

“Receiving Generously”  
Sermon by Rev. Erica Baron  
Unitarian Society of Hartford  
August 14, 2022

**Reading:** The Gift, by Alan Cohen

**Sermon:** Receiving Generously

Good morning. It is good to be with you! I am a congregational consultant for the New England region of the UUA, which means it is my job to help UU congregations in New England when they have questions or struggles, when the wider context beyond the congregation is helpful, when an outside person is needed to help hold something. There are five of us who do this job in New England, and we are here as your companions in the joyous and difficult parts of congregational life.

My regional colleagues and I have developed a way of understanding the purpose of congregational life and the practices that can help us lean into this purpose. We call this model Spiritual Leadership.

Spiritual Leadership is our term for a way of living that is rooted in your values, giving what is yours to give to the world, and joining with others to create communities of love and liberation for everyone. Spiritual Leadership is not only for identified “leaders.” Everyone can develop their own spiritual leadership. Since every person is unique, spiritual leadership looks different in each individual person. But we can recognize it through the commitment to living our values and offering what we can in community.

At the region, we believe that the purpose of congregational life, at its core, is to support everyone in the congregation to find and develop their spiritual leadership, while creating communities of love and liberation for all. We have identified 5 practices that congregations can do in order to fulfill this purpose: Covenanting, Tending Our Tradition, Doing Our Inner Work, Faithful Risking, and Centering in Gifts.

Today, I want to talk about the practice of centering in gifts. Our team's understanding of this practice has been deeply informed by Malidoma Somé, who was an Elder of the Dagara people of Burkina Faso in West Africa who understood his mission to be bringing this wisdom to the world. My colleague Meck Groot has studied with him extensively, and she has brought his understanding of gifts to us.

He is the workshop leader who taught this practice to the author of today's reading. Here are some words from him about gifts:

Whether they are raised in indigenous or modern culture, there are two things that people crave: the full realization of their innate gifts, and to have these gifts approved, acknowledged, and confirmed. There are countless people in the West whose efforts are sadly wasted because they have no means of expressing their unique genius. In the psyches of such people there is an inner power and authority that fails to shine because the world around them [cannot perceive] it.

Now, when we say gifts, that needs a little explanation. Because we live in a context that is really focused on productivity and marketable skills. So lots of us have learned all kinds of skills and techniques that we use in our work lives, our congregational lives, our families - everywhere we go. There are lots of very helpful skills and techniques for all kinds of tasks and situations, and having a good number of them available to you can be really helpful. I'm all about developing skills!

But gifts are something different. Notice that Malidoma Somé calls them innate gifts. You are born with them. They are part of your nature. You can develop and hone them, for sure, but you don't have to learn them at a basic level, because they are part of you.

I think of gifts of the things that shine out of us, the things we can't not do, in a joyful way. Like the person whose attention is always drawn to babies and small children, and who interacts with them with such delight and openness, that the children love them back. Or the person who is so in love with earth and soil that their garden is always overflowing. Or the person who can see a jumble of anything - clothes, files, images, ideas - and make of them a beautiful order, and

does not find the task onerous but, rather, enjoys the challenge and finds deep satisfaction in its completion.

Malidoma Somé goes so far as to call this our “unique genius.” Did you know that you are a genius?

We’re not taught to think this way about ourselves in our culture. Genius is something a very few, very smart, very accomplished people have. The rest of us are just ordinary. Not spectacular. Not special. Just ordinary. Even people who were labeled as “gifted” as children can feel the weight of imposter syndrome. “I’m not actually special or gifted. Someday they’ll notice that I’m just ordinary.”

But Malidoma Somé tells us that we all have a unique genius. So, you are a genius. You just have to find the thing that makes you a genius.

How do you know what your gifts are? How do you identify your unique genius? Sometimes we just know. But often we need others to help us discover our gifts. This seems strange if a gift is something so core to our being that we can’t not do it. But that’s precisely why it can be difficult sometimes to discern our own gifts. Because gifts come so naturally to us, we may think, “That can’t be a gift. It’s no big deal. Anyone could do that.” As it turns out, that is often not true! There is likely something that comes easily and naturally to you that others have to struggle to do.

Some gifts are big and showy, and hard to miss. I think for example of people with a gift for performing. That usually becomes obvious at some point. Or the people with a gift for greeting and welcoming others. You’ve probably met them because they have a gift for meeting you!

Other gifts are quieter and subtler. The gift of sitting with someone who is sad or lonely without trying to fix it. The gift of just being there. The gift of creating a physical space that feels calm and beautiful. The gift of asking the key question. The gift of saying the one sentence at the end of an hour long conversation that sums up the heart of what has been said. These gifts take a little more careful observation to notice.

As Malidoma Somé says, one of the things we long for is to have our gifts acknowledged, confirmed, and approved. Part of centering in gifts as a community is to notice each other's gifts, and then acknowledge them. To help each other feel deeply seen as people with something to offer, as people who embody our own unique version of spiritual leadership.

In our reading this morning, we heard about what this looks like in the community of a classroom.

In the first few months of my time on the regional staff, I went with my colleague Joe Sullivan to a leadership retreat in one of our congregations. Joe led the board members, committee on ministry members, and the minister in an exercise of noticing each other's gifts. We went around the circle and for each person, Joe invited others in the room to speak about that person's gifts. And they did! The mentioned things like a sense of humor, the insight to find and ask the key question, a willingness to speak a minority opinion with courage and without bitterness. Each person who spoke about a gift did it with deep appreciation. I could feel the joy and gratitude in the room. When we were done, there was a lightness and a closeness in the group that hadn't been there before.

This is one way of centering in gifts in a congregation. But it was one exercise in one day of a retreat. I've done this exercise a bunch of times since I learned it from Joe, and almost always there is the same joy, excitement, lightness, and closeness. And often this takes far longer than I have planned. I think this is because, as Malidoma Somé says, this is something we crave. Not only to have our own gifts seen and confirmed. But also to see and confirm the gifts of others. In fact, I've noticed that people tend to get at least as much joy from telling someone else about their gifts as from having their own gifts confirmed. It feels good to appreciate each other in this way. And it's such a rare thing. So when we get the opportunity, we want to revel in it.

As Unitarian Universalists, one of our Principles is to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The practice of noticing and naming each other's gifts is one way to practice this Principle. This is one of the ways of noticing the full humanity of others, and of promoting everyone's ability to claim and live into their worth and dignity.

Right now, I invite you to think of someone who has a gift that has been important to you. What have you seen someone doing with joy and love? What has someone offered to you that has been moving or helpful or supportive or inspiring? Take a moment to say thank you in your heart for this gift. And if you have never told this person the gift you have received from them and what it has meant to you, I invite you to consider doing that.

This idea might seem totally awkward. It is strange to me how rarely we tell each other what we appreciate about each other - what we mean to each other. But it is rare, and so it is awkward. It's something that many of us lack practice in. But if you do it anyway, it is usually appreciated. It's usually a way of spreading some joy.

I invite you to imagine ways this could become a more regular part of your life as a congregation. Maybe you want to try the exercise of naming gifts on a committee you're on, or in a small group you belong to. If doing it all at once feels overwhelming, maybe you can take turns, lifting up the gifts of one person each meeting until you've celebrated everyone.

Maybe you want to lean into this even more. Maybe those of you who have the gift for taking the conversational lead could make it a point to start telling people the gifts you notice them bringing. If you did that enough, maybe it would be less awkward for others to follow your lead.

I called this sermon Receiving Generously because we usually think about giving generously. I know that many of you give very generously of your gifts and your skills and your other resources to the congregation. That is also an important spiritual practice.

But we think less often about what it means to receive generously. A gift has meaning when it is received and appreciated. That's as true for the gifts of our being as for more concrete gifts. Since we crave having our gifts seen, acknowledged, confirmed, it is an act of generosity to each other to receive each other's gifts. Part of that is noticing each other's gifts and speaking them aloud as we have been discussing.

But there's another layer to the practice of centering in gifts.

Malidoma Somé says that, “There are countless people in the West whose efforts are sadly wasted because they have no means of expressing their unique genius.”

Some of us are lucky enough to have ways to offer our gifts in other aspects of our lives beyond the congregation. In our families or our jobs or other groups we belong to. But some of us don't. Some of us don't have another way to offer our gifts at all, and some of us only a little bit or only occasionally.

So as a community, part of receiving each other generously means offering each person a way to express their unique genius. Sometimes this requires creating new avenues to offer gifts in the community that haven't existed yet. This is how we help each other grow in spiritual leadership, by giving the power in each of us a way to shine.

Maybe you want to offer a way for people to request a conversation about their gifts. That might look like a group that would meet a few times to lift up the gifts they see in that person. They could then help the person think about where they are already expressing those gifts in the world, and where they might do that more. If there are important gifts that have no expression right now, this could be a way to figure out how the congregation can provide a way to express those gifts.

You are a genius! Right now. Without having to do anything, you are already carrying gifts for your community and for the world. Turn your attention inside. Can you notice your own gifts?

Every person around you in this room is a genius! They are all carrying precious gifts for your community and for the world. Can you notice the gifts of another person in the room? If not right now, can you prepare to be on the lookout? Can you make it a practice to seek the gifts in others?

You are all geniuses! And together, you can create a community that notices gifts and celebrates them and gives them ways to be expressed. I invite you to give it a try.