

Message ~ Cincinnati Friends Meeting
December 4, 2011

Giving & Receiving

by Donne Hayden

(I am feeling moved to move closer to you since you will not move closer to me. And I am no longer tethered to the microphone, so I am going to stand here [in the center near the back benches]. We have had conversations in the Meeting about why we sit so far apart and why everyone sits at the back. So, if Mohammed won't come to the mountain, the mountain will come to Mohammed. I'm going to just hold my papers and speak from here closer to you all.)

I want to begin by reading a verse from Acts in the New English Bible version:

All along I showed you that it is our duty to help the weak in this way, by hard work, and that we should keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus, who himself said, "Happiness lies more in giving than in receiving."

(Acts 20:35, New English Bible)

Paul attributed these words to Jesus when he spoke to the elders of Ephesus about two thousand years ago, and they are no less true now than they were then. About this time of year, we start hearing them a lot, usually in the King James language: "'Tis more blessed to give than to receive." We quote these words to each other or have them quoted to us; we often say them to our children who making long lists of what they want for Christmas; in general we are accustomed to hearing these words in reference to charitable donations or Christmas gifts. But I have been thinking of them in other circumstances.

I've lived quite a long time and my life experience has shown me that there's truth to this giving-is better-than-receiving business, that somehow the more we give, the more we *have* to give, and the more likely we are to receive. Just for comparison, let's consider for a minute those people—the beautiful, rich and famous—who receive everything our consumer culture tells us that we want. Have you ever noticed how

many of them seem to be really unhappy? In spite of all they receive in the way of material goods and attention, many of them have terrible marriages or drug & alcohol problems; many commit suicide. Writer Philip Yancey says of his experience as a journalist interviewing “diverse people”¹

. . . I can roughly divide them into two types: stars and servants. The stars include NFL football greats, movie actors, music performers, famous authors, TV personalities, and the like. These are the people who dominate our magazines and our television programs. We fawn over them, poring over the minutiae of their lives: the clothes they wear, the food they eat, the aerobic routines they follow, the people they love, the toothpaste they use.

Yet I must tell you that, in my limited experience, these “idols” are as miserable a group of people as I have ever met. Most have troubled or broken marriages. Nearly all are hopelessly dependent on psychotherapy. In a heavy irony, these larger-than-life heroes seem tormented by incurable self-doubt.²

Yancey also interviewed “servants,” people like Dr. Paul Brand, “who worked for twenty years among the poorest of the poor, leprosy patients in rural India,” and “health workers who left high-paying jobs to serve with Mendenhall [a good Quaker name, by the way] Ministries in a backwater town of Mississippi,” or “relief workers in Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, or other such repositories of world-class human suffering.”³

Yancey concludes,

But as I now reflect on the two groups side by side, stars and servants, the servants clearly emerge as the favored ones, the graced ones. They work for low pay, long hours, and no applause, ‘wasting’ their talent and skills among the poor and uneducated. But somehow in the process of losing their lives they have found them. They have received the ‘peace that is not of this world.’⁴

¹ Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts/What’s So Amazing About Grace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2008), p. 59.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 60.

Such servants, people who devote themselves to giving to others, receive something intangible—inner peace. Yancey cites extreme examples of giving and receiving, of course, but there are less extreme examples closer to home.

A Quaker meeting and Meeting for Worship, for instance.

It has been my experience that we *get out of* something whatever we *put into* it. When we give more, we receive more. This is true of just about anything worthwhile. For instance, let's say I sign up for a course at a university and make a commitment to finish it. If I attend all the class sessions, do all the reading and written assignments, I will feel like I have gotten a lot out of the experience. In contrast, if I sign up for a course but remain uncommitted to it—as I did my online Greek class at seminary—if I miss several classes, get behind in the coursework, and fail to do the readings, then at the end of the course (if I actually finish it), I will feel that it wasn't worth my time. But it was, of course. It was worth *exactly* the time and effort I put into it. I got out of it what I put into it. Learning lies more in what I give to process, my effort and attention, than it does in instruction or the professor or the material.

In a faith community, too, we receive more when we give more. And I'm not talking about finances, though the Trustees would probably like for me to remind you that donations are down this year, and we had to take funds from the endowment to meet our commitments this year. But I'm not talking about that today. I am concerned about our spiritual resources. I realize I am preaching to the choir because most of you who are here today contribute to our faith community—you give of yourselves, your time, your expertise, your talents, your resources, and your money.

But to be honest, some people give less but expect more. If you come to Meeting for what you can *get*—peace and quiet, silence—I suggest you are missing out. We get out of our faith community and worship experience what we put into it. If we put into it love and generosity, that’s what we will receive; and that’s how we will perceive our Meeting. If, however, we put criticism and dissatisfaction into it, that’s what we will receive.

Let’s talk about Sunday morning *worship*. What is it? Is worship for *us*? Isn’t worship a time when we *give* our attention, our adoration, to something greater than ourselves? A time to give our hearts to the Holy, to open our hearts and *give* of them. A time to seek the Light and, finding it with each other, bask in it a while with others in this room? In doing this, we *do* receive. And not because someone gives a great message; not because we have lovely music and sing beautiful hymns beautifully, but because for a time we forget ourselves. Together as a faith community, we give attention to God (or the Light or however you conceive of what put you here on the planet).

Rather than seeing Meeting for Worship in terms of what you receive from it, come with the intention of giving yourself wholeheartedly to the experience, to the Light, to that of God within you. Release your own demands and expectations; release them. When we can do that, we receive; we fill to overflowing. That’s when we have gathered meetings: when we are together, in community, all giving and open to the Light and each other.

I was inspired recently by a book on faith communities from the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, the great Vietnamese “Zen Master, poet, and peace activist.” The

book, titled *Friends on the Path: Living Spiritual Communities*, focuses on communities in which spiritual companions or friends generally on the same path practice mindfulness together. In Buddhism, such a community is called a “*Sangha*,” but it seems to me a fine description of a good Quaker meeting. Are we not a gathering of spiritual Friends, generally on the same path being mindful of the Light together on Sunday mornings?

To keep such a community strong, Thich Nhat Hanh advises us to give each other space to be imperfect human beings. “You don’t need a perfect *Sangha*,” he teaches; “a family or a community doesn’t have to be perfect in order to be helpful.”⁵ In fact, he says, “If we lived in a *Sangha* where everyone was perfect ... that would be very difficult for us.”⁶ When our weaknesses, shortcomings and rough places bump against those of others, we “have an opportunity to transform.”

But if we don’t give, if we withhold our compassion and tolerance for each other, then our hearts shrink and contract; we have less room to receive anything spiritual or otherwise. To *receive* as a spiritual community, we must *give* each other space to be human; we must *give* each other love and understanding; we must *give* patience to our differences. If we can give these things to each other, and if we give, each Sunday morning, our hearts to the Light, our hearts will grow bigger and bigger, and we can receive even more Light.

And we will know the truth of the words: “Happiness lies more in giving than in receiving.” May it be so.

⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Friends on the Path: Living Spiritual Communities*, compiled by Jack Lawlor (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2002), p. 30.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 31.