

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
21 November, 2010 ~ Thanksgiving Sunday

A Generous Heart

The Buddha said that no true spiritual life is possible without a generous heart.

Many years ago, when my grandfather died, I was a little unclear about how to continue to live. He had shown me infinite patience, and loved me unconditionally. I was utterly devastated.

When the funeral director arrived at my grandparents' home, we invited him into the parlor (my grandfather called it the parlor; it was the living room). I sat down across from our somber, black-suited guest, and began to speak with him about “the arrangements.” I suppose I was making some sense, but I was completely dissociated.

My uncle José came into the room to serve iced tea. He looked at me, and I think he saw that my spirit was disappearing, in search of my grandfather. He put down the tray, without even serving the tea, and came to me. José bent his tall body and folded his long legs to sit, then unfolded his long arm behind me along the back of the divan (my grandfather called it the divan; it was the couch), and leaned into me as I spoke to the funeral director.

My uncle was not a big talker. I never got the sense that he was raised in a family that did a lot of hugging and kissing. But somehow, without talking, without any obvious gesture of affection, he squeezed in next to me and squeezed the life back into me. In that moment, I got a glimpse of how I would continue to live.

When José died this past summer, this memory is the first one that surfaced for me. My uncle left behind the imprint of his generous heart. I know that it is mine, now, to share.

Buddhist teacher and author Sharon Salzberg writes, “Generosity has such power because it is characterized by the inner quality of ... relinquishing. Being able to let go, to give up, to renounce, to give generously – these capacities spring from the same source within us. When we practice generosity, we open to all of these liberating qualities

simultaneously. They [both] carry us to a profound [experience] of freedom, ... [and] are the loving expression ... of freedom.”

Generosity, Sharon Salzberg continues, “is the very first [quality] ... of the awakened mind. The path begins here, ... because when we practice generosity, we begin to know a very beautiful quality of joy; a sheer, unhindered delight flowing freely. Giving brings happiness at every stage of its expression. We experience joy in forming the intention to be generous; we experience joy in the act of giving something; and we experience joy in remembering the fact that we have given.”¹

Once, when Sharon Salzberg was teaching in Australia, she spoke of her resolve to listen when a strong urge to generosity arose in her. She vowed that even if the very next thought was, “I can't give that away; I might need it,” she would still honor her impulse, and be generous.

A student approached her and said that, in honor of her resolve, he wanted to give her some money to give away. He told her that, when she landed in California, she should start giving away the money to people who needed it. She imagined he would give her, say, thirty one-dollar bills. He gave her hundreds and hundreds of dollars.

She returned the states and spent a day walking up and down Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, giving away ten or twenty dollars at a time. Imagine the experience of *looking* for people who need something! She writes, “... [It] broke down a lot of barriers between people. There were people [behind me] literally dancing ... [in] the street.... It was the most amazingly joyous day for me, as well. It is a great happiness to be able to give.”

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The word “downsize” cannot fully capture the experience of Kem's and my move from our condo in Cambridge to our tiny apartment at Concord Academy. And it turns out that, while there is much we could have sold, it was infinitely more satisfying to give it away.

I was standing in the doorway of our daughters' old bedroom when the call came from the dean of students offering us the deal of a lifetime: give up your lovely, empty nest and come be house parents for twenty-nine teenage boys. As the words “yes” were crossing my lips, my eyes came to rest on ... Barbies: not just a few Barbies; three girls' childhoods' worth of Barbies. Barbies of every race, if you will, in every possible hairstyle, in various states of dress and undress with uncounted outfits ... not to mention

¹ Sharon Salzberg, *Loving-Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*, pp. 154-155.

the pink convertible, the wardrobe-suitcase, the pool, the spa, the house, combs and lipsticks and all those teeny tiny plastic high heels.

I asked Jessye, then a freshman in college and the most attached to her dolls, to consider giving them away; to imagine how much other little children would love them, as she had. She was very brave.

It took me the better part of a morning to gather up the Barbies and all their paraphernalia. Plastic crates filled with Barbies filled the back of our van. And off I went to Goodwill, to say goodbye to the Barbies.

Only there was a Chinese toy recall – you may remember this – and Goodwill wasn't accepting any toys. Foiled! I had a car full of Barbies and nowhere to go. I drove home, fearing that if I brought them back inside, Jessye would take it as a sign, or, at least, lose her resolve.

So I made some signs - *Free Barbies! Take us home! Barbies for all!* – and I unloaded all the plastic crates onto the sidewalk out front.

Maybe an hour later, I was walking the next load of stuff out of the house when I happened upon what was certainly a vision of heaven on earth. We lived in west Cambridge at the intersection of an old Italian neighborhood, a Haitian enclave, and an international, yuppy condo association. There, seated on the sidewalk, were perhaps a dozen little girls of many skin-tones, chattering animatedly in three or four different languages: an international Barbie convention, with accessories being passed like hors d'oeuvres. There were Barbies in the pool, Barbies being groomed, Barbies dressed for success, or for Christmas, or naked, all getting along in the hands of excited, happy children. Their parents stood at the edges of this magic circle, looking on in the same amazement I felt. Barbie does Davos.²

As darkness fell, I returned to the sidewalk to clean up the last of the Barbie party. The children were gone, and the Barbies had gone with them, to their new homes, their new lives. There was not a single tiny plastic high heel to be found. Everyone – even Jessye – was happy.

The Buddha taught that with generosity comes love. We don't give so that we will be loved; we are loved because we give. “People who are generous awaken in us [love,] and openness.” The Buddha also taught that, with generosity, comes fearlessness; our

² Davos, Switzerland, hosts the annual World Economic Forum (WEF), a meeting of the global political and business elite. The forum is called, simply, Davos.

courage “grows ... as we learn to give.” Generous people “can enter any group without fear.” The Buddha said that if we knew the power of giving, “we would not let a single meal pass without sharing some of it.”

Sharon Salzberg writes, “Sharing food is a metaphor for all giving. When we offer someone food, we are not just giving that person something to eat.... We give strength, health, beauty, clarity of mind, and even life, because none of those things would be possible without food.... In a single moment of offering food, the Buddha said, a great part of our spiritual path is fulfilled:” compassion, loving-kindness, goodwill, joy, equanimity, and letting go.³

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When I worked as a Girl Scout camp counselor, we were “on” twenty-four/seven for two weeks at a time, with dozens of little girls in our charge. To help with our sanity, the staff played Secret Santa, each of us anonymously keeping someone in little surprises throughout the two-week session. We were way out in the middle of the woods, without access to store-bought treasure. If it wasn't in the kitchen, the arts and crafts supply closet, or nature, it wasn't available. My Santa left me her Hershey's bar from the previous night's s'mores. I whittled a letter-opener from a beautiful piece of cedar. My Santa braided an international friendship knot bracelet from tent rope. I beaded a long necklace in Morse Code with the opening prayer of Cris Williamson's *Song of the Soul*. I'll bet you wish you had one of those! We would go to ridiculous lengths to hide our surprises from each other, so that no one could guess the identity of anyone else's Secret Santa, until the end of the session, when we would reveal ourselves, or be revealed. Once, my Santa was my friend Nancy Brossard. For her final gift to me, she gave me a painting of a stand of birch trees we loved.

When Bro isn't teaching kids to sail, she is actually a working artist. Later that summer, her studio burned to the ground. The very first thing she said was, “I'm so glad I gave away so many of my paintings!”⁴

Generosity is a spiritual practice that has an extraordinary way of teaching us the real value of things ... or the value of real things. This past July, Violet and Allen Large of Lower Truro, Nova Scotia won eleven-point-two million dollars in a lottery. As of this week, it's all gone. Violet, aged 78, says, “We're not travelers, and we're not high-class people. We live in an old house, but we're comfortable.” She and Allen, a retired welder, do not own a microwave or have voicemail on their phone. They drive older cars. “What you've never had,” she adds, “you never miss.”

3 Salzberg, *op cit*, p. 156

4 Please see adirondackartistsguild.com/nancybrossard.htm

In that spirit, they went on an eleven million dollar spending spree, donating to their local fire department, hospitals, animal protection groups, churches, and cemeteries; to the Red Cross; and to organizations dedicated to ending Alzheimer's, cancer, and diabetes.⁵ Especially poignant is the fact that Violet has been undergoing treatments for cancer, which, says the couple, has made abundantly clear to them the limits of wealth. “That money ... was nothing,” says Allen Large, age 75. “We have each other.”⁶

My spiritual companions, no true spiritual life is possible without a generous heart. Generosity is liberation. Even Barbies can help fulfill our spiritual path with compassion, loving-kindness, goodwill, joy, equanimity, and letting go. May we squeeze the life back into one another, and leave the imprint of our heart on those we love. At this Thanksgiving time, and always, I give thanks that we “have each other.”



5 The Larges “took care” of their children, keeping about two percent of the total.

6 *The Week*, 11/19/10, p. 4 and Mara Gay, *Couple Win \$11.2M Lottery, Then Give It All Away*, at aolnews.com, 11/4/10 and Amy Judd, *Allen and Violet Large Win \$11M Lottery, Then Give It All Away* at nowpublic.com, 11/4/10

7 photo courtesy of Harry Sullivan, Truro Daily News, posted at news.yahoo.com, 11/4/10