

*Growing Good Corn*¹
Rev. Myke Johnson
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Readings

The Best Corn

Author Unknown

There was a farmer who grew excellent quality corn.² Every year he won the award for the best grown corn. One year a newspaper reporter interviewed him and learned something interesting about how he grew it. The reporter discovered that the farmer shared his seed corn with his neighbors. “How can you afford to share your best seed corn with your neighbors when they are entering corn in competition with yours each year?” the reporter asked.

“Why sir,” said the farmer, “Didn’t you know? The wind picks up pollen from the ripening corn and swirls it from field to field. If my neighbors grow inferior corn, cross-pollination will steadily degrade the quality of my corn. If I am to grow good corn, I must help my neighbors grow good corn.”
So is with our lives...

The Wider World

A. Powell Davies³

None of our private worlds is big enough for us to live a wholesome life in.

We need the wider world of joy and wonder, of purpose and venture, of toil and tears.

What are we, any of us, but strangers and sojourners forlornly wandering through the nighttime, until we draw together and find the meaning of our lives in one another, dissolving our fears in each other's courage, making music together and lighting torches to guide us through the dark? We belong together.

Love is what we need. To love and be loved.

Let our hearts be open; and what we would receive from others, let us give. For what is given still remains to bless the giver—when the gift is love.

Sermon

The story of the farmer who grew the best corn reminds us that our lives are interconnected with each other. If we want to thrive, to be happy, to grow the best lives, we cannot do so without bringing the best to those around us as well. Now, some might suppose that the farmer was being selfish in a way—he had figured out that he needed to give his seed corn to his neighbors in order to win the prize for his own corn. Some might protest that true generosity would best be expressed when there is no gain in it for the giver. But if we realize that our lives are interconnected, then we see that there is no giving that does not also benefit the giver in meaningful ways.

Such is the case for our congregational stewardship. When we give to our congregation, we are enabled to thrive in ways that would not be possible if each individual was on their own. The giving comes back to us in the form of spiritual inspiration, community connections, and support during times of trouble. The giving comes back to us in the form of support for parenting our children, a sense of hope in the midst of challenges, and a collective effort to build a better world.

1 Copyright 2016 by Rev. Myke Johnson. Permission must be requested to reprint for other than personal use.

2 Reported in James Bender *How to Talk Well* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1994)

3 #39 *Lifting Our Voices* (UUA publication, 2015)

Once a year, we re-examine the giving that we each do for the financial support of our congregation. This year, there will be meetings in people's homes to connect with each other and talk about our giving to the church. Many members are participating in that way, but it is also fine to individually make a decision about what kind of support you might like to give the church in the coming fiscal year.

Almost eighty percent of our budget is financed through the direct giving of members and friends of the church through pledges. For those who are new to church, a pledge is a commitment that people make about what they hope to give each month during the next fiscal year, from this coming July to the following June. This is distinct from what we collect each Sunday during the offering, which adds an additional small amount to our budget, as well as to our outreach.

The pledges of members and friends enable the church to budget appropriately for next year. When people become members of the church, we ask that they make a pledge of such financial commitment. There is no set amount—that depends on the financial resources of each individual or family. But we hope that everyone gives enough to enable our congregation to thrive. Our budget is close to \$300,000 each year—this covers the salaries of all staff people, the cost of maintaining our building, our donation to the larger UU movement, and any program funds that make our mission come alive.

To put that into perspective, if every individual member gave about \$1000 dollars per year, that might cover the basics of our budget. But in reality, some of our members are elderly in nursing homes, and others are living on a fixed income. Each of us has differing financial resources, so we hope that those who can give more than \$1000 per year will do so, because others will need to give less. And many folks do give much more. The generosity of our members is a beautiful thing. Some members make a choice to give a percentage of their income. That's what my partner Margy and I do.

On the practical side, our church needs money to thrive. So once a year we look at the money it takes to run a spiritual community. But the money is also part of the spirituality of our community. It is like the seed corn. It is one way we invest in the future of our own well-being and spiritual growth. We are here to help each other grow spiritually. We are here to learn about love, to learn about interconnection. By our financial gifts, by our volunteer time and energy, we are creating the community that enables us to grow into our best selves.

Our stewardship task force has created a beautiful brochure with some of the ways our gifts help to make our mission comes alive. If you are a member, you will automatically receive a brochure, but if you are new and curious, I believe you can ask for one at the table after the service.

As I was thinking about our worship theme for today, I came across a beautiful story that I want to share with you. This story comes from the Muslim community, which has a strong ethic of generosity.

Shuaib received an automobile from his brother as a present [during the beloved holiday of] Eid. On Eid day when Shuaib came out of his house, a street urchin was walking around the shiny new car, admiring it. "Is this your car, Uncle?" he asked. Shuaib nodded. "My brother gave it to me for Eid." The boy was astounded.

"You mean your brother gave it to you and it didn't cost you nothing? Boy, I wish..." He hesitated. Of course Shuaib knew what he was going to wish for. He was going to wish he had a brother like that.

But what the lad said jarred Shuaib all the way down to his heels. “I wish,” the boy went on, “that I could be a brother like that.” Shuaib looked at the boy in astonishment, then impulsively he added, “Would you like to take a ride in my automobile?” “Oh yes, I’d love that.”

After a short ride, the boy turned and with his eyes aglow, said, “Uncle, would you mind driving in front of my house?” Shuaib smiled a little. He thought he knew what the lad wanted. He wanted to show his neighbors that he could ride home in a big automobile. But Shuaib was wrong again. “Will you stop where those two steps are?” the boy asked.

He ran up the steps. Then in a little while Shuaib heard him coming back, but he was not coming fast. He was carrying his little brother [who was disabled.] He sat him down on the bottom step, then sort of squeezed up against him and pointed to the car.

“There it is, little brother, just like I told you upstairs. His brother gave it to him for Eid and it didn’t cost him a penny. And some day I’m gonna give you one just like it...then you can see for yourself all the pretty things in the Shop windows that I’ve been trying to tell you about.”

Shuaib got out and lifted the boy to the front seat of his car. The shining-eyed older brother climbed in beside him and the three of them began a memorable ride. That Eid, Shuaib learned what the RasulAllah (*salAllahu alayhi wasalam*) meant when he had said: “love for your brother what you love for yourself”.⁴

When we talk about spiritual growth, we must ask ourselves, into what kind of people do we hope to grow? In the story, Shuaib keeps thinking that the little boy will want something for himself. But the little boy is wrapped up in the idea of bringing happiness to his brother. If his brother is happy, he is happy. Perhaps this is one step deeper than the farmer sharing his seed corn. The farmer still wanted to have the best seed corn, to win the prize for himself. But the little boy couldn't imagine a happiness in which his brother couldn't share as well. He had already the sense of what it meant to be family, to be interconnected. How could he enjoy a feast if his brother was starving? He couldn't.

In our American culture, we have had to learn individualism. We have learned that our happiness is in competition with our neighbors. We have been taught to try to be number one, to have more, to be more famous, to be more wealthy, to be more popular. It's not our fault. We are surrounded with this ideology. We are surrounded by the idea that greed is good, and competition is all there is.

But there is a vast emptiness in the bottom of this individualism. The more we have, the more empty we become. The more empty we feel, the more we try to accumulate. The cycle goes around and around. We have almost forgotten the joy that comes from connection and giving and sharing together. That is why it is so powerful to hear a story about generosity—for me, it is like a light going on—oh yes, there is another way to live.

4 <http://www.islamcan.com/islamic-stories/a-brother-like-that.shtml>

Church is a place in which we can remember those other values, and find true joy again. I remember when I first started attending a UU Church. I was living in Boston, and I began to attend the Arlington Street Church. I remember noticing that in church, all the rules of the city were upended. In the city, you didn't talk to strangers, and you kept yourself guarded while riding the train or walking on the sidewalks of downtown. You watched out for pickpockets who might try to steal your wallet. But in church, you were encouraged to talk to strangers, and to get to know those around you. You were invited to pass the basket and give of your money.

It is not that churches are utopias of kindness and generosity. We are all human beings who have our faults and virtues, our tensions and crankiness, our fears and egotism. And most of us have been raised in American individualism. But I think we are here because we yearn for something beyond all that. We yearn for community and connection. We yearn to be those generous souls who care for those who are part of our human family. We yearn to remember we are a part of a human family and part of the family of earth.

We yearn to share our joys and sorrows. We yearn to share our gifts and talents. We come alive in the practice of the old-fashioned virtues—kindness, service, care, generosity. I am not saying anything new today. There is an old truism that each minister really has only one sermon, and I am guessing this might be mine—that we are all interconnected, we are all one family. But perhaps the story of the farmer and the story of the little boy remind me of what kind of family we might become. The kind of family where we share our seed corn, so that each of us can grow. The kind of family where we want to be the generous sibling who gives a new car to our brother.

To that end, I want to try a little experiment. Today, we've had an offering in which you gave money for our church and the outreach of our church. Now I'd like to propose a reverse offering. After the sermon, I am going to ask the ushers to pass around these envelopes to everyone who is willing to participate. In the envelopes is an amount of money ranging from \$1 to \$20. If you take an envelope, you will find a way to use that money to spread the love in some way. Give it to a homeless person on the street, or pay someone's toll in the car behind you. You can add some of your own money to do some sort of kindness or sharing or gifting, if that feels right to you. But whatever you decide to do with that money, tell a story about it by sending me an email. I will collect the stories and share them in an anonymous way in an upcoming newsletter.

Let have a little fun turning the rules upside down. And also, if the most generous thing you can do this week, is to use that money to take care of someone in your own family, that is okay too. Just so you know, the money in these envelopes originated in the Minister's Discretionary Fund, which is used to help members and friends in a time of financial crisis. We always appreciate donations to that fund, which is separate from our operating budget. But for today, think about how you might practice spreading love and joy through a small amount of money.

How do we grow good corn? How do we grow our world into a world of caring and kindness? How do we create a family with our neighbors? How do we grow our souls? We grow by expanding our sense of self beyond our individual wants and needs to the wants and needs of others around us. When we realize that we are interconnected, and begin to live that way, we open the door to greater joy, greater love, greater security, greater peace.

Fran Healy, a singer/songwriter, founder of the group Travis, talks about a visit to South Africa that changed his perception of what interconnection and need are all about. He writes:

It appeals to our ego to consider what "we" have and what "they" need. I went to South Africa once, to a small village about 800km from Cape Town. The people were extremely poor; conditions were basic; alcoholism was rife. My first impression was typical of a Westerner. I thought 'These poor people...' and I thought about what "we", in the prosperous North, could offer people in poor developing countries.

But, by the time I left, having been invited into homes, eaten and laughed with both kids and adults, talked to folk wherever I roamed, I came away thinking more about what they had to offer to us. The visit made me realize that in our greedy pursuit of wealth we have lost a great deal of what money cannot buy. Our value system has gotten out of kilter with what is important in life.

He goes on:

The people I met had an abundance of natural **generosity**, exuberance, lust for life, sense of community and family. I am now more worried for us and the road we are walking, blinded by unconscious greed because we always look after number one. We all, rich and poor alike, have something very valuable to gain if we share the world resources more fairly, and if we look again at what is really valuable in life.⁵

We are the ones who are made destitute by the unbridled pursuit of individualism and greed in our culture. Let us begin to do our part to change our world. Let us practice a creative giveaway with the envelopes that will be given out by the ushers during our silent meditation, and notice what it does for our own hearts. Let us support this church community with our generosity in pledging, and notice what it does for our own lives. Let us imagine a world in which we care for each other, and perhaps we will become the change we so desire. May it be so.

Meditation & Reverse Offering

Closing Words

There is more love, right here, if we bring our love to the table.
There is more hope, there is more peace, there is more joy.
It multiplies when we share it with each other.
Let us be the channels that multiply love in this world.

5 <http://www.dailygood.org/pdf/dg.php?qid=1536>