

# **GENEROSITY IN HARD TIMES**

**Veterans Day 2023**

by Bruce L. Andrews

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sheridan

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This presentation has been a particularly difficult one for me to organize in my head and in my heart. So I will be revisiting quotations from my previous presentations and others that I have gathered throughout my life. Thus, the flow of my text may be a bit jumbled. I am preparing it as the war between Israel and Hamas rages on along with the devastation in Ukraine by Russia and other such atrocities in our world. Our House of Representatives is in disarray and dysfunction as, it seems, all of politics is. Many seem to be willing to point the finger of blame out the window while taking precious little time to look into the mirror to own their part in all of it and to try to do better. Harold Kushner is a rabbi who wrote the book “When Bad Things Happen to Good People”. His son died of a premature aging disease at age 16. Of course, he asked, “Why?”, many, many times. At the end, he said, “The next question is, ‘What are you going to do about it?’” In a sense, that question is for all of us. We all experience some level of trauma and need to deal with it in some effective way so it doesn’t interfere in our lives needlessly.

Yesterday, the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month, was our nation’s annual remembrance of our veterans and, I personally, believe their families are veterans too. There is a Vietnamese proverb about the pain of war as follows:

For those who have experienced the pain of war, no explanation is necessary.

For those who have not experienced the pain of war, no explanation is possible.

This proverb can apply to other forms of pain as well. I have been present for the birth of my two children and grandson. I have witnessed the pain of their mothers, but they can in no way describe to me that which they had just felt. This proverb can apply to pain or trauma of many different intensities. A few years back I wrote some thoughts regarding the breaking up of relationships. I think it’s

reasonable to use similar thinking regarding one's relationship with pain or trauma. Here it is:

“Clearly, it has been a long and difficult journey for you. The most healing journey is always where one works through the pain rather than trying to avoid it. When a person goes under, around, or over the pain, or avoids it in any other way, the pain remains there to be worked through in order to allow the healing and moving on. It's kind of like mending a tear in the fabric of person's life. It's obvious there is a scar where the tear was, but their life fabric is whole and strong again – maybe even stronger for what a person has learned about themselves and life.”

The above quote speaks to what one can do to be generous to oneself. In regard to the healing and helping in hard times, people can be helpful by being generous to others as well. Generosity in and of itself can be helpful because it lets another know that they are not alone in their hard times.

“Years ago, anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. The student expected Mead to talk about fishhooks or clay pots for grinding stones. But no. Mead said that the first sign of civilization in an ancient culture was a femur (thigh bone) that had been broken and then healed. Mead explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you die. You cannot run from danger, and get to the river for a drink or hunt for food. You are meat for prowling beasts. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal.

A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has taken the time to stay with the one who fell, has bound up [the person's wound], has carried the person to safety and has tended to the person through recovery. “Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts”, Mead said.

We are at our best when we serve others and in so doing broaden and deepen civility.

In her book, Braiding Sweet Grass, Robin Wall Kemmerer notes a Sioux tribal belief that “Wealth among traditional people is measured by having enough to give away.” It is my perspective that wealth may be measured not just in money or physical assets but also in personal assets that people may choose to share. These may include kindness, decency, respect, time, skills, and others.

Here are some instances of sharing of personal assets. When I was in Vietnam in 1969, we helped a couple of orphan boys about 12 years old by providing them with clothing, schooling, food, shelter and safety. One day I was riding in a Jeep with one of the boys who we called Mike between Tan San Nhut airbase and Phu Loi, our main headquarters. Along the way there were 50 gallon drums of sand and barbed wire arranged on the roads to slow us down for security checks. There were also stands of palm trees close enough to the road that if snipers wanted to shoot us, they could. In addition, there were little stands where people sold fruit for travelers or gas for scooters. We stopped briefly for some fruit. I knew little of the Vietnamese language. When I began to pay for the fruit, Mike stopped me from paying and spoke to the merchant. When I asked Mike what he said to the merchant, he told me that I was paying too much and he had let the merchant know he was on to him so I paid a fair price. That may seem like a little thing, but everything counts. I had helped to take care of him and he was helping to take care of me. I see this as generosity not in the presence of trauma or pain but in the presence of danger. That little boy gave what he had. To be honest, I just wanted to keep moving and provide less of a target.

Danger was prevalent to some degree all the time in Vietnam. One of my extra duties was to be pay officer for the Headquarters and Headquarters Company. That meant I paid cooks, clerks, my medics, and others in that company. I would fly in a chopper out to a rice dike or be driven on back roads by a private with an AR 15 assault rifle in a Jeep to where an infantry platoon was camped. I would be carrying upwards of \$30,000 in an ammo can. There I would pay my medics. One time an infantry platoon was camped in a graveyard because that was the highest point away from water in the area. As we were returning to our base camp, we were quite a distance away from the platoon we had visited and still had a ways to

go to get to our base camp. Our Jeep got stuck in the mud and we couldn't get it out. Two Republic of Vietnam (RVN) soldiers came along in their Jeep and offered to help pull us out. We rigged up a tow strap with some webbing and made it out. By that time it was getting close to dark .

The night was when Mr. Charles or Sir Charles became quite active. We were able to get back to camp "behind the wire" to safety before it was dark. It was getting dark for the RVN soldiers just as it was for us. Fortunately, their generosity in our hard time won out.

Under different circumstances another time, when I was a boy, I was traveling with my family and we were driving through Iowa. It was winter and we slid off the road. We weren't hurt nor was the car damaged. We certainly couldn't get out of the ditch on our own. After a while we saw a farmer and his son on a tractor with chains on those huge wheels. They came and pulled us out of the ditch and asked nothing for it. How's that for generosity?

Another time my friend had bound up his canoe between rocks in the Platte River. A group of us loaded up in our 1962 International Travelall. For those of you who don't know, that was an early version of what we think of as a suburban. We headed out to find the canoe in order to tie it to a tree on the shore until we could come back later and retrieve it. We tied it to a tree and by that time it was becoming dark. We lost our way when trying to find the truck. We came upon a cabin with a light in the window and told the occupant of our predicament. We described where we thought the truck was and he said that he knew where to take us. We all piled into his new Oldsmobile F 85 which at that time was called a "compact" car. We were 5 big healthy young men at the time and added a lot of weight to that little car. As we drove through the forest in the night, the car kept bottoming out and took on a few dents and scratches. We found the truck and the man helped us find a way out. I asked what I could pay him and he said, "I don't want any money. But what I do want is that if you ever find anyone who needs help as you have needed it, then you help them and pass this gift along".

Now, since yesterday was Veterans Day, I thought I would tell a story from World War II that speaks to generosity. A bomber pilot returning from a bombing run over Germany was flying a plane that was terribly torn up. The aircraft was so crippled that he wasn't sure he could make it back to England. He was still in range of German anti-aircraft weapons. He was flying slow and at low altitude and trying to maintain flight. Suddenly a German fighter plane appeared on his wing.

The German fighter pilot radioed the German anti-aircraft soldiers to hold fire as he escorted the Allied bomber across the channel to where he could land. These two pilots were able to meet after the war and shake hands and become friends.

In addition, there is a story in the May 1987 issue of Boy's Life magazine. The author is Ray Bradbury. The title of the story is "The Time Machine". The time in the story is 70 years after the Civil War. The place is the porch of an old man, a veteran, where three young boys have come to listen to what he has to say. He tells of battles at Shiloh, Antietam, and others. The protagonist, a boy named Charlie, asks him and I quote directly,

"You remember winning, don't you? A battle won, somewhere?" "No," said the old man, deep under. "I don't remember anyone winning anywhere, anytime. War is never a winning thing, Charlie. You just lose all the time and the one who loses last asks for terms. All I remember is a lot of losing and sadness and nothing good but the end of it." This Civil War veteran was unwittingly and generously teaching the boys about the vicissitudes of war.

Speaking of the vicissitudes of war, here's another example. While serving as a Disaster Mental Health Provider for the Red Cross, my partner and I came upon a fishing village on the west side of Galveston Bay lying on the north edge of the Gulf of Mexico. This particular village was occupied by Vietnamese shrimpers. The woman who owned the business came out to greet us. We talked to people like this as part of our job to see if people had any needs that we might help them meet. As we were about to leave, the woman said, "Thank you for coming for us." We noted that we were more than happy to do so because that is why we are serving

with the Red Cross. I should note that on hurricane duty I always wore my Vietnam boonie hat. The woman had seen that and she said, “No. I mean thank you for helping my family get out of Vietnam.” I personally hadn’t done that, but in some small way I may have contributed to it. That was generous of her to say. I, 40 years out of Vietnam at that time, had never had a thank you from someone from Vietnam. I hated that war and war in general so much, that I blinded myself to the fact that some good might possibly come out of it. Her generous gift of thanks allowed me to open my mind and to some degree my heart regarding war and its effects. Sometimes a person can be part of something generous and good in the middle of something very bad and not even realize it. Sadly, a number of veterans never experience an eye, heart, and mind opening event like this that I had the privilege of experiencing.

Today, of all days, I want to remind you of one definition of a veteran which is as follows “

A “Veteran” – whether active duty, discharged, retired, or reserve – is someone who, at some point in his or her life, wrote a blank check to “The United States of America” for the amount of “up to and including his or her own life”.

Therefore, I need to repeat this year and every year:

Not only do I want to thank veterans for their service and sacrifice but I also want to thank their families and loved ones for their service and sacrifice. Without their support, our journey would be a lot tougher. In addition, I want to thank those people and their families who have also served and sacrificed working for peace in nonviolent ways. For military vets, nonviolent workers for peace and their loved ones, the journey is not one briefly taken in our youth. It is a journey of a lifetime. It is a journey with its lessons in life that we must not forget; indeed we are unable to forget.

Veterans, people who work for peace nonviolently and their families give generously to our nation sometimes even unto death. Consider the following.

“and the truth is  
all veterans pay with their lives  
some pay all at once  
while others pay over a life time”

Jm Storm

There is a saying that I paraphrase as follows:

My country right or wrong my country. When it is right, keep it right. When it is wrong make it right.

In the same vein, Dag Hammarskjold once wrote, Never “for the sake of ‘peace and quiet’ deny your own experience or convictions.

These two sayings require a generosity of courage and suggest that a person stand and speak in ways that may be risky. To quote Theodore Roosevelt, “In a moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, and the worst thing is to do is nothing.”

In the face of the war in the Middle East, and the Ukraine and other such wars in the world, grief abounds and so does generosity. So I quote from an amalgam of Jewish writings including the Talmud.

Do not be daunted by the world’s grief

Do justly now

Love mercy now

Walk humbly now

You are not obligated to complete the work,

Neither are you free to abandon it.

The question that remains is figuring out how generosity enables us to cope as effectively as possible during hard times.

There is plenty of darkness in life. We all have dark places in our lives that we may visit from time to time. Hopefully, we can choose to visit, but not stay to live in the dark places. Doing the latter can diminish or destroy your spirit of generosity. In the end, living in the dark places can begin to disrupt and maybe even destroy our lives. Here are a couple of relevant quotes because anger and hate are dark places and can be poisonous.

Anger [and hate] are darkrooms in which negatives are developed.

An author whose name I can't remember

Holding onto anger [and hate] is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Buddha

So how do we keep and practice generosity in our lives?

Three sources that help me to keep generosity in my life, most of the time, are as follows:

The great African-American opera star Marian Anderson is said to have grown up in a tarpaper shack. In an interview she quoted her mother as saying, "There are times when you think you have lost everything. However, you have not lost everything until you lose your sense of humor." I personally don't want to be a grumpy old man.

Khalil Gibran, the great Lebanese poet, wrote "You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give." I don't think Khalil Gibran plagiarized this idea about generosity. However, I do believe Native Americans, that I noted earlier, were a little ahead of his time.

Finally, here is a paragraph from a talk I gave in 1967 that speaks to generosity as a personal asset.

“...I want to point out the fact that a person, having passed a certain point in space, can return to that exact point. However, once a person has passed a specific point in time, they can never return to it. This is important because once one has passed up a chance to help a fellow [human being], that particular chance may never come again.

In conclusion, Stephen Grellet writes:

“I shall pass this way but once; any good, therefore, that I can do or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.

**May it be so**