

The Altruistic Impulse

A Sermon Delivered on October 6, 2019
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrman

*“Practice kindness all day to everybody
and you will realize you’re already in heaven now.”*

-- Jack Kerouac

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Meditation: a poem by Denise Levertov

I have a small grain of hope –
One small crystal that gleams
clear colors out of transparency.

I need more.

I break off a fragment
to send you.

Please take
this grain of hope
so that mine won't shrink.

Please share your fragment
so that yours will grow.

Only so, by division,
will hope increase,

like a clump of irises, which will cease to flower
unless you distribute
the clustered roots, unlikely source –
clumsy and earth-covered –
of grace.

First Reading: by the former psychology professor turned spiritual teacher, Ram Dass,
from his book *How Can I Help?* (p. 9)

Sometimes I help, and sometimes I don't.

I hold the door open for one behind me, or I rush through preoccupied in thought.
I vote, but not always. When solicitations come through the mail, some catch my eye or
heart and I send at least something. Others I basket as junk mail. A friend is having a hard
time. I think I should phone to see how she is, but I just don't feel like doing it tonight.

I'd do anything to help the family. But how much is enough? When to stretch a
little further? Whose needs come first?

Those close to me get an immediate hearing. The suffering of people more remote
gets sporadic attention. I'm only vaguely aware of it. It's out there somewhere.

Whom should I help anyway? Senior citizens, battered children, human-rights
victims, whales?...

If I stop to think about it, I help out for all kinds of reasons. Maybe it's because I
should; it's a matter of responsibility. But there's usually a maze of other motives: a need
for self-esteem, approval, status, power; the desire to feel useful, find intimacy, pay back
some debt....

There are times when [helping] is effortless. Other days, burnout. With one person, I'm totally open and present. With the next, I might as well be on Mars. Sometimes the chance to care for another human being feels like such grace. But later on, I'll hear myself thinking, "Hey, what about me?"

Second Reading: by Neal Bowers, a poem entitled "Living the Parable"

Wanting to be helpful, we all
see ourselves as the Samaritan
rather than the priest or the assistant,
and never as the bruised man in the ditch,
stripped and penniless, taken
to a room smelling of figs and tallow,
where he turns painfully in bed,
tonguing his chipped tooth,
touching his swollen eye.

After all, how could anyone imagine himself
mugged somewhere between Jerusalem and Jericho
when he could ride in like some minor deity
on a donkey packed with oil and wine
his fat purse tucked away, credit unlimited.

Better to be the one without cracked ribs,
safe on the hard packed road,
pausing long enough to help
some creature with no luck –
a dog, a sheep, a beaten man –
not one of us.

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We were standing at the side of the highway at night. It was cold and dark, and we were hoping for a ride, hoping someone would pull over and give us a lift. We had been standing there for hours. We were tired and hungry, and losing hope.

I remember that evening very well, even though it was almost forty years ago. I was seventeen years old at the time, standing at the side of the autobahn, south of Freiburg, Germany, with my traveling buddy, Oliver.

We had just spent a few days during winter break hiking through the hills of the Black Forest, camping in the snow and feeling rugged and very adventurous. We had hitchhiked from our homes near Frankfurt, about 150 miles north, to a trailhead, lugging heavy backpacks, with our tent, sleeping bags, and a few days worth of food. It was great. After three nights in the wild, we were ready to head home.

We reached the highway north by mid-afternoon, put down our packs, and held out our thumbs. And waited... We ended up waiting until late at night, then finally called it quits and pitched our tent right there. The next day our luck wasn't much better. But by this point our carefully rationed food had run out, and we had spent the last of our meager funds at a nearby gas station on Snicker bars.

We stood at the road all of the following day and into the evening, watching countless cars zip by. We were not happy campers. But then, finally, someone did pull over. A middle-aged man, who looked to be heading home from a business trip, and was going in our direction. By this point Oliver and I were thoroughly exhausted, chilled to the bone, and famished. We were not very good conversationalists, and simply sat in silence, relieved to be sitting in a warm car, heading north.

I guess the driver noticed that we were in pretty bad shape, and so a few miles up the road he pulled over at a roadside restaurant, and offered to buy us some dinner. Usually we would politely decline such an offer... Who knows what ulterior motives the stranger might have? We had encountered some shady characters on earlier hitchhiking expeditions, and knew to be cautious. But we were so hungry and tired, that we warily accepted the man's offer. Oliver and I each wolfed down a big plate of schnitzel and fries, all the while keeping a close eye on our host, who seemed content just watching us eat.

When we got back in his car, continuing our journey, I tried hard to remain awake and on guard. But sitting in the comfortable, warm car, with a full stomach, speeding down the autobahn, I couldn't help but fall asleep. I woke up when the car suddenly came to a stop, at the terminal of the Frankfurt Rhein-Main International Airport. The stranger had gone out of his way to take us right where we could catch a bus that would take us home.

I was too surprised and suspicious to even offer much of a 'thank you,' as Oliver and I tumbled out of the car, picked up our packs, and watched the man drive away. We simply couldn't believe that the stranger really was so generous and kind, with no expectation of reward.

* * *

Instances of altruism – acts of true self-sacrifice - are not the norm. Most of our actions are guided by a healthy sense of self-interest. If we are brutally honest, some say, all our actions are fundamentally selfish. Thomas Hobbes, the 17th century English philosopher, argued that there is no such thing as true selflessness. Anything resembling altruism, he said, is merely selfishness dressed up in fine feelings. Late in his life, Thomas Hobbes

was caught giving money to a beggar. When he was confronted with the fact that he himself had just performed an act of altruism, Hobbes replied: “That beggar’s distress distressed me. Easing his pain, I eased my own.”

The Russian-born writer Ayn Rand, the author of *Atlas Shrugged*, takes this critique of altruism one step further. She rejects the idea of self-sacrifice altogether. As she sees it, the sacrifices a parent makes over many years of raising a child, for instance, are not really sacrifices. Parenting is simply an investment of time and energy with the anticipated gain of producing a healthy, happy adult. Parenting is a calculated enterprise designed to create descendants who will carry on our heritage, and perhaps even look after us when we are old.

Ayn Rand says, the sacrifices we make in our work, the sacrifices we make for our country or community, even to the point of risking life and limb, these are not truly sacrifices. They are rather economic equations of cost and benefit, calculated risk and anticipated gain. Just as I might sacrifice a pawn in a game of chess, for the sake of hopefully capturing my opponents queen or king a few moves later.

We use the word sacrifice to describe the sophisticated strategies we use to reach our desired goals. But this is not true sacrifice. It is far-sightedness, perhaps cunning, perhaps wisdom, but since it is for the sake of some kind of personal gain – even simply the pleasure of pleasing others – it is not sacrifice. So says Ayn Rand.

* * *

Now, I don’t agree with either Thomas Hobbes or Ayn Rand’s schools of philosophy. But I do think they are onto something, when they see something strangely rewarding when we serve others without expectation of reward.

The psychologist Martin Seligman, has done a lot of work on just this phenomenon. His research shows that our acts of “disinterested kindness” provide a sense of profound joy and satisfaction. Research shows that engaging in enjoyable activities like going out with friends, watching a movie, or indulging in a banana split, is less satisfying and provides less long-term happiness than performing acts of kindness.

There is an undeniable correlation between altruism and happiness. Again and again, studies show that the happiest people are also the most altruistic. When we’re happy we are less self-centered, we are more open to others, and more attentive to the world around us. Happiness and helpfulness re-enforce one another. Carefully designed studies showed that when people experienced a happy event in the past hour, they were more likely to come to the assistance of a stranger.

And likewise, research shows the opposite is also true: acute depression goes along with an inability to feel concern or express love for others. The Buddhist teacher Matthieu Ricard, who was a scientist before devoting his life to spiritual practice, finds these psychological insights are consistent with Buddhist teachings that say selfishness is the

main cause of human suffering, and altruistic love is an essential ingredient of true happiness.

Science and spiritual teachings agree there is an intimate relationship between happiness and having a good heart. They create and reinforce each other, and reflect a oneness with our deepest inner nature. At the most fundamental level all living creatures share our desire to avoid suffering and experience well-being. The Buddhist says: “That understanding cannot remain a mere concept but must be internalized [and practiced] until it has become [our] second nature. Ultimately, when our sense of belonging extends to all living beings, we are intimately touched by their joys and sufferings.” (*Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life’s Most Important Skill*, p. 202)

The Buddhist calls this enlightenment. The Christian calls it eternal life.

You remember the story: a lawyer asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answered with a question: “What does the law say?” The lawyer knew ancient law perfectly well: you should love God with all your heart and will all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. But how to put this into practice? And who is our neighbor, anyway?

That’s when Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. The simple moral of the story is that we should all be as generous and kind as this unlikely helper, a traveler from Samaria, who helped the man lying bruised and battered in the ditch.

And we are. Each of us has had moments when we have been helpful with no thought of reward. We have each held open a door for someone behind us. We have each contributed to worthy causes. We have each sometimes helped family and friends.

The deeper moral of the story is more difficult. The deeper moral of the story is that sometimes we don’t help. Sometimes we’re like the priest. Sometimes we are preoccupied and indifferent. Sometimes we are self-involved or depressed. And sometimes we are the victims of illness or injustice, plain bad luck. Sometimes we are the one who are suffering, and in desperate need of help.

We would like to be the helper, the savior, the Good Samaritan. And sometimes we are.

* * *

I have to think of the members of our church who are part of our Caring Network and our Pastoral Associates. Just this last week I met with both committees: people like Carol Collin, Jean Mansfield, Gretchen Nicholas, Val Gottesman, Mibs McCarthy, Meredith Harrill, Dennis Hamilton, Phil Hawthorne, Karen Judkins, and Darold Skerritt. These are all helpers extraordinaire.

As part of our monthly meetings, we go down a list of church folks we know, who have been dealing with some kind of trouble. Someone who is sick, or recovering from

surgery. Someone who is grieving. Someone who is lonely. Someone who needs a ride to the doctor, a casserole dinner, or simply a shoulder to lean on and a listening ear.

We go down the list of names, one after the other, and try to figure out how we can help – maybe a visit, maybe a phone call. I always feel better after our meetings, because they vividly remind me of the countless ways we help.

But what I find most striking, is that just about every one of our devoted helpers has also sometimes been in need of help. Their names have been on our list. Each of us sometimes struggles. Each of us has been in trouble or been worried about loved ones, and felt deeply grateful for the help we received.

* * *

Life is a journey. Each of us on our way. All of us sometimes speeding along, without a care in the world. All of us sometimes stuck at the side of the road, in trouble, out of luck. Each of us sometimes in need, and each of us always deeply longing to help. Our longing to help – our longing to love and be loved - with all our heart, and all our soul and all our strength – this is truly rooted in our deepest nature.

And this gives me hope – one small crystal that gleams.
In this day and age, we all need more hope.
So let us take break off a fragment, and share it, so it won't shrink, but grow.
Only so, by division, hope will increase,
Like a clump of irises, clumsy and earth-covered,
Full of grace.

Sustained by hope, guided by love,
Let us continue this journey together.

So be it. Amen.