The Master Plan

BY **KATE R. WALKER**, MINISTER, MT. VERNON UNITARIAN CHURCH, ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

I know the master plan of the universe. Really, I do! I did not figure it out all by myself. I had help from a long-ago TV show, in which one of the main characters returns from the dead after being shot in the dramatic conclusion of the previous season. He had been a lawyer for the hospital before being killed, and he reappears in a hallucination to a hospital administrator who is having his own dramatic health crisis.

The episode focuses on the conversation between the two. The lawyer explains how the universe works in simple terms, but he keeps qualifying himself by saying, "It's more complicated than that."

Toward the end of the episode, as viewers are shifting back and forth between an emergency room drama for the hospital administrator and his hallucinatory conversation, the lawyer decides to share the master plan of the universe with the administrator. He writes it on a piece of paper, which is hidden from the camera. The administrator looks at it, shares a puzzled expression, and asks, "That's it?" The dead lawyer responds, "Yes, it's that simple—and it's more complicated than that."

Of course, the administrator then takes a turn for the worse, and viewers go to a break. With commercials blaring, the master plan of the universe sits on a piece of paper, hidden from viewers, offering answers to humanity's long-sought deepest questions. For upwards of 10,000 years we've been looking up at the sky, wondering what it's all about, to no avail. For most of us, silence has been the loudest response.

Eventually, the hospital administrator is saved, the lawyer returns to heaven (actually it's more complicated than that) and the master plan of the universe is revealed. The slip of paper contains these words: *Giving and Receiving.*

It's that simple, and it's more complicated than that. Giving and Receiving! There were no trumpets, no clouds finally parting with clarity, coming down in gold letters from the heavens. No loud voices or angels in chariots.

The master plan of the universe is Giving and Receiving. Simple in so many ways, *and* more complicated because we humans make it more complicated.

Giving and receiving go together. We give because we want to believe service is a form of prayer. And we receive with gratitude—mostly (if we're having a good day and remember to be open to love and generosity). Religious leaders have been saying this for centuries. They've been offering metaphors, images, art, poetry and songs in thousands of languages. The message has always been about giving and receiving.

Yet, pathetic as it is, I didn't get it, *really* get it, until I heard it in plain, simple language on a dramatic TV show. It was not the medium, it was the mode. The message was simple, it was clear, it was gentle, and I let it sink in. "Giving and Receiving." I like saying it. I like hearing it. I like letting it rest on my lips, those three simple words.

We make those three words so complicated with ego, pride, shame and guilt. We are so fearful of appearing weak, incompetent, ignorant; fearful of insulting or offending people.

Quest

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The essence of [a] gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity.

—Robin Wall Kimmerer

A monthly for religious liberals

GIVING AND RECEIVING

At the heart of our complications is a fear of the other. We make it complicated because we're scared of each other. My personal favorite is our absurd attachment to individualism, which, at its worst, looks too much like isolationism and nationalism. Individualism often undermines our religious community.

The value we place on *community* requires us to walk with one another, to be with one another in an eternal Giving and Receiving of love, compassion, solace, and celebration. It requires bearing witness to solidarity, to advocacy and to reclamation of human dignity where oppression has forced its way into the world.

I'm going with Giving and Receiving as my master plan.

If Giving and Receiving is the master plan, we have to do it despite the pain and anger, and *in spite* of our pain and anger. Not out of protest, but rather for our very survival. When we are deeply hurt we are called to open ourselves to love and compassion in order to heal. When we are angry we open ourselves to letting it transform into action on our own behalf and for the sake of others. For where there is anger, there are the roots of change.

In Genesis, Abraham lives in the desert where hospitality rules because survival is on the line. When three strangers appear before Abraham, who has no clue his life is about to radically change in an act of deity-size generosity, he respectfully bows before the strangers. An exchange of greetings is offered—*peace, shalom, salaam*—and the strangers' feet are washed. They are invited to rest under a tree, and a feast is prepared. Life and death are on the line in the hot and arid desert. Giving and receiving is the rule of the land.

Sometimes it feels like we are living in a desert. We are searching for hope in a world often filled with an empty landscape. Yet it is in our DNA to both reach out to one another for hands to help when we are lost in the wilderness, and to respond with an outstretched hand, ready to grasp, pull in and offer refuge.

Ecclesiastes 5:17 states: *All their days they eat in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger.*

It would be easy in our fear to sit in darkness, feeling frustrated, angry at the universe when things don't go our way. It is easy to make the master plan of the universe more complicated than simply Giving and Receiving. But the text of Ecclesiastes continues:

> *This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God.*

Ecclesiastes is the book most known for "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." It is a book of questions, of doubt, that often asks more of us than we ask of ourselves. It invites us to offer thanks even when we're lost in the wilderness. It invites us to recognize that in the end we can't know God's or any other master plan…even if the answer is in a well-written dialogue, said by a character in a TV show.

I may not know for sure, but I'm going with Giving and Receiving as my master plan. It's easy, with two gerunds—nouns that are really active verbs. It is a plan offering something to practice, not items on a list of right and wrong.

The plan calls for reaching out from the depths of our heart and soul. It invites letting go of fears, ego, pride, and sacred individualism. It pushes us to reach beyond our comfort zone, into the unknown, trusting that all will not be lost.

Our lives are full of chaotic energy and mayhem on most days. As we wake each day, we are called to give and receive. You might name it as the gracious cycle of life. From the day we're born to the day we're going to die, we are called to give and receive. We are offered moments in time of holy exchange, one soul to another soul, two hearts meeting in true reciprocity.

Giving and Receiving is not about a brokered deal, or an exchange of material gifts or Hallmark cards. It's about seeing the holiness in the other, being present to that holiness, accepting that holiness, and celebrating the divine relationship between us and the presence of love.

The master plan of the universe begins with one holy gift: You and me. We're all gifts from, and parts of, the universe. We are both from and part of the God of many names and faces, the God of love, of compassion of justice.

I believe we're here to be present to one another, to be present to and faithful to the holy. I believe we're here to give and receive in the holy exchange of living. Let's not make it more complicated than that. ■

In this season of giving and receiving, we hope that you feel that you have received something substantial from the CLF. Whether it's a new idea, a sense of connection, a call to live life more fully or a different take on life, we hope that you've received something that makes your life better. Your gifts to the CLF make it possible for us to share with people around the world. Please consider making a year-end gift by visiting **www.clfuu.org**, or by calling **1-800-231-3027**. ■

The Gift is in the Asking

BY **JOE CLEVELAND**, MINISTER, UU CONGREGATION OF SARATOGA SPRINGS, NEW YORK

I can't tell you how many times I've been visiting with someone, sitting down with them in their home or at their bedside, and after a while they say to me: I didn't want to admit that I needed help. Usually the person will cast their eyes down for a time and it can be a little while before they make eye contact with me again. Their hands might fiddle with a blanket or with a cup of tea.

Usually, they say, I'm the one who gives rides to people or cooks them a meal. I'm the one who helps with the kids or visits people when they're in the hospital. I'm not used to being on the receiving end. I'm not used to having to ask for help.

It can be difficult to receive. Years ago I lost the apartment I was living in—and a lot of my stuff—to a fire. It was a traumatic experience. And one of the things that was most difficult to deal with was the generosity of people. The Red Cross gave me money for clothes. Friends gave me dishes and silverware and bath towels. Friends also held a benefit concert to raise money for me so I could replace some of what I lost—a computer, a microwave. Friends filled the stage and the seats.

At the end of the night, after the concert, a friend put in my hand an envelope with cash and some checks. I went off and sat on a corner of the now-empty stage and opened it, and I couldn't hold back tears. It is difficult to receive.

But even more difficult than receiving, I think, is the actual asking. "I am in need. I am in trouble. I could really use some help." I don't know many people who can really do that at all easily.

We resist asking. Lots of our resistance comes from shame. The musician and professional "asker" Amanda Palmer notes in her book *The Art of Asking* that:

> *Women tend to feel shame around the idea of being "never enough": at home, at work, in bed. Never pretty enough, never smart enough, never thin enough, never good enough. Men tend to feel shame around the fear of being perceived as weak….*
>
> *Both sexes get trapped in the same box, for different reasons.*
>
> *If I ask for help,* I am not enough.
>
> *If I ask for help,* I am weak.
>
> *It's no wonder so many of us just don't bother to ask. It's too painful.*

I'm wondering if there might be a gift in the asking itself.

But none of us gets through this life alone. A colleague of mine, Emily Hartlief, posted on Facebook that this is what being a new mother is teaching her. She says:

> *I left home when I was seventeen years old… I studied, I worked, I traveled, I moved ahead professionally. My mom and dad offered me emotional and financial support at every turn. Sometimes I accepted, and sometimes I did not.*
>
> *I wanted to do it all on my own terms. I married. And then we had a child. Since then, I have had to ask for and accept more help than I ever imagined.*

Emily asked for and has received all kinds of help from all kinds of family and friends. Help with cleaning and with food, help with baby clothes, and help with remembering to take care of herself, too. Emily says, "Mothering is not a solo act."

You might have a story similar to this. And we all know the saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." There are plenty of stories about being really reluctant to ask for help but then finally, somehow managing to ask—and the help comes.

But the place in all this that interests me the most is that moment of asking. It's easy for me to understand how I'm receiving a gift when my friends have given me a place to stay, or when my dad gave me his overcoat. I'm wondering if there might be a gift in the asking itself.

I'm intrigued by how Amanda Palmer describes what it means to ask. She says, "Asking is, at its core, a collaboration." She describes a kind of thought-experiment: Imagine there is a surgeon working away and then something happens, "an unexpected bump in the process," and the surgeon needs to ask the person next to her for something important, and she needs to do this quickly. Palmer notes that the surgeon doesn't have any time for questions like:

> *Do I deserve to ask for this help?*
>
> *Is this person I'm asking really trustworthy?*
>
> *Am I [pretentious and insulting] for having the power to ask in this moment?*

She simply accepts her position, Palmer writes, asks without shame, gets the right scalpel, and keeps cutting. Something larger is at stake. This holds true for firefighters, airline pilots and lifeguards, but it also holds true for artists, scientists, teachers—for anyone, in any relationship.

Those who can ask without shame are viewing themselves in collaboration with—rather than in competition with—the world. Palmer describes three different kinds of asking:

Asking for help with shame says:

You have the power over me.

Asking with condescension says:
I have power over you.

But asking for help with gratitude says:
We have the power to help each other.

Asking with gratitude is a way of building mutual relationship. Asking with honesty is an opportunity to see what we can create together. The gift is in the asking.

Asking with gratitude is a way of building mutual relationship. Asking with honesty is an opportunity to see what we can create together.

I ran across a story on medium.com that seemed to be another example of how the gift is in the asking. Morgan Roe, a survivor of sexual assault, is now mother of a daughter who is almost five years old. Roe says, "Once my daughter became old enough to understand and respond to questions, I began asking for permission to touch her. May I touch your face? May I touch your arm?" She asks her daughter's permission when she is bathing her or playing a game of This Little Piggy. Sometimes the answer her daughter gives is a "No," and she respects that.

Now her daughter asks her: "Mama, why do you ask all the time?" She says, "I ask because your body is yours, and yours alone. You get to choose who is able to see it and touch it. If you don't want someone to touch your body, all you will have to do is say no. They have to listen… even if you give me permission once and then later change your mind, I have to listen." The daughter says: "Because my body is MINE?" "Exactly."

The gift is in the asking.

This idea that the gift is in the asking got me thinking about Atul Gawande's book *Being Mortal*, and what he says about the importance of having discussions about end-of-life preferences. As Gawande says, "People who had substantive discussions with their doctor about their end-of-life preferences were far more likely to die at peace and in control of their situation and to spare their family anguish." As hard as it is to ask, the gift is in the asking.

Gawande tells a story about a palliative care specialist named Susan Block. Even for her, when it came to her own father, it was hard to ask the questions she needed to ask. Her father faced neurosurgery. The night before the operation, she and her father "chatted about friends and family, trying to keep their minds off what was to come, and

then she left for the night." On her way home, she says, "I realized, 'Oh, my God, I don't know what he really wants.'" And so she turned around and went back.

Block has a list of questions that she asks her patients and she had to turn around and go back to ask them of her dad:

- What do you understand the prognosis, the likely course, of this disease, to be?
- What are your worries or concerns about what lies ahead?
- What trade-offs are you willing to make?
- How do you want to spend your time if your health gets worse?
- Who do you want to make decisions if you can't?

Block says she told her father:

"I need to understand how much you're willing to go through to have a shot at being alive and what level of being alive is tolerable to you." We had this quite agonizing conversation where he said… "Well, if I'm able to eat chocolate ice cream and watch football on TV, then I'm willing to stay alive. I'm willing to go through a lot of pain if I have a shot at that."

And it was a good thing she'd had that conversation, because there were complications with the surgery, in the middle of which doctors came out to ask her what to do. "She asked the surgeons whether, if her father survived, he would still be able to eat chocolate ice cream and watch football on TV. 'Yes,' they said. She gave the okay to take him back to the operating room."

Susan Block's father lived for two more years after that—quite productive years, actually. Years that he might not have had if she hadn't known clearly what would qualify as livable for him.

The gift is in the asking. Author Gawande refers to a 2010 study at Massachusetts General Hospital:

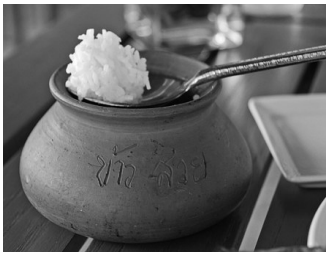
> *Those who saw a palliative care specialist stopped chemotherapy sooner, entered hospice far earlier, experienced less suffering at the end of their lives—and they lived 25 percent longer….*
>
> *If end-of-life discussions were an experimental drug, the FDA would approve it.*

If we are brave enough to be vulnerable, the gift is in the asking. If we can ask from a place of gratitude, the gift is in the asking. If we have the courage to live a question without controlling the answer, the gift is in the asking. If we can ask our loved ones hard questions about what they fear and what they really want, the gift is in the asking. ■

Generosity First

BY **THANISSARO BHIKKHU**

In Thailand, children's first exposure to Buddhism—after they've learned the gesture of respect—is in giving. As a monk comes past on his alms round, you see parents taking their children by the hand, lifting them up, and helping them put a spoonful of rice into the monk's bowl. Over time, as the children start doing it themselves, the process becomes less and less mechanical, and after a while they begin to take pleasure in giving.



At first this pleasure may seem counterintuitive. The idea that you gain happiness by giving things away doesn't come automatically to a young child's mind. But with practice you find that it's true. After all, when you give, you put yourself in a position of wealth. The gift is proof that you have more than enough. At the same time it gives you a sense of your worth as a person. You're able to help others.

The act of giving also creates a sense of spaciousness in the mind, because the world we live in is created by our actions, and the act of giving creates a spacious world: a world where generosity is an operating principle, a world where people have more than enough, enough to share. And it creates a good feeling in the mind.

The whole idea that happiness has to consist either in doing things only for your own selfish motives or for other people to the sacrifice of yourself—the dichotomy between the two—is something very Western, but it's antithetical to the Buddha's teachings. According to the Buddha, true happiness is something that, by its nature, gets spread around.

The quality of generosity, what they call *caga* in Pali, is included in many sets of Dharma teachings. One is the set of practices leading to a fortunate rebirth. This doesn't apply only to the rebirth that comes after death, but also to the states of being, the states of mind you create for yourself moment to moment, that you move into with each moment. You create the world in which you live through your actions.

By being generous—not only with material things but also with your time, your energy, your forgiveness, your willingness to be fair and just with other people—you create a good world in which to live. If your habits tend more toward being stingy, they create a very confining world, because there's never enough. There's always a lack of this, or a lack of that, or a fear that something is going to slip away or get taken away from you. So it's a narrow, fearful world you create when you're not generous, as opposed to the confident and wide-open world you create through acts of generosity.

At the same time you break down barriers. Monetary transactions create barriers. Somebody hands you something, you have to hand them money back, so there's a barrier right there. Otherwise, if you didn't pay, the object wouldn't come to you over the barrier. But if something is freely given, it breaks down a barrier. You become part of that person's extended family.

In Thailand the terms of address that monks use with their lay supporters are the same they use with relatives. The gift of support creates a sense of relatedness. The monastery where I stayed—and this includes the lay supporters as well as the monks—was like a large extended family. This is true of many of the monasteries in Thailand.

If there's a connection of skillful behavior, a good connection is formed. This sort of positive connection starts with generosity, and grows with the gift of virtue. As the Buddha taught, when you hold to your precepts no matter what, with no exceptions, it's a gift of security to all beings. You give unlimited security to everyone, and so you have a share in that unlimited security as well.

> So this is what generosity does: It makes your mind more spacious and creates good connections with the people around you.

So this is what generosity does: It makes your mind more spacious and creates good connections with the people around you.

You find, of course, that you end up getting a lot more if you start with the attitude of giving. The mind is more up for challenges: "How about if I give it more time? How about meditating later into the night than I usually do? How about getting up earlier in the morning? How about giving more constant attention to what I'm doing? How about sitting longer through pain?"

The meditation then becomes a process of giving, and of course you still get the results. When you're not so grudging of your efforts or time, you place fewer and fewer limitations on the process of meditation. That way the results are sure to be less grudging, more unlimited, as well. So it's important that we develop the Noble Wealth of generosity to bring to our meditation.

The gift of being virtuous builds on the simple act of giving, and the gift of meditation builds on both. ■

From Your Minister

BY **MEG RILEY**
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

When I was in third grade, I found the perfect present for Mrs. Graham, my favorite elementary school teacher. I knew exactly what to get her! Every day when Mrs. Graham taught us cursive on the blackboard, she used a chalk holder to make four straight lines across the board so that she could show us how low and how high dips and swirls on various letters should go. (Yes, these were all important parts of classroom life when the dinosaurs and I were children.)

Every day, her old chalk holder dropped out pieces of chalk and she grumbled that she needed a new one. That's where I came in, brilliant giver of Christmas gifts!

I told my mother I wanted to give my teacher a new chalk-holder, and my mother helped me find and buy it. We wrapped it up. When I gave it to Mrs. Graham, she was so delighted that she gave the class a little speech. "What makes this gift so perfect," she told us with pleasure that both delighted and embarrassed me, "is that Meg noticed a need that I had. She paid attention to me! And then she got exactly what would help me fill that need! That's what a good gift is!"

Then she had me write my name with a pen on the chalk holder. She said that every time she used it, long after I had moved on, she would remember me and thank me for it. Good gifts keep on giving!

That, I can tell you without hesitation, is the best story about giving a present I can tell to this day. I treasure that memory. Because it's all been downhill from there. Truth be told, I am gift-giving-challenged.

I don't know why I am so bad at gift-giving. I know people who are tremendously talented at it. My sister-in-law, for instance, has a knack for causing almost everyone's face around the Christmas tree to look like Mrs. Graham's. It's not that I don't notice people and what they like. It's just that I can't figure out, generally speaking, how to meet people's preferences in life with material gifts. Sometimes, when I think I've got just the right present, it's not.

I found a disco ball at a thrift store and was tremendously excited to give it to a particular friend. When she opened it, she startled me by laughing uproariously. "What a great gag gift!" she guffawed. Trying not to sound hurt, I asked what was funny about it and she looked at me with great incredulity. I've blocked out just why she thought it was so funny, but my hurt must have been visible. She sobered up quickly and stumbled around trying to find words of appreciation. Oh, sure.

Because I'm not very good at giving gifts, I'm also not very good at receiving them. Each "It's perfect! How did you know?" that I utter out loud to my sister-in-law is accompanied by an unspoken thought: "Oh crap. Now my present to her looks even worse!" In fact, you may have noticed that she is related to me only by marriage. No one in my family of origin is very good at gift giving. My father gave up the game early on and presented us with us cash for Christmas, something I will say I was always happy to receive, even as a seven-year-old.

After we were too old to be riveted by any seemingly random toy that Green Stamps could be traded in for, my mother usually gave us practical stuff that she had to buy anyway; socks and underwear weren't unusual. My friends and I spent hours at shopping malls buying random items on sale, the cheaper the better, for our siblings. Our favorite items on those trips were the items we picked up for ourselves.

Once my mother gave my little brother a quarter to buy me a Christmas present at Woolworth's Five and Dime store (back when dinosaurs shopped there, too). He picked out plastic naked baby dolls, about the size of pencil erasers, which were two for a nickel. My sister told him they weren't a good enough present and he began screaming at the top of his lungs, his anger echoing throughout the store. He was looking to keep the change.

My worst professional experience with gifts was when I went to Japan to represent then-president of the UUA, Bill Sinkford, in important conversations with interfaith partners. Gift-giving is central to Japanese culture. Every person I spoke with in advance of my trip emphasized the need for gifts, but no one offered to help me pick them out. They simply raved about how successful the amazing, hand-designed gifts were that Bill's wife Maria had taken on previous trips.

I'll just say it was not a Mrs. Graham-type experience in Japan. In my imagination, religious leaders in Japan are still hooting and hollering together after a few bottles of sake, exchanging tales about the pathetic gifts I took. "You think *that's* bad!?" one will exclaim. "She gave me a *bobblehead* of a Red Sox player!" (In my defense, I'd heard he liked the Red Sox.)

Over the years, I've accepted this shortcoming about myself, and I mostly let go of the anxiety that used to accompany it. True, I'm not good at showing people how much I value them through material gifts. But I'm a great listener, I'll laugh at anyone's joke, and I love taking people to nice places that they'd appreciate.

In the great big world of energy exchange, giving and receiving wrapped gifts is a very small piece of the pie. At least that's what I'll be telling myself on Christmas morning! ■

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Christmas is the time of giving, of generosity and welcome. And Santa Claus embodies all of our hopes and expectations around receiving and abundance. Or does he? Rev. Sara Ascher tells this story about one Christmas that particularly stood out from her childhood:

I had to have been about nine years old the year that Christmas didn't come. My brother and I were being pretty awful to each other for weeks. We were arguing and fighting and picking on each other. You know, all the sibling stuff of pestering each other just to get a rise out of the other person. "He's touching me!" "She's looking at me!" Mom yelling, "Stop it, both of you!" She had warned us that the way we were behaving, we didn't deserve Christmas, but we didn't actually believe she meant it. So we kept on at each other right down to the wire of Christmas Eve.

Growing up, Christmas Eve in my home was when Christmas really arrived. No decorations were put up before then and though carols and TV specials were allowed, we had no lights or wreath or anything. All of it came Christmas Eve. As a single parent, this was brilliance on my mother's part, reviving an old German family tradition. We helped with all the decorating, with the tree and the lights after church service. This kept us up late, listening to music and drinking eggnog, which meant we were more likely to sleep in on Christmas morning. Brilliant, I know.

But this Christmas Eve we went to service as usual, went to dinner at Mom's best friend's as usual, but when we got home, nothing. No advent calendars, no music, no tree, no wreath, no nothing; straight to bed. We put out our stockings with the hope they'd be full to bursting in the morning. We could maybe get over not having a tree, we could forget about eggnog, but presents—surely they would still come.

Nope. Bright and early Christmas morning my stocking at the foot of my bed lay flat but for a small bump in the toe. Disappointed, but not yet crushed, I reached in hoping to find the traditional orange, only to pull out a lump of coal. Seriously, nothing but a lump of dirty, gross charcoal sitting in the palm of my little hand.

As my brother and I stood in the living room with disbelief and tears in our eyes, Mom simply looked at us and said, "I told you if you weren't better to each other, you didn't deserve Christmas."

> Gifts are not things you get because you earn them.

Wow. That's a pretty shocking story. Sure, we know that Santa is "making a list and checking it twice" based on "who's naughty or nice." But who would imagine that we could ever really end up on the naughty end of the spectrum? How naughty is *too* naughty? How much is enough nice?

These are pretty difficult questions, especially for Unitarian Universalists who hold as a basic tenet of our religion that we should always be striving to become better people, people who are making the world a better place. We know that we could always be better than we are. So what's good enough to make it onto the *nice* list? What is good enough to deserve the overflowing stocking and the presents under the tree?

Well, I certainly can't speak for Santa, but I think the answer comes in the word "gift." Gifts are not things you get because you earn them or deserve them. Gifts are acts of generosity, not an evaluation of how good you are. Our Universalist forbearers were radical in that they declared that God was not, in fact, keeping a list of who was naughty and who was nice, who was saved and who was damned. God, they said, was Love freely poured out for everyone, without exception. God, Universalist Hosea Ballou said, wanted us to be happy—God's goal was to "happify" us.

That's what gifts are for. They are meant to happify people. Not to reward them for being good but to pour out some extra love and delight. Which is not to say that there isn't a place in life for rewards for good behavior and unpleasant consequences for bad behavior. As parents we might carefully choose these consequences for naughty or nice, or the world might just supply those consequences as part of the natural way of things. (Chances are you will have more fun in the sandbox if you share your toys than if you hit.)

But Sara's story is shocking because most of us think of Christmas as a time of giving, of "happifying," not behavior modification. And I, for one, am good with that, whatever Santa might think. And not just for the one holiday.

I'm good with seeing the essential nature of the universe as being an outpouring of love for all beings. I'm good with kindness and generosity just because they are happifying for everyone involved. I'm good with the notion that life is full of gifts, most of them not wrapped and set under a tree, for which our only responsibility is to be delighted and grateful. ■

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In Midwinter

BY **REBECCA PARKER**, THEOLOGIAN IN RESIDENCE AND MINISTER FOR ADULT SPIRITUAL FORMATION, ALL SOULS CHURCH UNITARIAN, WASHINGTON, DC

In midwinter
the world comes indoors
and is our guest of honor.
Arms hug the arriving logs
that clatter in to take their place by the fire.

Mouths kiss the prickly branches of holly
so elegant in green and red.

The forest, which we've called and asked to come,
travels long roads to get here.
Finally she arrives, tired, but still bursting
with the energy of high mountain cascades and starry nights.
She tumbles across the threshold
to be fussed over until she is comfortably settled
in the living room.
Soon the whole house is filled
with the world's presence.
And it is up to us now
to make her feel at home.

Let this be the year
we fully welcome the world,
and treat her right,
and lift our glasses in a toast to her,
and thank her,
and keep our resolutions,
and mean it when we say,

Joy to the World. ■