

**'Tis a Gift: Mindfulness, Simplicity, and Creativity
in Gift Giving
December 2nd, 2007**

In the spring of 1988, immediately after graduating from college in my hometown of Portland, Oregon, I picked up and left my native Pacific Northwest for the wilder territory of New York City. There I got a job working in a small publishing house on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Now, while I *worked* in Manhattan, I *lived* in Brooklyn. So early each morning, I headed out from my apartment, onto the street, then down into the train station where I would catch my first train on a long, two-train train ride to my workplace.

Now, of course, this being New York City, a few million other people had the same routine I did each morning. That meant that some days the trains were, well, a little crowded. I remember one morning in particular, the beginning of a hot day, as I recall. I had just managed to *squeeze* myself into a

car of the Number Three Train, and the doors were beginning to close behind me, when a man in a business suit, who was about my age, maybe a little older, came rushing to the train, and managed to wedge in about $\frac{3}{4}$ quarters of his body, squishing up against me, thus squishing me up against others, and causing the doors to bounce back open. Now, it being hot, and me being in my slightly hotheaded twenties, I grew a little cranky at this man's audacity, and found myself leaning my smaller, but equally insistent body back against his, causing him to budge an inch or two back *off* the train, and onto the platform. He pushed back, and I pushed back yet again. The tension rose. Finally, the man puffed up his chest, and proclaimed to me, "I think I can take you on."

It's not that in that moment I cowardly concluded he was right. I just decided in my indignation that I wouldn't stoop to such barbaric fisticuffs. So, I let him pack himself into the car,

and off we went, me with my chin up and my brow knit, making sure he could feel my steely stare, even if I was looking away from him.

The *true* truth be known, though, I'm sure that I let out a huge sigh once he had disembarked at his lower Manhattan stop, and that I was extremely relieved for such *reciprocal* chest puffing to be over with. It is so draining, thinking back to the words of Lao Tse we heard earlier, to try to take over the earth—or even one square foot of one car on one subway train of the earth—and to try to shape that space to one's will. While it's true, to quote Lao Tse, that “for a time in the world some push aboard and some are tipped out,” the sanity of engaging in such struggles is questionable at best. In fact, such trivial territorial tussles are indeed profane, once we truly see how like a sacred vessel the earth we share is.

That is one reason—just one reason—I do not arise at 2:00 am on the Fridays after Thanksgiving to stand in line with hundreds of others, in order to be able to rush in when stores open at 5:00 am for the “door buster” sales of Black Friday. That’s one reason—just one reason—I don’t avoid Black Friday, either, by taking advantage of some Big Box stores’ recent offers to open on Thanksgiving day itself. Whether it’s Black Friday or Thanksgiving Day or any other day, I no longer wish to push and shove—to be a door buster—in order to get what I *perceive* that I want.

Better, instead, to try to keep things simple. Better to aim as William Henry Channing did, and try to “to live content with small means...” The nephew of William *Ellery* Channing, William *Henry* Channing worked throughout his life “to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion.” In fact, for a time, the young Channing even worked

among the members of the Brook Farm Commune, a mid-nineteenth century utopian community in Massachusetts that sought to practice social reform, in part by removing commercial competition from its own system of labor. While Brook Farm lasted, sadly, only six years, and while Channing moved on to other work and even other countries, settling finally in England, his words are still words to be cherished, particularly in this advent of Christmas and other holy days in which gifts shall be exchanged. “To be worthy, not respectable,” Channing says, “and wealthy, not rich... to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart... To let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common. This is to be my symphony.”

How do we, and why should we, emulate, such a symphony? Let me try to answer the second question, the “why should we” part, first. First of all, I want to acknowledge

that for many people, being told they *should* do anything is a set up to send them running to the nearest station to buy a one-way ticket to rebellion. For so many people, coming to Unitarian Universalist services means getting *away* from Church that tells them what they *should* believe, how they *should* behave, who they *should* (or should *not*) love, and so on. If you are among those people today, I am so glad you are here.

But while I want as much as you do for us to be free of demure obedience to any God or priest or parent whose religious instruction has backfired in such a way as to dim our own inner light, if there is one thing I think we all *should* remember and honor, is that life on this earth is inherently interdependent, and so what each one of us does has deep effect on others.

Just yesterday, for example, I was at the second gathering of Wildflower Church's newly forming healing chorus. For those of you who haven't heard about this group, its purpose is to provide healing presence through song to those in the community who are suffering. And so yesterday, thirteen of us gathered in the cozy space of the church office and spent about an hour and a half singing together. Some of us knew how to read music and some of us did not; some of us were familiar with many of the songs, and some of us were not. All of that was fine. The important part in yesterday's gathering, was that we listened to each other, helped each other find the right notes, right rhythms, right entry points to the rounds we sang, the right moments to, in Debbie Grove's words, "take a sip of breath."

Trouble only really came for me when I lost focus on the fact I was singing *with others*. When I lost track of that I'd find

myself off on my own musical path, and *symphonic* is not how one would describe it. But oh, when we did all come together, when we did sing with our eyes and ears on each other as much as on the music before us, it was as if we were giving each other, and ourselves, a gift. And that is why we should strive, I believe, to emulate Channing's efforts to "live content and with small means... to listen to stars and birds, babes and sages, with open heart...." It becomes a mutual, and regenerative, gift.

Now, aside from singing together, *how* shall we emulate William Henry Channing's symphony? As I said earlier, his words are words to honor, and to act upon, particularly as we head into this holiday season. As we head into this holiday season, we do so with oil prices nearing triple digits per barrel, we do so with this past November's Cyber Monday bringing in a record-breaking \$733 million worth of online purchases, and

we do so with a subprime mortgage crisis that includes as many as two million more American families possibly facing foreclosure in the coming year. In other words, we do so as some people in the world “push aboard and some are tipped out.” How then, shall we emulate Channing’s symphony? How do we refrain from the over-reaching, over-spending, and over-rating that Lao-Tse claims risks our very sanity?

Let us do so by turning toward our own creativity. Let us do so by turning towards a more mindful living, content with our own mindful means. In fact, you can literally turn now, to the table in the back of our sanctuary, and see that several Wildflower people were kind enough to bring samples of their own creative gifts they have offered to others in the past: from fruit bread to music boxes, from mixed CDs, to homemade T-shirts, from photographs to beads, we can make for our beloveds any number of gifts that come from our hearts and

with our love. I encourage you after the service to peruse the table, and to ask those who've brought their samples any questions you may have, which will help you to tap into your own creative gift giving.

Now, if you're saying to yourself right now, "Oh, but I don't sew," or "I don't cook," or "I just plain old don't *create*," then *think* creatively—think outside of the traditional gift-wrapped box, and give, for example, a Heifer Project gift in someone's name, to a family in need. From honey bees to ducks, from chicks to trees, from goats to, yes, heifers, your gifts will enable whole communities from all over the world to develop more sustainable economies. Or, check out Alternative Gifts International, another nonprofit, and interfaith, organization that provides affordable relief and development through gift-giving. On their website, they state, for example, that for the price of a Barbie doll, you can provide training to

one Kenyan family in solar cooking and water pasteurization. Such a gift is truly just that, in a land where both wood and healthy drinking water are scarce. Furthermore, once one family learns this solar cooking tool, they can teach another family, and they another, and so on.

Now, of course, the Heifer Project and Alternative Gifts International are just two possibilities for alternative gift giving. I also found a website that enables you to give a gift in honor of someone you love to a public land trust. Yet another website provides what they call a “conscious consumer marketplace.” So if you still want to hand an actual, tangible gift to someone, you can make sure that it is a fair trade gift, or sweatshop-free, organic, non-toxic, and so on. The choices you have for conscious consumer gift-giving are countless.....

Still, you know, I have to admit, that Barbie doll I mentioned a moment ago is haunting me a little: Do we just

quit giving to our children and our loved ones—cold turkey—the things we know they know and love—just tell them, no more Tonka toys or Legos, no more Lincoln Logs or Hot Wheels for you? OK, I know I'm dating myself by listing that particular bunch of toys, and I have to say I never once owned a Barbie doll. But the point is, amidst my call for us to be mindful of what and how we give this year, I still want to honor that children get to be children; that children *need* to simultaneously lose and find themselves in the world of imagination and creativity that toys like those I've mentioned can provide. Grownups too need the comfort of play, whether through good books, good music, good exercise, good art supplies—you name it.

I only ask you this, as we move into these holy days of gift-giving. Give as if these are holy days, indeed. Give as if this place we share, this earth we share, is a holy place. I'll tell

you, as I've been getting to know the community of Wildflower Church, as I've prepared for this sermon and for today's congregational meeting; as I've reflected back on the work that's occurred in the past months, and the future we have envisioned together; as I've revisited our stated purpose in our church bylaws which calls us to be a "loving, welcoming religious community," I have thought to myself, what might it be like if we were to add to that statement, that we are a *giving* community? I know it's there already, in so many ways, and it shows every day in the love and care we give to each other and to the community. I know too that giving must be balanced with receiving, and with rest. But in this consumer-crazy culture we live in, in which we so readily do battle with each other for positioning, whether at Black Friday "door buster" sales or in New York City subway trains; in this war-addicted world in which the disempowered fight so often so that

someone else can have more of something, and then more, and more, and more, I think of the words of Starhawk that we read together, and hear, once more, something like a symphony:

“...you who seek to know Me, know that your seeking and yearning will avail you not, unless you know the Mystery: For if that which you seek, you find not in yourself, you will never find it without. For behold, I have been with you from the beginning, and I am that which is attained at the end of desire.”

The well of giving, the well of generosity and of mindfulness is within us. We need not reach out to grasp for more and more. For, it is a gift, indeed, to be simple, and to give simply from our hearts and from our creativity. So whether you are a cook or a carpenter, an artist or a teacher, a mathematician or a musician, a stay-at-home mom, or a stay-at-home dad, here is my call to you today: Give from within

the beauty that is yours. Make these days holy days, in honor of this earth, so sacred a vessel in which we all live.

Amen.