



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"Volunteer Recognition Sunday"

Delivered 21 May 2023

Rev. Jen Raffensperger

"The most important thing each of us can know is our unique gift and how to use it in the world. Individuality is cherished and nurtured, because, in order for the whole to flourish, each of us has to be strong in who we are and carry our gifts with conviction, so they can be shared with others. Being among the sisters provides a visible manifestation of what a community can become when its members understand and share their gifts. In reciprocity, we fill our spirits as well as our bellies."

There's a special thing that can happen, I think, when we volunteer. By giving of our own time and talents, we can grow both a greater sense of what we have to offer, and what we are able to receive from others.

I don't know about you, but I grew up in a family and social culture that made it very challenging for me to ask for help. If I was struggling, I figured that my work was to just keep struggling until eventually I figured it out for myself, by myself. My parents used to talk to me about how smart I was, and what a gift it was, that I should appreciate that. And this was all fine and good until the first time I was handed a paper with a failing grade.

I remember it well because it was so absolutely mortifying. It was in the 2nd grade, and it was a math assignment. I was also, of course, receiving social cultural cues that as a girl, I shouldn't like or be good at math - but up until that day I always had been. Up until that day I'd always been good at EVERYTHING. Suddenly, my worksheet was on my desk with a big red "0" on

it. I was so shocked when I saw it that I crunched it up into a little ball and shoved it into the back of my desk.

It never once occurred to me to ask my teacher about this grade, to ask what I might be missing or what I could study to do better. And I was filled with shame at the grade, so I vowed not to tell my parents. But I kept getting math problems wrong! Finally, the school called my parents. The horror! My heart sank. I was sure I was in trouble.

My parents talked to my teacher and she showed them the worksheet - that she'd dug out of the back of my desk and smoothed out. The assignment was to copy math problems off the board, solve them, and use the answers to color a picture by numbers. And it turns out that I had solved every problem correctly! But I had copied all of them down wrong - because I couldn't see the board. That fall, in 1980, I got glasses, and it solved my math problems... at least for a while.

My parents meant well. They wanted me to know and appreciate my unique gifts! They wanted me to go out and use them in the world, for good, to share with others! But I became so convinced that I was so gifted that somehow, admitting I was struggling would expose me as a fraud or a sham.

What does one person's struggle have to do with the great gift of service? If you do not think you are worthy - that you have inherent worth and dignity, you might say - then you might not think you have anything to offer others. But you do. I do. We *all* do.

If we sit with our gifts - whatever they may be - in isolation, then we stagnate. We don't grow as well as the three sisters, the three crops in our reading today from Robin Wall Kimmerer's [*Braiding Sweetgrass*](#) (which is a simply marvelous book on the gifts of indigenous wisdom, the human ingenuity of science, and the lessons living within every plant). The corn, beans and squash create a harmonious living environment that enhances individual growth and thriving while giving gifts to the other sisters.

We named SO MANY volunteers today - and we named them by groups only! We knew that to try to name every single individual, we would have far too great a chance to leave someone out, to make someone's gift feel unnoticed, unappreciated.

And that's part of what is so great about sharing your gifts! Being appreciated for what is uniquely, wonderfully you! But there's also that magic of receiving the gifts of others. Witnessing the people who can do what you can't, who excel where you struggle. Sometimes, an outside perspective might show you that it's not that you're doing something wrong, but that you don't have the tools you need - like I needed glasses to see the board.

“Respect one another, support one another, bring your gift to the world and receive the gifts of others, and there will be enough for all.”

UUCYork simply wouldn't exist but for the dedication and cooperation of volunteers giving of their own gifts. Beginning in the fall of 1954 when a few like-minded seekers first met, and became the Unitarian Society of York in early 1955 - it is people working together that have built this community. And it is people offering their own gifts, living fully into them and carrying them with conviction, that will continue to light the way into our future.

It is spiritual work, volunteering. To grow into the full conviction of who you are, what gifts you bring, also means gaining an understanding of how much more there is to learn, how much more growing there is to do. And witnessing the unique gifts of others, in service to something you both believe to be of great worth indeed, grows empathy and appreciation for others. You see how your gifts enhance the lives of others. You see how the gifts of others enhance your lives. You get better at asking for help, for another perspective. You grow in appreciation and yes, in love - the heart of our faith.

“It goes on one at a time,
it starts when you care

to act, it starts when you do
it again and they said no,
it starts when you say *We*
and know who you mean,
and each day you mean one more.”

This final stanza of Marge Piercy’s poem [“The Low Road”](#) to me cuts right to the deep truth of building community. “It starts when you care to act” and then continue to act even in the face of obstacles. “It starts when you say *We* and know who you mean, and each day you mean one more.”

We honor, today, all those who have brought their gifts of abundance to our shared table. We honor all the ancestors who first chose to build a we, and to include more and more within that we, to create a space of welcome and of growth. We honor all those who have yet to join us, whom we’ve yet to meet, all those lives whose gifts we may one day share and with whom we may learn and grow.

“Respect one another, support one another, bring your gift to the world and receive the gifts of others, and there will be enough for all.”

So may it ever be.