

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

**“The Altruist’s Dilemma”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 5, 2017

**Call to Celebration**

In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, there are four vows which they are expected to make ... that are impossible. Yet these vows are repeated on a daily basis all around the world. They are:

Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to save them all.

Desires are inexhaustible; I vow to end them all.

The Dharma Gates are infinite; I vow to enter them all.

The Buddha Way is unexcelled; I vow to attain it completely.

Dharma Gates are all the attainments, wisdom and insights of the Buddha. To enter all those Dharma Gates means to know everything that the Buddha knew and attain all that he mastered. The Buddha Way is the eightfold path of ethical living, mental training, and the development of wisdom and compassion.

Each of these four vows promises to do something that just can’t be done. How am I going to save some Mongolian herder, garbage picker in Mexico, rice farmer in Viet Nam and factory worker in China? Why, I’m not sure I can save all of you who are right here and even willing to listen to me!

End all desires? Give me a break. Is that even healthy? Even the desire to save all beings?

I would love to enter all the Dharma Gates but, I’m already 60 and there probably isn’t all that much time left to get this done after saving all beings is finished.

I think I’ve maybe got a shot at attaining the Buddha Way but that seems impossible too. The Buddha could meditate for seven days without moving. Just not there yet.

The Bodhisattva vows are examples of the challenges the altruist is up against. Making a dent in the suffering in the world is no small challenge to undertake. Let us consider that challenge this morning as we join together in the celebration of life.

**Reading**

A reading from the beginning of the book [\*strangers drowning: Grappling with Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Overpowering Urge to Help\*](#) by Larissa MacFarquhar (whose book provides lots of source material for this sermon)

A young man and an older man—a philosophy professor and his student—are having lunch together in a Thai restaurant in New Jersey. [The young man says:]

I'm not sure what the world would be like if everyone thought like me. In college, we were given the thought experiment, "Should you save **your mother** from drowning, or **two strangers**?" I think I should save the strangers, but I would probably be too weak to, because I love my mom. And maybe it's good to have this disposition where you love your mom. I don't know what the world would be like if everyone saved the strangers rather than their mother. When I read books on Buddhism, and monks are talking about problems like this, they don't think of it as caring less for your mother—they think about it as caring about strangers more. And if you care about the strangers and your mother equally, it's just a numbers game at that point. But it's not a cold and calculating thing, it's extending empathy to others.

The young man's face is mostly blank. On first impression he seems to be deeply recessed inside himself—a person whose emotions are compressed under heavy strata of ideas about altruism and rationality and philosophical precision. But if he is questioned about his views on suffering, this word will recall to his mind facts he has encountered in books about terrible things endured by nameless human beings hundreds of years ago, or by prey animals in the wild, and the horror of this remote information will overcome him to the point where he starts to cry. What appears to be an absence of emotion then appears to be a need to control overwhelming emotion that is apt to surface without warning.

[The old man responds:] But that is impossible.

Sermon - Sam

I highly value altruism. I strive to develop those qualities in my behavior. Living simply, being generous to others, limiting my consumption of the planet's resources and working to encourage the flourishing of all life on this planet makes sense and inspires me. I find the ostentatious pursuit of wealth and power to be spiritually bankrupt and socially destructive.

When I read about those who dedicate themselves to the service of others, however, I feel a little hypocritical. When I compare what I've done with what they've done, I feel challenged to do better.

AND, I see problems with the way some altruists have chosen to act out their passion. Sometimes these selfless people act from pathological motivations. Sometimes, I sense a conflict between the desire to be extremely altruistic and good mental health.

This certainly isn't obvious from the laudatory nature of their pursuits. Reading about the lives of these people who feel a strong inner drive toward altruistic behavior can be very inspirational.

One of those people from Oregon is a fellow named [Charles Gray](#) who died in 2005. He was a social activist most of his life. One of the contributions he is best known for is a half a million dollar gift he and his first wife, Leslie Brockelbank, made to establish the [Mackenzie River Gathering Foundation](#). This foundation's mission is to inspire people to work together for justice and mobilize resources for Oregon communities as they build collective power to change the world. Greatly

influenced by the writings of Gandhi, Gray worked as a field organizer for United World Federalists; helped to direct a work camp in Mexico for the American Friends Service Committee; and fasted for 40 days to stop the nuclear arms race (along with lots of other projects). What he might be best known for is his [World Equity Budget](#). He calculated what his share of the world's wealth should be and lived under that amount which was about \$100 dollars a month (in 1981 dollars)

Charles' second wife, Dorothy Granada, was another extreme altruist. She grew up in a Central Los Angeles ghetto. Her mother was Mexican and her father Filipino. He deserted her mother when Dorothy was an infant. Life was very hard for them so Dorothy worked and studied hard to get a degree in nursing. She married a doctor and attained a middle class life in Chicago, but the marriage didn't last. She realized she didn't want to be the only brown face in a white world of privilege to which she didn't feel she belonged. That led her to work in a Mexican Barrio. But they didn't accept her either because she continued to live in Hyde Park sending her son to privileged schools.

What turned her to selfless service was hearing the message of Jesus to resist violence and stand with the poor. Her ex-husband doctor was now at Stanford which allowed her son to get a college degree there which freed her to pursue service. She felt drawn to serve the needs of women in the developing world that got her eventually to Nicaragua to work in a tiny remote village creating a health clinic. She worked there for twenty years.

Another inspiring person who has dedicated his life to alleviating suffering is a man who doesn't like his name used in public at all. We can call him Frank. Frank was deeply influenced by the philosopher Peter Singer, a utilitarian who advocates for animal rights. Frank wanted to fight against all forms of suffering and settled on chickens. There are plenty of people who care about fuzzy cats and dogs and their well-being. Another popular group to save is species that are threatened with extinction. But no one cared that much about chickens. Yet billions of them were and are living miserable lives in tiny cages laying eggs or getting slaughtered after very short lives of great pain and suffering. Frank has been very successful at raising our collective awareness of the cruelty designed into caged factory farming. And not just the suffering of animals but also the terrible ways workers are treated. And the toxic pollution produced from the way caged animal waste is or isn't properly handled.

I want you to hear about these people this morning because of the intensity they bring to their efforts. Charles Gray was meticulous in his accounting to make sure he didn't spend over a \$100 a month. Dorothy Granada risked her life numerous times. She was a human shield for several weeks accompanying a woman who had received death threats. She treated both the Sandinistas and the Contras in her clinic which made her suspicious to both sides. Frank was a vegan but not an ideologue when it came to what he ate. He would eat beef if he was meeting with cattlemen to show he wasn't a zealot and could be a reasonable negotiator.

What I found interesting as I read about their lives was their lack of religious motivation. These people were not participating in sacrificial giving with the hope of some heavenly reward or because God had directed their activity. They were very rational in their choices. They witnessed suffering

and wanted to do something to stop it. And in that altruistic effort, though they wouldn't seek an emotional payoff for their actions, they still found great satisfaction and meaning.

The [word altruism](#) is actually a fairly new one. The word was coined by the French philosopher [Auguste Comte](#), the founder of positivism, for an antonym of egoism. In the middle of the nineteenth century, he advocated a theory of conduct *independent* of religious motivation that regards the good of others as the end of moral action. Primary in the goods to be advocated is the alleviating of pain and suffering. The effect of altruism in society is to foster love.

As you might expect, Friedrich Nietzsche was no friend of altruism and railed against it. Freud didn't take kindly to altruism either. Freud worried about people who tried to be too good. He thought it might indicate a moral masochism. Those who turned the other cheek all the time, as the selfless mothers he saw in his practice did, were begging to become slaves to the tyranny of their children's desires, he thought. Adult children's altruistic behavior towards their parents could be accused of trying to escape the burden of gratitude for their existence.

Anna Freud joined him saying, "Altruists are bossy, because the urge that is usually behind the fulfillment of one's own wishes is [hidden] *behind* the fulfillment of the wishes of the other person." In other words, One can transfer one's own aggressive ego desires to others and fulfill them by saving the other person.

For a number of reasons including general suspicion of do-gooders, altruism has never been all that popular until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Perhaps as a response to the "me generation" characterization of the rush to wealth accumulation in the 1980's and 1990's with MBA's being prized over PhD's, altruism started becoming popular. [People like the Sharpes](#) who saved Jews during World War Two and those ordinary people who, at great risk to themselves, saved Jewish families from the Holocaust became the subject of research. What qualities separated them from the people who turned the Jews in? Altruistic character cultivated by their parents came back as the most consistent answer.

This has great implications for us as we educate our children and we grow and develop our own character. As I mentioned last Sunday discussing covenant, one of the reasons to have one is to cultivate "the spirit of mutual love." One of the most important desires our members *consistently* want from our congregation is for community. It follows that an important component of nurturing that spirit of mutual love that sustains community is altruism.

Now, I don't want to disregard Freud's warnings about altruism. As Larissa MacFarquhar points out in her book, *Strangers drowning, Grappling with Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Overpowering Urge to Help*, altruism can have its problems too.

Charles Gray was intensely committed to his \$100 a month as a maximum he could spend. Not 99 dollars or 101. Once he had settled on that number he would not go over it. His obsession with that number had an impact on anyone in his life whom he was in relationship, like Granada. At first she

was attracted to his commitment and joined him. But his lack of flexibility got very annoying after a while.

This was true of a number of these altruists. One woman I read about accepted a gift of a candied apple at a fair from a boyfriend. Later, she was up half the night in tears thinking of the children in Africa who died because they didn't get the vaccine that money could have provided. This was a woman who donated over a hundred thousand dollars a year to charity, living on next to nothing to save people in the developing world. Rather than going to save them herself, she rationalized, it was better for her and her husband to make good money here and send it there.

But thinking about every purchase down to one's food and clothing choices can easily drive the altruist to madness. And that kind of thinking can be consuming if one has a tendency to obsessive compulsiveness ... or codependence.

Some of the most selfless, giving people are those married to substance abusers. They get trapped thinking they can rescue them if they are just good enough and can lure their partner away from addiction. With the awareness today of [Al-Anon](#) and [twelve step recovery programs](#), this error has entered the general consciousness. Addiction can't be stopped by altruistic behavior which actually enables and even encourages it. If the addict is shielded from the results of their actions, they lose one of the powerful motivations to stop when they hit bottom. Their suffering can begin their road to recovery.

This is a bit of a paradox right here. The urge to alleviate suffering actually makes for more suffering. This can be a big problem as do-gooders in the developed world send aid to the developing world. In a famine or a disaster, Western food aid can come pouring in undercutting the local market and driving down prices for local producers. Governments will ignore the people's health care needs if Western donors are willing to pay for it. And as was true in Central America, aid workers can be at cross purposes with the government and American foreign policy ... for better or worse.

Ministers can get caught up in altruistic dilemmas too. Very quickly most ministers discover there is an endless ocean of need into which they begin their ministry. There are always more people to visit and offer support than they have time. But those choices can be difficult to make. In the crisis situation, you generally drop what you are doing and go to the hospital or to the grieving widow. But rarely are the choices that clear cut. It takes a while to put together a decent sermon to serve the people who will be coming on Sunday morning. Yet, I could go down to the New York State Capital several times a week for a demonstration or advocacy day. I could be writing daily to my representatives in Washington as our current President strives to dismantle so much of what I think the Federal government ought to do. And while I am very generous in supporting this congregation, [my seminary](#), [the UUA](#), [the UUMA](#) and [the UUSC](#), I know I could be offering more support to local, national and international organizations I know are doing good work. And they know me as I get requests from them every week. I know this is a struggle for all of us.

And as a [Unitarian Universalist Buddhist](#), I'm especially moved by the monastic example of the Buddha who gave everything for the liberation of all beings. The Buddhist bar for altruism is impossible to meet.

We all have to find and respect some kind of limits. For me, one of my limits is my health. Having suffered greatly from childhood with chronic digestive problems, I have come to respect the needs of my body for health. They come first. I'm also not willing to sacrifice the wellbeing of my family. I'm not going to put them in danger or deprivation so I can satisfy my personal altruistic compulsions. That means I sacrifice the purity and self-righteousness I would prefer to cultivate ... which probably wouldn't be good for me anyway.

And yet, the stories of people who are great altruists still call to me and inspire me. I may not be willing to follow their extreme examples, but I do honor and appreciate their choices. And if sacrificial giving is your thing, may I encourage you to support the good and noble work of our congregation as we strive to be a beacon of light here in the Capital Region. (just want you to know I'm with you 100%). After all, you've got to give when the spirit says give.

## **Benediction**

[David Rakoff](#) says it well:

Altruism is innate, but it's not instinctual.  
Everybody's wired for it,  
but a switch has to be flipped.

Let us cultivate a healthy altruism here, that  
gives us joy and zest for life and  
cultivates the spirit of mutual love for each other.

As we receive it and cultivate it,  
let us go forth and share it with a world  
in need of healing and reconciliation.