

## “The Answer I Wish I’d Given!”

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I had jet lag. That’s my excuse---that, and it was a hot, humid Sunday afternoon in Chicago, the end of a three-day family reunion. All of us were well-fed and happy, but tired and . . . Well, the family had been together for three days. When my aunt remembered that she needed to return the flower vases to her church, I volunteered to jump in the car with her and my mom. To re-cap: I had jet-lag, it was hot, and I was enjoying the peace of a Sunday drive. That’s how I got caught off-guard by a simple question. As for how the question arose, I recall only that my aunt mentioned her church’s mission and outreach programs. Recently, the church had sent a team of volunteers to New Orleans, where citizens were still cleaning up two years after Hurricane Katrina had mowed a path of destruction through it. My aunt holds deeply conservative political values, which she holds in check under the best of circumstances. As I’ve already described, our weary afternoon was not the best of circumstances. “That city has had two years to clean up and they’re still asking for help,” she huffed. “Tell me, Erika” why should we help them?” There it was: the ball out of left-field, the surprise attack on the right flank. Anyway you look at it, I choked. “Um” I said. Really: how do you begin to answer a question like that?” We were talking about her church---and not just any church: it was the church that my mom and uncle attended as college students; the church where my parents held their wedding reception; the church where my cousin was married; the church where, as a teenager I heard the best sermon about Jesus I’ve ever heard. But clearly, the answer had eluded her. “They seem to think that they don’t have to do anything,” she continued, “except sit and wait for other people to come help them. How long do they expect us to keep helping?” (Notice how many theys she was up to.). “Well,” I fumbled, “When I lived there, we used to joke that New Orleans is the most developed of all the Third World nations. I mean, they operate under a different legal system. It was hard to work through the red tape when it was whole---now it’s a city with broken hope and a broken infrastructure, so . . . “

Lovely, isn’t it, how I decided to explain the civic and legal framework of New Orleans, instead of answering my aunt’s question? And, oh, friends, it gets worse. I proceeded to explain the quirks of land ownership and inheritance, for which my aunt had a counter-argument, until from the front seat Ma “Peacemaker” Hewitt wisely drew our attention to another new subject. I was on vacation in Chicago that day but apparently my personal angel was still at home. If she’d been on duty, she would have dope-smacked me (lovingly) before I uttered my first sentence; she’d have put three words that form the only possible answer to the question should we

help?” The answer I wish I’d given: BECAUSE WE CAN. Because we can. We should help because we can. We share what we have with others because we can. That’s the quick-and-dirty answer. Ever since that hot summer day, my aunt’s question has been stuck to my frontal lobe like peanut butter sticks to your palate. That’s why I want to take my answer a little further---that, and because I think we all ask a version of that question from time to time: Why do we give? Take note: I hereby change my aunt’s question from Why should we help them? To Why should we help? I’m uncomfortable with the notion of a “them,” because it means “they” are not part of “us.” As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in the interdependent web of all existence: our human family is woven from the same fabric. I happen to feel a connection to New Orleans because I have lived there, and people I love still live there. Whether suffering rains down on New Orleans or Myanmar, Knoxville or China, reaching outward in gestures of help is a means of reinforcing---of re-weaving--the frayed strands in our web of connection. Whom we help isn’t as important as the fact of our helping.

That helps rid the question of the distasteful word “should.” The new question becomes Why do we have a responsibility to help others? Even better: Why are we called to give of ourselves? This question applies, conveniently, to any and all means of giving, whether it’s to our congregation, to our Unitarian Universalist movement, or to someone in need. The fact, however disquieting, is that giving often comes more easily when it’s directed towards a crisis, or toward the collective (ie., entire cities or countries) than towards a single stranger. When groups are in trouble (the victims of flooding, say, or political oppression), the need is evident; our help is triggered readily. On an individual basis, though, we risk second-guessing ourselves, our inner instinct to share lost in a flurry of suspicion and quiet judgment. At the highway exit near my house, there’s usually a panhandler at the light, holding a sign and a hopeful expression that burns right through my windshield. Is it right to roll down my window and give him one of the dollar bills that I keep in my ashtray? (If you’re ever in my neck of the woods, it’s a tan Corolla with “(Heart) OTHRZ” plates. I don’t always lock the doors. Help yourself.) As a church pastor, I receive out-of-the-blue phone calls every so often from strangers who sing me their blues and recount terrible losses of luck. Am I called to take out the checkbook for the Minister’s Discretionary Fund---created by my congregation and entrusted to me---to ease their burdens for a night? These aren’t uncommon decisions. In her book *The Samaritan’s Dilemma* (pp. 7-8) political scientist Deborah Stone parses a situation from her own life: A few years ago . . . Our local newspaper carried a story headlined “Panhandler concerns Residents.” It seems that every day, a man stood . . . Holding a sign reading “Hungry.” Many residents complained to the selectmen . . . When the topic came

up at the next selectmen's meeting, the chairman asked, "What are you going to do, arrest him and give him a free meal? Sixty years ago, that would have been precisely the response to a hungry vagrant in small-town New Hampshire. He would have been taken to the jail if there was one, to an inn or a house if there wasn't, and there he'd been fed. Thirty years ago, a local official might even have helped him sign up for food stamps or welfare. But now, feeding a hungry man would seem to be trouble waiting to happen, for (another selectman) advised the townspeople, "The best way to avoid the problem is not to give out free food." . . . To be sure, common morality still calls for feeding a hungry man, yet today, when I tell this story and ask audiences what they think the selectman meant, everyone seems to know. It's as if I'd asked a kindergarten class the color of the sky.

\* "If you give out free food, the man will just keep coming back for more."

\* "Other poor people will come to the town, knowing that there's free food."

\* "If you help him, you're just enabling him."

The answers pretty well summarize the new conventional wisdom: "Help is harmful. Think twice before you do it, and do it with restraint." Aha, I think: there's the true chasm that my aunt and I were bickering across that day, the yawning gap between our two different poles of belief. She believes that help should be given judiciously to those in need, so as not to compound the problem--the "problem" being that, in her eyes, people ask for help when they don't really need it, or when they've grown dependent on the help of others. I've worked in enough soup kitchens, mental health clinics, and Habitat for Humanity sites to believe something different: most people ask for help only when they're so trapped by their need that they're willing to exchange a piece of their dignity by calling attention to it. I've come to believe that most people will ask for help only as long as they need it, and ---moreover---that giving is helpful to both the recipient and the giver: in helping, in giving, we come to see and appreciate our own resources more deeply. There's a vast expanse between being responsible with our resources and fearfully hoarding what we have, attributing others with greed or laziness when their resources run thin.

Here's another way of defining our respective views of the world: my aunt's experience is funneled through scarcity metaphors: life is comprised of stockholders, "zero-sum games and pies with only so many slices" ---a mentality Stone calls "mine-or-thine." In contrast (and on a day when my personal angels aren't off gallivanting somewhere else), I see life moving in metaphors of abundance, "continuity, circular flows, and widening ripples . . . Mine--and--thine." (The Samaritan Dilemma, p. 187). Why are we called to give of ourselves? When my car and I are idling at the exit ramp, it might be prudent to ask myself, "Is this guy really homeless? What will he do with this money? Does he really need help?"

"Why I'd hate to waste a dollar, after all-right? After careful consideration, it's a gamble I'm willing to take, more often than not. I would rather hand him a dollar bill than sit with the uncomfortable grain of knowledge that I looked away from someone declaring himself in need. What, after all, is the true cost of purposefully looking through or past, someone who's asking for help? When I pretend not to see another human being, it exacts a steeper cost-a gram of my soul--than a measly dollar.

It should be evident to you by now how I respond when a red light pins me in front of a panhandler, or a stranger visits my office with a burden that needs to be eased. I use common sense; of course I do. I've called landlords to verify that someone is a day away from eviction, for example. But I do not examine homeless families for "evidence." of true poverty before paying for their motel room. Perhaps this is a Pollyanna-ish tack to take, this trust in strangers' integrity and their stories of need. But giving is for me, both a statement and expression of my faith. I give in all the ways I give---from all the means that I can give, with intention. I give to strangers in need. I give to my congregation, with its mission to transform its members so that we may transform the world. I give to UUA organizations---such as the UU Service Committee and my District's Chalice Lighters program---so that my monetary statement of faith is amplified by merging with the gifts of others. I give because I choose not to harden my gaze and narrow my heart. I choose not to be seduced from my perch---where abundance is visible and alive in the world---by the siren song of "there's not enough. . . Hang onto what's yours."

On most days---when my personal angel (my muse, my cerebral cortex, whatever) clocks in on time, alert and ready to guide me---I remember that I give because I can. For me, "I can" is a reflection that much of what I have, I did not earn. I've received freely from the generosity and privilege of others. What's "mine" isn't entirely mine, any more than the oxygen that flows through my lungs is "mine." I wish for a portion of my resources, along with my goodwill, to reverberate through the "UUuniverse," doing good in as many ways as possible. There are innumerable ways to name the forces that compel us to help others, all of them overlapping and none of them more important than the rest. You're a generous people: you have your own reasons for helping, for giving. Know them. Examine them. Practice articulating them. Because here's the truth: it's not that my "angel" failed me on that humid Sunday in Chicago. I failed. I failed to speak, with the full conviction of my faith, and the bold power of my love for this crazy patchwork family of human beings to which we belong. I didn't know how to answer my aunt's question, on that long-ago summer afternoon. But I know the answer now. I'll never be caught off-guard again.