Trust Generosity
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My father's favorite hymn was "Trust and Obey", whose chorus goes "Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey." [Yikes!] I turned thirteen in 1968, a time when no self-respecting American teenager would have put trusting and obeying at the center of their religious life. I literally could not go there. Obeying sounded un-American to me. Yet my family always tithed, giving ten percent of what we earned to the church or others in greater need than us, even though for most of my childhood we lived well below the poverty line, with ten hungry kids at home. Tithing was just something a good Christian did. So, I faithfully set aside ten percent of what I earned playing marbles, from mowing lawns, from my paper route, from working at McDonalds, and every other job I've ever had. Even after I left the Baptists, I tithed, because it's part of living generously.

Being a generous person is one of the classical virtues, advocated by Aristotle and other classical ethicists. This word derives from the Latin word *generosus* which means noble or magnanimous, which is often translated as being a "great soul." Who wouldn't want to share a portion of what they had, with those who need it most, in order to grow into being a great soul? This is the basis of generosity, this feeling of empathy or compassion, leading us to share from our resources. In fact, the Oxford English Dictionary defines generous as "freely giving more than is necessary or expected." So, by definition, to be generous is to give more than our fair share, in order to help those who have less.

We aren't primarily talking about your money however. We are talking about generous gifts of your time, your efforts, your thoughts, and your compassion. As Rebecca Parker reminds us, all of our God given gifts can be used to feed the hungry, bind up the broken, welcome the immigrant and stranger, offer someone our love, praise what is sacred, and do the work of justice in the world. Or they can be used to buy a bigger house, a nicer car, take exotic vacations, and hoard our wealth; as we abandon the poor, comply with unjust government programs, obscure what is sacred, and withhold our love and compassion. What will we do with our resources? Will our gifts bless or curse the world?

In this community, when we welcome the stranger, approach someone we don't know at coffee hour, or visit someone having a difficult time, we are practicing generosity. When we speak kindly about someone with whom we disagree, or who has somehow annoyed us, we are practicing generosity. When we take on a task no one else wants, or volunteer to do more than our share, we are practicing generosity. But remember, it is a practice. Some of us need more practice to do it well.

I fell in love with Loretta, my wife now of forty years, back in college. She was the daughter of Chinese immigrants, so her family tradition did not include tithing, or generosity of any magnitude, beyond immediate family. But she could readily see how my spirit of generosity greatly enriched and enhanced my life and my sense of wellbeing. So, from the very beginning of our marriage, even when we were struggling with student loans, a large mortgage, and car loans, we practiced a spirit of generosity by gifting away ten percent or more of our income each year. This wasn't easy, but it was always the right thing to do. As our careers grew and prospered, the sums we gave away grew much larger, but the principle remained the same. We learned to trust generosity.

This transformative spiritual concept goes far beyond money. It means embracing what Buddhists call a non-attached open-handedness in our relationship to our world. No matter how little or much we have to share, or our anxiety about the future, these can be transcended through trusting generosity, both our own and that of others. How do you treat your friends and neighbors? Or even random people you meet on the street? Would people you meet this week describe you as generous and kind? If you encountered a stranger in need, would you be a good Samaritan? Can you, will you, be that kind of person?

Mystics say embracing a spirit of generosity is the key to human flourishing. As the great Sufi master Hafiz reminds us in one of his mystic poems, "Even after all this time, the sun never says to the earth, 'You owe me.' Look what happens with a love like that, it lights up the whole sky!" So, Loretta and I decided early on to make generosity core to our marriage, in how we dealt with each other, with our children, and with the world around us. Despite everything in the world today, and our success at capitalist occupations, we chose to trust generosity.

Over the decades I have mentored dozens of young and promising entrepreneurs and executives. From my positions as Chief Financial Officer, Chief Executive Officer, or Managing General Partner, I was privileged to mentor in their first senior corporate roles many women, racial minorities, GLBT folk, and recent immigrants. Some of my most successful hires and promotions were such people of promise, often overlooked by others, who just wanted the chance to show what they could do in the role. These folks grew into being some of my closest friendships in business. People who I would do anything for, and who would do anything for me, as we built great companies together.

In the early 1990's I was Chairman and CEO of a public multinational biotechnology company called Transgenic Sciences Inc. Our largest facility and headquarters was in an old factory building in downtown Worcester. One day Andy, our black head of human resources, showed me in the paper that a bank was about to foreclose on a poor black Baptist church located a few blocks from us. At lunchtime I went over to meet the pastor. He reminded me of my father. I called the bank and collateralized their mortgage with my company's stock. Less then a year later they got current on their loan and my collateral was released. The gifts we have to give vary greatly, but we can always be generous.

Over the years Loretta and I have been blessed with an abundance of resources, financial and otherwise, and chose to use those resources to bless the world. Most of our giving has been quiet, so as not to make it about our ego selves, but we look for opportunities to bring a blessing. After my father died, my large extended family was falling out of touch with each other, so Loretta and I rented the biggest beach house we could find on Nantucket, and invited everyone to come for a family reunion. Two dozen of us gathered at the beach, and it was so special, especially for many of my nieces and nephews, that we turned it into an annual gathering. For over twenty years now Loretta and I have rented beach houses every summer on the Rhode Island shore. While not everyone makes it every year, I have a much closer relationship with my siblings, and their kids, because of this small act of generosity.

In the late nineties Loretta was on the board of the U U Urban ministry, focused on their after-school program for Roxbury youth of color. This was a time of guns and gang warfare in Boston's poor urban

center. So, when she saw the need to help more of the youth of color escape the school to prison pipeline through attending college, she created a program called Funderberg scholars to provide help with college applications, mentors, and money to provide a bridge for those with the intelligence and ambition, but not the supportive environment, to have their chance at college and a career from which to make a living.

Over the last twenty years it has been one of the joys of my life helping and watching these often awkward, black, urban teenagers, blossom in their educational and occupational passions, to take their place in the world as responsible adults. In the end, they each must make their own way, but Loretta's program makes a way possible for them where none was possible before. One program graduate said one of the most important keys to her success in college was always knowing, no matter what happened, Loretta was always available on speed dial. At her annual fundraiser last weekend, Loretta raised over $126,000 from generous folks to fund more inner-city black kids in college this year.

I tell you these stories, not to call attention to Loretta or myself, though I am particularly proud of my wife, but to give you some illustrations about what can happen if you trust generosity to transform the world. You may start small, by providing a ride to appointments, or helping a neighbor with her shopping, bringing food or a pleasant visit to a shut-in. These are the cornerstones of building a community of generosity. You might lend an ear to someone who doesn't feel heard, or be a confidant for someone with a joy to share, or a shoulder to cry upon. This spirit of generosity makes both the giver and the receiver happier, and it's a contagious thing, the receiver of generosity is likely to have different gifts, yet in their own way they are likely to pass the gift on.

But let me be frank, there will be people who don't deserve or will even abuse your generosity. Don't let that stop you! Presumably you were not being generous out of any expectation of getting something for yourself. That's not generosity but rather an investment. If they don't show their appreciation, or pass it on, that is their loss, not yours. You have done your bit to make the world a better place, now go find someone who needs your generosity even more. After all, the good Samaritan did not stop to judge the bloody man dying in the gutter, instead he got off his donkey, bound up the man's wounds, and helped him to where he could heal. This is the ultimate spirit of generosity.

Over the last several weeks I have been exploring with you what the mystics have taught me, about resilience, ego-decentering, gratitude, and now generosity. My hope is that at least some of you will find something useful among these teachings for your own flourishing. Each of us is on our own particular spiritual journey from birth to death. We are all in very different places along that path; some closer to birth, others closer to death, and many somewhere in between. In two more weeks, I will return to preach my final sabbatical sermon among you. It has been a pleasure and a delight to share this brief time with all of you. I wish you well on your spiritual journeys, wherever they may take you, as I continue to follow mine. You are a blessing to the world. Amen and blessed be.