

**Matthew Hare, Stewardship Chair, Feb. 25, 2024**

## **Gifting Grows Connections**

Good morning!

Today is a special day. This service is our annual Stewardship Celebration when we focus on the many ways Gifting Grows Connections, and thereby builds our capacity to find inspiration and engage the world.

This week you received a letter from the Stewardship Team, more of an invitation to today's celebration and lunch, rather than the traditional pledge card delivery. Of course, we do want your pledge, and we encourage you to be generous, but we're experimenting with this approach in an attempt to make pledging less transactional and more a source of connection.

We are so pleased that you have chosen to be here, in person and live streaming, to share today's joyful messages of hope, love, and connection.

Please stay and enjoy the Steward-soup lunch in the Annex. Or if you are live streaming and unable to physically join us, send an email to [stewardship@uithaca.org](mailto:stewardship@uithaca.org) to request a delivery of vegetable soup today.

Out there, where we all live and work, the monetary economy drives our lives in so many ways. In this country, we grow up with a cultural emphasis on individual achievement, with success too often measured by wealth. Even as our devices provide more and more opportunities for communication, many of us grow increasingly insular, socially bubbled, focused on self, and lonely. Many of us are here at First Unitarian because we are seeking something better, more meaningful, more centered in love and connection. I believe we have that potential here, and realizing it looks a little different for each of us.

With these thoughts in mind, I want to offer a frame shift for our internal FUSIT economy – to a gifting economy.

Many indigenous cultures, including our Haudenosaunee neighbors, have a tradition sometimes referred to as a “gift economy”. Here, I want to pause and respectfully acknowledge that our Ithaca home, and our church properties, are on the ancestral and unceded homelands of the Gayogohó:nq? People (the Cayuga Nation), and pay our respect to elders both past and present. I profess no expertise on native American culture. Today, I merely offer a glimpse of one of their traditions so that we might learn from their wisdom.

In native American gift economies, as I understand it, relationships between people, and with Mother Earth, are built through reciprocal gifting. In native American traditions, every pronouncement and ceremony starts by expressing gratitude for life, recognizing the debt to mother earth, ancestors, family, and a responsibility to future generations. Indigenous ceremonies, including treaty signings with colonists, were first and foremost gift exchanges to cement relationships among the parties. Gifting also is central to traditional native American justice systems. Chief Maquinna, of the New-Chaan-ulth People of western Vancouver Island,

described it this way: “Once I was in Victoria, and I saw a very large house.

They told me it was a bank, and that the white men place their money there to be taken care of, and that by and by they got it back with interest. We

are Indians, and we have no such bank; but when we have plenty of money or blankets, we give them away to other chiefs and people, and by and by they return them with interest, and our hearts feel good. Our way of giving is our bank.”

Gifting is quite different than the one-way transactional consumer economy we operate in, where there is no relationship between buyer and retailer, and nothing but a financial transaction between philanthropist and receiver.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, author of “Braiding Sweetgrass”, describes the

dissonance between these two economies. She writes, “The expression, ‘Indian giver’, used negatively today as a pejorative for someone who gives something and then wants to have it back, actually derives from a fascinating cross-cultural misinterpretation between an indigenous culture operating in a gift economy and a colonial culture predicated on the concept of private property. When gifts were given to settlers by the Native inhabitants, the recipients understood that they were valuable and were intended to be retained. Giving them away would have been an affront. But the indigenous people understood the value of the gift to be based in reciprocity and would be affronted if the gifts did NOT circulate back to them... The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity.”

Obviously, you and I are steeped in the market economy and I am not suggesting that we can completely abandon it, even if we wanted to. Kimmerer reminds us, “For the greater part of human history... shared resources were the rule.” On this continent, colonists arrived with “a different story, a social construct in which everything is a commodity to be bought and sold. The market economy story has spread like wildfire, with uneven results for human well-being and devastation for the natural world. But it is just a story we have told ourselves and we are free to tell another, to reclaim the old one.”

I propose that you think about pledging and service here at First Unitarian with a gifting sentiment, whereby your contribution builds connection and fertilizes relationships, and thus gets reciprocated in a thousand small ways. This applies to your pledge as much as your effort on a hospitality team or committee.

There are tangible ways in which your pledge supports our staff and operations, and in turn, the FUSIT ministry and programs enrich our lives by connecting each of us and our relationships with faith, love and action. That’s why, this year, our Stewardship theme is Gifting Grows Connection. It might have been even better as, Gifting Generously Grows More Connections.

Our offertory today, later in the service, will be with pledge cards, distributed to all of you in the pews. Please take note of the Fair Share guidelines on the back side – some of the math is done for you with a progressive sliding scale in which those who have more, give more. If you are joining us online, we hope that you will take time during the offertory music to access the FUSIT website homepage where there is a “pledge” button to link to an electronic pledge form.

I get to wear this purple hat as chair of Stewardship, but it represents the effort of a dedicated small committee including Jack Roscoe, Wendy Schearer, Jeanette Knapp, Margaret Nichols, and until recently, Amelia Habicht, who was warmly remembered yesterday, right here. We have many helpers, but in this moment I want to hold up Mike Daniels, an energetic new FUSIT member, and Pat Gaines who BOTH did a fantastic job organizing today’s lunch. Thank you all.