



# MONTHLY SERVICE

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Have you ever seen the bumper sticker that says, "God wants spiritual fruits, not religious nuts"? I saw it again recently. This humorous slogan referencing the Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians about virtues or fruits of the spirit, is a reminder that we are not our own. We are the fruit of many generations, the seeds of life divine. Religious nuts serve themselves, but spiritual fruits sow seeds through service to others.

Now, I could go on with this fruitful metaphor forever, but I will conclude by saying that in my experience, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Every personality quiz and assessment that I have ever taken identifies me as the helper, the mediator, the peacemaker, the caregiver, the person who shows love through acts of service. I take after my parents very strongly in this regard, and these inclinations have profoundly shaped who I am and how I engage with what is beyond me. But there are times when it has gotten me in trouble. More than once in my life I have found myself completely overwhelmed and over-committed because like Jonipher Kwong talks about in our first reading, I was chasing after issues and responding to the needs of the world one after another, after another, until I was out of breath and unable to meaningfully address any of them. Does anyone else know this feeling? Yeah? Okay. You are not alone.

It's easy for us to get caught in this trap right now. What with horror after horror, injustice after injustice, and need after need confronting us and calling for us to respond. And so, we must ask, why do we serve others in the ways that we do? I think this question is an important place to start. Is it because you believe in what you're doing and the values expressed through your actions? Or because you have a goal or vision that you're working toward? Because of a personal connection to the community that you're serving? Because it feeds your ego or your need to be needed? Because

someone asks you and you feel flattered or perhaps obligated? Because you feel hopeless and are grasping for something to fill that void? Or because you feel guilty and want to do something about it? Or because it feels good? Or because you believe that you have something valuable to offer?

These are all real and valid reasons for serving others. And if I'm honest, all of these have been motivators for me at one time or another, but not all of these motivators help us to feel more alive in the work, because as our reading said, "Works without faith is lifeless." After finding myself caught in this worn down state more than once in my life, I realized that the ways I serve must be grounded in my faith. Faith in the inherent goodness at the heart of human beings. Faith in a sustaining grace in the universe that holds us even, and especially when we fail to live out of or recognize this inherent goodness. When confronted with the great need all around us, we must remind ourselves that our wholeness and well-being and liberation are bound up with that of others. And serve from that place of connection, not with a sense of obligation exactly, but more with a sense of joyful responsibility.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*, makes a really important distinction between helping, fixing, and serving, which she suggests represent three very different ways of seeing life. "When we help, we respond to life as if it were weak," she says, and when we fix, we respond to life as if it were broken." These relationships are inherently unequal. We are the person with the resources or the expertise, and the person being helped or fixed is the needy or broken one. This assumption creates distance and runs the risk of taking away the sense of worth and dignity of the person on the receiving end of your resources or expertise.

When we serve, however, we respond to life as if it were whole and holy. "Service," says Remen, "is the work of the soul." It is seeing the wholeness in another and collaborating with it on the same level. The assumption is that we are all connected. As she says, "All suffering is like my suffering and all joy is like my joy." And we must be willing to tap into that connection. Service requires a humble posture, meaning we don't serve with our strength or our expertise, but with our experience, even with our limitations and our wounds, because those are the source of our compassion and empathy. Through service, we strengthen and renew both ourselves and others and we all become more whole.

Now, this statement from Remen sums it all up for me. She says, "Our humanity is more powerful than our expertise." She shares a story from her career in medicine about an emergency physician named Harry who discovered this truth one night while working his shift in a busy emergency room. A woman was brought in about to give birth and her OB would not be able to make it there in time, so it was up to Harry to deliver the baby. He had delivered many babies in his career and he enjoyed the technical challenge, so he sprung into action to get that baby delivered.

While the newborn baby was still attached to her mother, before the umbilical cord was even cut, Harry laid her along his left forearm, holding the back of her head in his hand, and used a suction bulb to clear the mucus out of her mouth and nose. And suddenly the baby opened her eyes and looked right at him, and he realized in that moment that he was the first human being this baby had ever seen. He said he felt his heart extend to her, embracing her with a welcome from all people everywhere, "Welcome to the world, baby girl." And tears welled up in his eyes.

Now, Harry had delivered hundreds of babies in his career and he knew himself to be very competent at doing so, but never before had he let himself experience the meaning of what he was doing. Reflecting on the experience, Harry said this was in a sense the first baby he ever delivered, not as an expert, but as a human being. He felt fully alive in a way that he hadn't before and found renewed purpose in his work because it became a spiritual practice in which he recognized his connection to this baby and her mother and to all of humanity and the wholeness and holiness of this little life.

This is a story of someone finding meaning in their professional calling, making it too, a spiritual practice. I am fortunate as a minister to enjoy this alignment as well, and I know some of you experience your work in a whole variety of fields in this way, but I, like many of you also have other ways that I serve. Several months ago, I was invited to join the board of Reading Partners North Texas, an organization that places community volunteers in systematically disadvantaged schools in Dallas, Fort Worth, and Everman ISDs, to help elementary students master basic reading skills. These volunteer tutors, including a few dozen people from this congregation, are typically not experts in child literacy, nor am I, but they are people who are willing to serve a child, human being to human being, so that that child can develop new skills and discover within themselves the joy and power of learning.

In addition to doing the advisory and stewardship work of the board, I occasionally do makeup tutoring sessions with students. We sit side by side at desks, practicing sight words, reading to each other, and discussing what we read, just as I do with my own kids, side by side at the kitchen table in the evening. The students I've served in these tutoring sessions are the same age as my own children, who are working hard on learning to read. And while my own children do not experience the same systemic disadvantages as the children served by Reading Partners, they are navigating the challenges of dyslexia.

I witness how these students and my own children struggle with a challenge beyond their control, but I also see how hard they are trying and how proud they are when they learn new things. I'm not teaching them as an expert, but I am accompanying them in the learning process, getting to know them, and celebrating their progress. It has meaning for me because I see how my life is connected with theirs. I remember how important it was to me as a young person to have adults who cared about me and supported my learning, and I remember how good it felt to grow in my confidence as a learner and a leader. Our humanity is more powerful than our expertise.

This Lenten sermon series that we are in the middle of invites you to consider ways of deepening your spiritual life, looking inward and looking outward to find ways to channel your sense of purpose, to serve people and communities to which you are connected. We talk about it as monthly service in this framework, but whether you find ways to serve more or less often than monthly is less important than having some regular practice of service.

The theologian Frederick Buechner wrote about calling and vocation saying, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." The voice of God as he understands it is that sense of knowing, that inner sense of knowing that is distinct from the voice of

society or superego or self-interest. The world right now is so hungry it feels like it could eat us up. So, each of us needs to discern, "Where does that hunger meet my own deep gladness, not my expertise, but my gladness?" Gladness is aliveness and spiritual connectedness.

And so, I ask you today, what is your deep gladness? What makes you come alive? And how can you channel that or how do you channel that into service to others? How we serve our communities says a lot about who we are and what we value. We say each Sunday here at church in our affirmation that service is our prayer. I understand this to mean we pray for a better world through our actions in service to others and to a greater good.

When we approach service as a prayer, it takes on a deeper meaning and reflects the values and beliefs that are important to us. We can engage in a spiritual practice of service in the streets, at the food pantry, in a classroom, in an emergency room, in so many places where the world's hunger calls to us. And we can also engage in a spiritual practice of service closer to home, in our families or in our church community.

One of the unique aspects of serving at church is that we are building up an institution and a community that serves us in return. We're all together in this house of welcome, living stone upholding living stone, as we sang. Whereas some settings require more intention to approach service as wholeness meeting wholeness, connecting as equals. In church, that's built into the way we work. We are in covenantal community, promising to journey with each other and to serve each other and our values to the end, that all souls shall grow in harmony with the divine.

Service isn't selfish, but it's also not selfless. It can't be. We have to bring our whole selves and our experiences to the relationship, for this is what helps us to connect on a human level instead of as fixers or helpers or experts. There are many ways to serve here at church, both within the walls of the church and as Unitarian Universalists serving beyond our walls. For example. We always encourage new members to find ways to serve in our hospitality teams, because the experience of being welcomed into this community is still fresh, and you can connect newcomer to relative newcomer with others through greeting and ushering or serving up a cup of hot coffee.

We invite members and friends of the church to serve as teachers in our Sunday morning children's classes. No need to be an expert in teaching or child development or Unitarian Universalism. Again, our humanity is more powerful than our expertise, especially when it comes to relating to children and youth. We invite members and friends of the church to care for one another through delivering meals and sending cards and making art for those cards, which people of all ages in our church do. No need to be a chef or a great writer or a trained artist. What matters most in this is your generous heart, your whole self connecting with and uplifting the wholeness of another in a time of struggle or celebration. Our humanity is more powerful than our expertise.

Now, the opportunities are endless. I could go on and on, but we also serve as Unitarian Universalists both individually and in groups beyond the walls of this church. Coming up on April 6th, Sunday, April 6th, we are excited to relaunch our community service group in the church with new leadership and

new opportunities, both connecting those who are already engaged in service and offering pathways of involvement for those looking for new ways to serve.

If you can't figure out where your deep gladness meets the hunger of the world or how your soul connects with others in a meaningful way that inspires service, perhaps this question will resonate. Why are you here? Why did you seek out and become and remain a part of this church community? What is at the heart of it for you? The experience we seek for ourselves can point us toward the ways we might serve to create that experience for others.

In *Advice from a Raindrop*, the reading I shared earlier, the voice of the raindrop says, "You think you're too small to make a difference? Tell me about it." But each of us, like the raindrop, is one small voice among millions, and that is no weakness. You are one small part of a storm that changes everything. Never forget that. No one is alone.

Edward Everett Hale, a 19th century Unitarian minister who interestingly served for some time as chaplain of the United States Senate, wrote these words that I return to often. He said, "I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." So, friends, go find that something and do it with your whole being. Many of you are already doing it, but looking at what you're doing through the lens of spiritual practice will make it all the more meaningful, knowing that you are bearing spiritual fruits and contributing to greater goodness and wholeness for us all. Blessings on your practice, and amen.