Stretched to the Limit
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Lesson For All Ages  Adapted from Just Enough is Plenty by Barbara Diamond Goldin
Hanukkah is happening soon. Can anyone tell me when the first night of Hanukkah is? Tuesday night, Dec 16. Who can tell me some of the ways that families celebrate Hanukkah? Lighting the menorah... making and eating latkes... playing dreidel... Hanukkah gelt... Barbara Golden tells a story about one Jewish family who celebrated Hanukkah a long time ago. The story is called Just Enough Is Plenty.

In this family were a mama and a papa and two children: a girl named Malka and a boy named Zalman. Their papa is a tailor—who knows what a tailor is? He makes clothes for people. But business was hard that year, and the family didn't have much money. Mama sends Malka and Zalman to the store with their very last coins to buy some potatoes and eggs so she can make Latkes for their Hanukkah celebration. On the way home from the store, Malka says to Zalman, “I'm worried that there won’t be any Hanukkah coins this year to buy treats.” Zalman just shrugs his shoulders.

On the first night of Hanukkah, they aren’t able to have a big party; but their aunt and uncle join them for the holiday dinner. As they all sit down to eat, Papa whispers to Mama, “Are there enough latkes?” and Mama replies, “Just enough.”

But then someone knocks on the door. It is a stranger—he looks like an old peddler. He had seen their Hanukkah lights in the window and asks if he could join their celebration. They welcome him to their table, but Malka is worried. How will they have enough latkes? She had heard her mama say they had “Just enough.” Her Mama whispers to her, “We can stretch the just enough—we’re poor, but not so poor.” So each of them gives the old man one of their latkes, and they all eat them happily with sour cream and applesauce.

After dinner, the old man says, “I have a few coins—the children could use them to play the dreidel game.” So they have fun with the dreidel, and then the old man begins to read stories to them, marvelous stories: about kind people and mean people, about beggars and miracles. Malka’s favorite story is about the prophet Elijah, who would come back to earth sometimes to help someone who was poor but kindhearted.

That night, the family gives the stranger a place to sleep, but in the morning, he is gone. They find his peddler’s sack at their door, with a note saying “Happy Hanukkah. This will help you.” In the sack are wonderful books for the children and marvelous bolts of cloth for their father, the tailor, so he can make more holiday suits and dresses, and earn more money to help the family.

What do you think? Could their visitor have been Elijah himself? Sometimes we worry about whether we will have enough, but when we share what we have, we discover that generosity opens the door to wonderful things. Malka and Zalman's family didn't have much, but when they shared their latkes, there was enough for themselves and their visitor. In the end, they were gifted for their generosity.
Our readings today were: Just Enough by Nanao Sakaki \(^3\) and The Weighing by Jane Hirshfield.\(^4\)

Excerpt from The Weighing:

...The world asks of us
only the strength we have and we give it.
Then it asks more, and we give it.

Sermon

Hanukkah is a minor Jewish festival, but it has gained extra visibility among non-Jews because of its proximity to Christmas. Hanukkah celebrates religious freedom, and the miracle of holding fast to one’s beliefs in the face of oppression. A very small ragtag group of Jewish rebels were able to defeat the mighty Greek army. A very small amount of oil, only enough for one day, kept the eternal flame of the temple lit for the eight days needed to prepare new oil. What seemed too small or not enough was somehow able to open the door to everything that was needed. The lighting of the menorah and the letters carved on the dreidel celebrate these miracles.

Have you ever been in a situation where you didn’t think there would be enough? When you felt too small for the challenges in front of you, right up against your limits? Perhaps like Malka’s family in our story today, you faced a financial struggle. I remember a time in my life when I faced that kind of struggle. While I was in the midst of attending school for ministry, my marriage broke apart. I left my home, and got a room at the school; my school expenses were covered by a scholarship, but otherwise I had just a few dollars any given week. I remember selling some books to the used book store to have money for food. Somehow I scraped by up to the end of that semester.

I had heard about some women who were camping at a military base in protest of nuclear weapons, the Seneca Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice. Perhaps it was foolish, but somehow I knew that I wanted to devote my ministry to working for peace and justice, so I called the camp, and asked if it was okay to come there for the summer. They said I would be welcome. At the end of May, I had only $100 to my name. I bought a tent, and a bus ticket, and with $10 in my pocket I traveled to the camp. It was like entering a little miracle zone. I didn't think I could make it, but somehow I was helped into a whole new life.

Perhaps your struggle wasn’t about material resources, but a struggle of a different kind—a time of emotional depression, or the illness of a loved one. A time as a parent, when your child was getting into trouble. Perhaps your challenge was a tough exam in school, or starting a new job where the responsibilities seemed too steep to handle. Perhaps you had to start life over again after the loss of your spouse. Perhaps you fell into addiction, and didn't know how to find your way out. Perhaps you face a struggle like that today. What do we do when the challenge seems too big for us?

The miracles in the Hanukkah story remind me of the process described in twelve-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous. The first step for alcoholics or other addicts in the program is to admit that they are powerless over their addiction—to recognize that they have reached the limits of their strength. The second step says, “We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” By reaching out to this greater power, there is a possibility for finding sanity and sobriety and a life worth living.

\(^3\)From *What Book?!*, ed. by Gary Gach and Peter Coyote
\(^4\)From *October Palace*
But what is this power greater than ourselves? I know that for some of us, it refers to God, however we might understand God. But I also know that many UU’s don’t relate to the idea of God or Spirit. Does that mean that they have no greater power to turn to? I don’t think so. Help can come from many places beyond ourselves. Sometimes, it is relationships with other people that provide the help, if we take the risk to ask. Let me share a little story told by David Wolpe:

A boy and his father were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy said to his father, “Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move that rock?” His father answered, “If you use all your strength, I am sure you can do it.” The boy began to push the rock. Exerting himself as much as he could, he pushed and pushed. The rock did not move. Discouraged, he said to his father, “You were wrong. I can’t do it.” His father placed his arm around the boy’s shoulder and said, “No, son. You didn’t use all your strength—you didn’t ask me to help.”

A power greater than ourselves is just that—all that exists outside of our own limited strength. There are many things that can help us when we come face to face with our limits: other people, the inspiration of poetry or music, the wisdom and example of a courageous leader, the vast wonder of nature, the circle of community. When we reach our limits, we can either get stuck in despair, or we can reach out to the whole wide universe around us. In fact, I wonder if part of our learning as human beings is to experience reaching the end of our own strength, so that we can discover the power of all that is larger than we are.

Scott Russell Sanders describes a basic experience of trusting the universe, trusting that which is larger than himself. He writes:

Sometimes when I cannot sleep, or when I wake in the morning before dawn, I walk downstairs in the dark. I could turn on a light in the hall, but I don’t want to disturb Ruth. So I make my way down the stairs without being able to see where I am setting my feet, yet I never doubt that the steps are there. In mild weather I often continue on outside, and if the night is moonless or overcast, I walk without hesitation over the invisible ground, trusting the earth to bear me up. To live boldly, to work effectively, we need to feel a similar confidence in the Ground of Being. We don't have to feel that it is benevolent, any more than we have to believe that the stairway or the dirt is benevolent, only that it is steady, reliable, and, at least in part, knowable.

If we have a fundamental confidence that the larger universe is available to us, we can risk walking in the dark, or reaching out when we are stretched to the limit. We can take one more step. Malka and her family risked inviting a peddler into their house to share the “just-enough” latkes. But then they received so much more than they gave. Sometimes our strength is renewed because—even in the midst of our limits—we reach out to help another person. I believe the message in the Hanukkah stories is that if we reach the end of our limits, and yet reach out in some way, or give what small gift we can give, there is a kind of magic that can happen. Our small gift will awaken help from the universe. Giving what little we have opens the door.

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5 David J. Wolpe, in *Teaching Your Children About God*, quoted in *Spiritual Literacy*, p. 447.
Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian-American poet and author, tells a story of being delayed at the airport. She was exhausted and cranky about what looked to be a long wait. An announcement over the intercom asked if there were any speakers of Arabic near her gate. She paused—did she really want to deal with this? But then she went to see what was needed. She wrote,

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. “Help,” said the Flight Service Person. “Talk to her. …We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.” I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to her haltingly. …The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day.

Naomi offered to call her son for her, and then called all her other sons just for fun. They called Naomi’s dad, who spoke with the woman in Arabic, discovering about ten shared friends. By this time the woman was laughing and telling stories of her life and offering homemade cookies to all the women at the gate. Naomi goes on to say,

To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament— we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. …And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. …This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost."

This is the magic revealed in the Elijah story. When we reach our own limits, and yet act with kindness to someone who needs our help, sometimes something beautiful can happen.

On the simplest level, we know that people who reach out to others feel less stress when they experience hardship. Stephen Post writes about five hundred scientific studies that demonstrate how giving to or helping others enhances our resilience and health. According to one study, nurturing others raises the dopamine levels in our brains, the neurotransmitter linked to pleasure and reward. 8 We are hard-wired by nature to feel good when we help others.

Another study is from Doug Oman of the University of California at Berkeley.

Oman has followed about two thousand individuals over the age of fifty-five for five years. Those who volunteer [regularly] have an impressive 44 percent lower likelihood of dying—and that’s after sifting out every other contributing factor, including physical health, exercise, gender, habits like smoking, marital status, and much more. That reduction in mortality is truly impressive considering that it is stronger than that associated with mobility (39 percent), exercising four times a week (30 percent), or attendance at religious services (29 percent). The only activity with a slightly higher effect is to stop smoking (which reduces mortality by 49 percent). 9

Every religious tradition in the world has encouraged its followers to practice giving and to offer service, and science is stepping up to concur. Giving creates a sense of connectedness in the life of the giver, even as it helps those who are served.

7 Published at http://www.gratefulness.org/readings/nye_gate.htm
9 Stephen Post & Jill Neimark, p. 8. Also mentioned on page 68.
As a minister, I sometimes encounter situations in which I am utterly bewildered about what to do to help those who are experiencing conflict or pain. I wish there were a secret handbook that would tell me: if this happens, then do this. Or if that happens, do that. I have heard parents wish for such a secret handbook too. But life brings to both parents and ministers a complexity that stretches us in ways we never would have imagined when we started out on the path.

I can't imagine getting through such parts of ministry without turning to powers greater than myself to find a way forward. When I come to the end of my own wisdom or understanding, I have to ask for help. Sometimes, I can find help in another person who might have the wisdom I need. There are colleagues I can reach out to in confidence whose experience is greater than my own. But sometimes, they are also bewildered. I think this is why I have such a need to pray.

When I find myself stretched to the limit in ministry, I come to the end of my day, and I call on the mysterious forces that create and sustain life. I let myself give up for a while, and lay it all down on the altar of humility. “Here I am,” I say, “I am utterly baffled. Please help me know what to do. Please give healing and comfort to those whom I love so much, but can't find a way to help.” And then I go to sleep.

When I wake up, I may have to pray the same prayer all over again, but sometimes I will suddenly realize one more thing I can do, or one more step I might take, or one more resource I can tap. And so I do that one thing, and hope it will light the lamp for one more day.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen makes an important distinction between helping, which is one-sided, and serving, which is mutual. She says,

> Over the years I have discovered that everything I know serves and everything I am serves. I have served people impeccably with parts of myself that embarrass me, parts of which I am ashamed. ... Many times my limitations have become the source of my compassion, my wounds have made me gentle with the wounds of other people… In helping, we may find a sense of satisfaction; in serving, we have an experience of gratitude. Service connects us to one another and to life itself. Over the long run, fixing and helping are draining, but service is renewing.\(^\text{10}\)

I am inspired by the idea that even our limitations can be a way that we can serve others. Even our bafflement, even our wounds. I guess it depends on being willing to be in relationship with others, even when we don't feel on top of our game, even when we don't know quite what to do or say. We must let go of our relentless quest for control, and show up in the midst of the chaos.

I am thinking about Malka's mother, and her careful accounting of the Hanukkah latkes. There were just enough for everyone at the table to have a certain number of latkes. Maybe six each for six people. I can imagine how careful she was when she was making them, to make them a certain size, so there would be an even number. I am imagining how she must have wished she had more to offer her children. And then the stranger arrives, and begs a place at the table. How gracefully she let go of her careful planning, and made room for what was most important—generosity and connection. An open heart.

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So she and the whole family welcomed the stranger, and shared their limited meal, and a place to rest. But then, from the stranger, they received stories and laughter, and finally, helpful gifts of cloth and books. Each had something to offer to the other. So Elijah wants to teach us that if we reach the end of our limits, and yet reach out in some way, or give what small gift we can give, there is a kind of magic that can happen. Our small gift will awaken help from the universe. Giving what little we have opens the door.

So maybe it is a good thing, that we have limits and must wrestle with our fears about our limits. Maybe it is a good thing, that others have limits too, and need us. Maybe it is in our very limitations and struggles that we find compassion for ourselves and others. Maybe it is by reaching out—when we need help or when we would offer help to others—that we can figure out what is most important. That it is the very connections we share with each other that fill our lives with just enough.

As I was wrestling with these questions, something dawned on me. We are all a part of each other's greater power. You are part of the power greater than myself that I must reach out to when I need help, and I am a part of the power greater than yourself that is available to help you in the midst of your struggles.

Today, on this amazing planet earth, ecologists say that there is enough for everyone. But it is not evenly divided, so many people have too little while others have too much. We absolutely need each other. Some of us are the temporary bankers of material wealth, and are invited to use it to serve those who need it. But all of us have something to give, whether emotional or temporal or physical.

We may feel overwhelmed by our own struggles and limitations. We may feel overwhelmed when we think about the struggles of those we love. Each one of us is too small to handle this life alone. But giving to each other is what we were designed to do. When we take the risk to give what we can, then maybe, like Malka and her family, we too will know in our deepest hearts that just enough is plenty. Happy Hanukkah!

Closing Words
May we have the courage to light the one candle we can light.
May we have the strength to give what little we can.
May we have the vision to recognize Elijah when he comes to our door!