in the magazines. In order to complete the challenge, he had to accumulate prizes that totaled one million yen (about \$8,000 US at the time). The prizes came in slowly and the food was limited. He would occasionally win rice and other decent food but also resorted to eating dog food he received just to stay alive. His sleep suffered because his mental health declined from being alone. He said he would have killed himself but did not have the courage to do so. The front door was unlocked and he could have left but he gradually lost the will to do so. The entire time he was being filmed and he did not know he was on a show that was being broadcasted all over Japan. He became a celebrity and millions of people watch him because of his funny reactions and celebratory dances when he would get items delivered. When it was finally revealed he was on a reality tv show, his initial reaction was that he was tricked.

Now years ago I would have seen what he did as a huge accomplishment but as I watched, I was saddened by his suffering. As I watched, I just wanted someone to save him.

After the show and the initial celebrity, he struggled from the trauma it caused and found it difficult to cope with the void he was feeling.

In 2011 Japan was hit by a massive earthquake in Fukushima. He went there and began helping where he could. He said "I realized my past struggles could be something useful". "I realized that by helping those around you, you can find deep resources of inner strength". "But I also think that I gained something significant."

He also had a journey of climbing Mt. Everest and on his initial attempt there was a massive avalanche he survived and then stayed a long time helping others to survive until rescue.

But on his second attempt he made it to the top of Everest! He credited the people and fans that supported him as to how he made it. His life lessons and perspectives are profound. He said "I realized that humans cannot exist alone". "I came to realize it was their support and affection that filled that void". A human's love, or that kind of spirit of helping each other, that's what it's all about".

We all do not have to go through terrible suffering in order to appreciate these profound perspectives. We can relate to people who are suffering because we are just as human as they are.

When I was working at the Portland Rescue mission there was a young African woman who would visit our shelter from time to time to get resources and she would sing beautiful traditional African songs to the staff and was amazingly polite and friendly. However, there were times when she would have erratic behavior and be violent and refuse to leave. I was told, one day she stripped her clothes and began writing all over the walls and was destructive. I would always try and ask myself, how can I relate to her and feel empathy for her? The last time I saw her she said something to me that stuck with me. She had a lucid moment and she

said “It hurts to be me”. This is one thing I think most everyone can relate to. I don’t think it hurts to be me always. I just think most people can relate to that feeling in moments of shame or regret. This is one area I feel all people can relate to and have empathy for other humans no matter their circumstance.

I now know suffering is not a badge of honor but it has given me the appreciation of the suffering of others. In order to thrive in this world, we need each other! When I help others, it feeds my soul.

Over the years of helping our families with Family Promise, one thing I have heard and seen is families saying I have never been encouraged or felt supported like I have since I have been with Family Promise. Volunteering and our words of encouragement is what they are missing in their life and although many volunteers have not been homeless, they know what it is like to be human and that is enough.

Although it’s too much to get into now, I will leave you with a recommendation.

“The science of the good Samaritan” by Dr. Emily Smith is about an epidemiologist who shares stories from her life to show us how to...

Find shared values with people from different backgrounds, faiths and culture than our own.

Reach outside our immediate circles to bring in those on the margins

Redefine our concept of “neighbor” and love our neighbors in more practical and global ways

Bridge the gaps of society’s disparities and inequities

This can all be accomplished by first not walking by our neighbors that are in need.