

## **The Wellspring of Generosity**

In these difficult and demanding times, our spirit of generosity needs to be carefully cultivated and nurtured. How do we sustain our sense of personal generosity—in whatever ways we give—when we're suffering from giving fatigue? The source of a generous spirit and heart lies in being generous with ourselves.

**UU Church of Vancouver**

**March 23, 2025**

### **APC Reflection - Arlene Blair**

Approximately 35 years ago I came by this church midweek, looking for a place to hold a pro choice meeting to. The minister, Bruce Clear, allowed us to meet here at no cost. I came back on Sunday and found a home. I wasn't the only activist member. Jerry King, authored the policy of inclusion for the city of Vancouver. Many other members have stepped up over the years. WHO and Family Promise are recent examples.

I contribute to this church to continue the necessary work to ensure that all people's rights are respected. It often feels like two steps forward and one step back. Still progress is being made.

It is important, especially in these times, to have institutions like ours. Therefore, we must all contribute as we are able.

But the major reason I donate to the church is so that my husband doesn't feel so bad when he takes members' money at the monthly poker game.

## Sermon - Bonnie Long

So glad to be here.

If I learned anything from spending ten years in Toastmasters way-back-when, it was to never begin a speech (especially a sermon!) with an apology or a disclaimer. (Like, “I didn’t sleep well last night, so here goes nothing.” Or “I’m missing a few pages here, but I think I can muddle through. . .”) So I know better. . . but. . . I feel the need to set the scene, before moving into what I have to say this morning: I know I’ll be “preaching to the choir” much of the time. . . so please take my various “pearls of wisdom” as just gentle reminders, if you’ve already embraced them and are making them part of your daily practice. We won’t fix this poor broken world this morning, but—together— we can bask in this safe, friendly ambience, and maybe ramp up the collective brilliance of these GENEROUS “little lights of ours.” OK? ( . . . . . ) OK!

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There’s a particular roller coaster at Disneyworld that’s rated the #1 scariest ride in the park. It launches backwards at top speed, then you’re experiencing sudden drops, twists, loops, and you’re upside down much of the time . . all of it while being kept in the dark. Sound familiar? In whatever ways we’re managing to navigate life these days. . . our nervous systems are a bit out of whack. We can handle occasional spikes in full-on outrage, but extremes are not healthy long term. . . especially if we let them control us. Not to mention never knowing what the next wild ride will be.

Studies of human happiness and well-being usually focus on the positive impact of caring for and sharing with others. There's no disputing that such factors as trusting others, knowing others have our back in times of trouble, and being socially connected with others (in person) . . . gesture. . . are all key to how we perceive the quality of our lives. They're a big part of why we show up here. It's palpable in this room, and it might have something to do with why many of the personal statements submitted during each in-gathering of new members remark that this space feels like "home" from the start.

The growing lack of trust and safety and connection in society at large is probably why—in the recently published World Happiness Report (from Gallup and Oxford University) notes that the United States has slipped to its lowest-ever ranking among the 147 countries surveyed. It ranked 11th twelve years ago and came in at 24th this year. (You can connect those dots.)

Like 'mercy' in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, generosity is "twice-blessed" – it blesses those who receive and those who give. Pledging financial commitment to UUCV, showing up to volunteer at WHO (Winter Hospitality Overflow), pulling a few weeds during a Friday work party, teaching an RE class. Our reaching out, sharing, caring, always comes back to us in healthy, feel-good ways.

And—BTW—showing ourselves some of that mercy when we can't show up to help, is also important! Where does the energy to reach out come from—what's the "well-spring of our generosity," when we're scraping the bottom of our

resource barrel, in so many ways. When our nerves are frayed, when our glass is empty.

It begins within. That magical re-charging station is right here. . . in each of us. Our ability and willingness to give to others arises from our ability and willingness to be generous with ourselves. Do I trust myself? Do I feel truly connected to myself? Do I have my back –am I there for myself— in times of trouble? Am I my own best friend?

We've talked before about the power of story in our lives, meaning that the narratives we learn at our elders' knees help to form our world-views. Contrary to the "sacrificing for others" story we may have been taught growing up, think about the "origin story" of generosity as the story of nurturing and sustaining ourselves. Were we taught to cherish ourselves before showing up for others? As the Substack author Joy Ohkoy put it during Emily's Reading, Self-care isn't a luxury right now. It's not an indulgence. . . it's not just for the people who can afford it. It's for people who can't afford not to.

Easier said than done, maybe. But we have a great role model for this in Rev. Kathryn. Given the steady demands of her work with us, she keeps her boundaries clear. She honors Monday as her personal sabbath. She exercises regularly. She makes quality time for her family. (Again—if you missed her "Letter" in Friday's bulletin, please fill yourself in about that.) In her words, "Self care is not selfish!"

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Enough with preaching to the choir—for a while. I'd like to share a personal story.  
.. OK?

My Mom was born in 1914. Her first few years were rough, to say the least. They involved her being neglected, emotionally abused, and rejected. Her grandmother eventually rescued her, and probably saved her life. She thrived on her grandparents' Montana ranch, was the valedictorian of her high school class, and finished 3 years at the University in Missoula, before the money ran out during the Great Depression.

As a parent, she did over-the-top "generous" things for my sister and me, like staging our birthday parties in big ways, buying way too many Christmas gifts for us, volunteering to lead our youth groups—a mixed blessing at times.) She worked full time—both for pay (to supplement our Dad's income so we could go to college), and for her church. She was often exhausted and cranky, as she doggedly followed through with what needed to be done---for others. But. . .

. . . to the best of my memory, she never said "I love you." After I left home, she always signed her notes to me "love, Mom." And when I said the three words out loud to her, in her later years, she'd hold on a little longer when we hugged. But she still couldn't say them back to me.

One day shortly after she died, I sat on her bed, going through some stuff in a shoebox I'd pulled off her closet shelf. Among a stash of old cards and keepsake photos, I found this small, yellowed newspaper clipping. It's a list entitled "Things

I must do today.”(Author unknown) I’ve since framed it. Most of them involve doing for someone else, but there are a few items she must’ve also thought important: Take 30 minutes just for yourself. Admit I might be wrong. Laugh. Listen. . . and, last . . . “Say ‘I love you.’”

I’ve read this to-do list many times since I found it 20 years ago. (And I wonder how often she read it.) I’m GLAD to know that she cared enough about doing—and being—these things to clip the list and save it. And I believe that she tried. She tried to say “I love you” out loud. She just couldn’t DO it. Fitting together the pieces of her early, formative years, maybe she’d never learned to nourish herself with trust or to love herself. She was unable to shed her old limiting stories about being less than enough. So who cared if she told them she loved them?

What do you do to care for yourself-- to show your love for yourself? ASK: Nod or raise hands if you’d like. . .Walk or run or pedal your bike a few times a week? Stop to marvel at Nature’s glory when you’re in her presence? Get massages? Meditate? Eat real food? Dig in the dirt and watch things grow? Watch grandchildren grow? Sing in the shower? All good. . . and here are three more suggestions

First, SEEK BALANCE We weather storms better if we aim for an emotional, mental, physical, spiritual equilibrium in our lives, in whatever ways work for us. Some of you know I’m not naturally a blithe “don’t worry/be happy, glass-half-full” sort of person. My pulpit persona may seem to be a bit saccharine, but I tend

to be as cynical and skeptical as the next guy. (I see some of you “guys” here this morning.) Seeking moderation is the ticket.

On one hand, once we get the hang of it, it feels so good to be good to ourselves. . . have that 2nd dish of ice cream, schedule that extra massage, sleep in on Sunday morning. We deserve it. Within reason, of course.. .

(gesture) On another hand—on the far other end of the pendulum’s arc –we also need to avoid overreacting to every fleeting crisis that crosses our path. People say we’re living in an Age of Over-Reaction. Everyone seems to have a hair trigger about what everyone else does or says. It can kick our beleaguered nervous system into overdrive. My personal sense of “radical resistance” says that things are so bad right now that there’s no overreacting. As an equally angry friend says, “Somedays, the supply of available curse words is insufficient to meet my demand.” But before posting some knee-jerk smartass comment on the latest bad-news FB piece I run across, I’m trying to remember to practice restraint. Wait 20 minutes before wading-in. If it still needs to be said, it’ll be said in a better, kinder way.

(gesture) On the inevitable other other hand. . . calming down is one thing, but checking out or giving up is another. \* Stay in the game until you need a time-out. Several friends have deactivated their social media accounts lately. More power to them for stepping back and resting—like practicing a FB sabbath. But in the process, I hope they don’t lose track of people they value and who are good to have in their lives.

(BTW, if you're looking for news sources that focus on good news, I recommend [fixthenews.com](http://fixthenews.com). It's worth subscribing to, just to learn that there's plenty important stuff happening around the globe that's not doom and gloom!)

Second: Look for small JOYs. They're easily overlooked these days, but they can be powerful when we notice them. A friend helping me in the yard one day last week spotted a tiny hummingbird nest high up in one of our still-leafless maple trees. While we stood there squinting up at it, one of its occupants zoomed past us, up into the tree and, settled in for a quick rest. We smiled the rest of the afternoon, despite the government being dismantled all around us.

We need to PLAY. We need to let ourselves laugh. Maya Angelou counsels us to "use humor to lighten the burden of our hearts." And she should know. Thursday evening, Gale and I attended a performance of The Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain. The seven expert ukuleleists (?) are all British subjects, based in London. They held the sold-out crowd in Beaverton's Reser Art Center spellbound for two hours. The playlist was thoughtful, funny, eclectic, and perfectly orchestrated. No one left doubting that a ukulele is a serious instrument. Early in the show, one of the more talkative players shared that they were "glad to be here among our American friends." Silence. She went on, "We ARE still friends aren't we?" That got a huge round of applause. A little later, (maybe it was between their performance of the Muppet theme song and a lovely rendition of "Addicted to Love" —one of Fadin' by Nine's favorites), she mentioned what a wonderful audience we were. . . and dropped in the line "Let's make America Great Britain again!" Laughing that long laugh out loud—along with everyone else in the room--



felt so good, I almost cried. Which reminds me. . the corollary to letting ourselves laugh, is. . .?

Yes, letting ourselves cry. When we let tears come, it's a blessing. Tears not only release toxins from our body, they tend to clear our minds and hearts—and guide us toward actions that restore and heal. Plus--when we allow ourselves to feel and show our vulnerability, we give others permission to do be present with their own pain.

Third: MAKE MEANING. If you don't have any yet, create just one tiny ritual that grounds you on a regular basis. Light a candle in the morning as the coffee is perking. Spend 20 minutes working in the garden with intention—rain or shine. Say “I love you” whenever someone you love leaves the house. At meal time, Gale and I briefly squeeze each other's hand before starting into the food on our plates. We don't “say” grace, but, in a world that feels like quicksand, the grace of that quick gesture reminds us where our solid ground is.

Further. . . Neuroscientists say that when we name our negative emotions, they lose some of their grip on us. So join me in a short journey. . Please sit back, and rest your eyes on this lovely photo provided us by our own Jennifer Pratt-Walter. It shows an entrance into the Jedidiah Smith redwood forest that she and Craig visited a while back. In our search for balance . . Come with me now, deep into this peaceful, sheltering forest. . . Now that we're all alone, let's NAME those negative emotions! Let's kick and curse and scream and howl. . . (sigh, pause) OK—let's get coffee.

Bottom lines: Remember how to keep our light shining. Yes--we must resist, but in balanced, joyful, meaningful ways. And we must never stop celebrating our perfect imperfection.

I'll close with another poem from John Roedel:

"Everything seems so heavy today,"

I told an angel who was disguised as the sky

"That's because you're not supposed to be carrying everything,"

the angel replied.

I feel my back buckle under the weight of my burdens

"Well what am I exactly meant to be carrying right now?"

I asked the chatty heavens.

"On. . . " the sky angel responded. "Just keep carrying on. And for today, that's enough."

Please rise in body or spirit to sing together. #1015 in the teal hymnal.