

You Do Not Have To Be Good

by Rosalind Reynolds

“If you could have any super power, what would it be?” This may seem like a rhetorical question, but it’s one that my kids have spent hours of their lives hotly debating. My answer, when I’m asked, is always the same: flying. Who wouldn’t want to fly? Who among us has never thrilled at the sight of a huge V of geese sprawling across an autumn sky, and secretly wished we were among them? We know they fly vast distances with few breaks to rest or eat, but somehow they make it look easy. How do they do it?

Years ago, before I’d ever heard of Unitarian Universalism, my sister sent me a poem she thought I would like. It began:

“You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees

for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.”

Many of you will recognize this is as “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver. It’s printed on the cover of your order of service, or possibly your neighbor may have it tattooed on their forearm. I have since come to learn that Mary Oliver poems are something of a sacred text among UUs. But what kind of sacred text tells you you don’t have to be good? I will get back to the geese, I promise. But first, I’ll be honest, that line bothered me, and has stuck with me ever since. Of course you have to be good. Isn’t that the lesson of every myth, every fairy tale, every kids’ book, every law code, every parental lecture? Have you ever told your kids, “It’s all right that you didn’t clean your room, honey, just let the soft animal of your body love what it loves”? No, I didn’t think so.

I can’t speak for all cultures, but for those of us raised in the Judeo-Christian ethic, the idea that you don’t have to be good makes no sense. What does Mary Oliver mean by this line? Does she mean that you can be good without even trying? Because that has actually happened to me.

For example, I cannot be bothered to rid my lawn of dandelions. I used to feel guilty about this, until a friend of mine pointed out that it’s very important *not* to pull or spray dandelions, because they’re one of the few food sources for pollinators in the early spring. What I had taken for laziness turned out to be, in fact, careful environmental stewardship. With no effort on my part, I’d been doing the right thing all along.

Similarly, when the call went out not too long ago to boycott the NFL, I congratulated myself on the fact that I have been boycotting the NFL my entire life, due to a complete and utter lack of interest in football.

But that's not really being "good," is it? I mean, there's not much virtue in letting your dandelions grow, or in refusing to watch a sport you couldn't care less about. The actions themselves may be good, but I can't claim merit for them. Virtue, we're taught, should involve struggle, and self-sacrifice. You give up something that might be pleasurable or beneficial to you, for the sake of someone or something else. Being good should be heroic and ideally, painful. Being generous, especially, should be painful. "Give till it hurts," runs the old adage. If you're not sacrificing your own comfort or well-being for the sake of others, does it even count?

Let's face it, no one's ever been made a saint for letting their weeds grow. (Though incidentally, St. Werburgh, patron saint of Chester in England, is best known for chasing a flock of wild geese out of the village fields, where they were eating the seed. So the bar is not always as high as you might think.) But in general, saints do things that the rest of us wouldn't. They give all their money away, and they dress in hair shirts, and they perform great deeds of self-sacrifice, often ending in their own grisly deaths. They walk on their knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. That's what really good people do, right?

One of my favorite characters from Dickens is Mark Tapley, servant and companion to Martin Chuzzlewit, from the book of that name. Mark Tapley has one prodigious talent, and that is the ability to stay cheerful under trying circumstances. In fact, his life is pleasant enough that he begins to feel that his super power is going to waste. He begins looking for ways to make his life miserable, so he can get “more credit.” He tries to get a job as a gravedigger, but unfortunately there are no openings in that field. He finally lands on a scheme that will truly test his ability to stay cheerful under the most trying circumstances: he sails to America.

It’s easy to chuckle at Mark Tapley’s odd notion. But I think that many, if not all of us, secretly believe that unless we’re making ourselves miserable in some way, unless we’re dragging ourselves on our knees through the desert repenting, we’re not really doing as much good as we could. Letting the dandelions grow is surely not enough, I told myself. It’s time to make some sacrifices.

You could stop driving and ride a bike, suggested my husband. Several years ago now, alarmed by the science on climate change, he did just that: sold his car and bought a cargo bike. I’ll be honest, I resisted. I gave the time-honored excuses for not riding a bike: too dangerous, too much work, too much time, too much weather. Then it hit me that these were just the sort of sacrifices a really good person should make for a good cause. So I got a bike, rigged it up to transport kids and groceries, and have been using it as my primary mode of transportation ever since. Now, I won’t say I haven’t enjoyed the

occasional moment of self-righteousness. But here's what I quickly discovered, my guilty truth: cycling is fun. It's fun, like sledding or roller skating is fun. I arrive at my destination feeling exhilarated from the exercise. When I drive, I arrive at my destination feeling irritated, stressed, stiff and sluggish.

Often when I show up on a bike, especially if it's dark or cold or raining, people will say, "Good for you!" Like I've just donated a kidney or something. It makes me feel like an imposter, because secretly I know that I have sacrificed nothing, other than irritation, stress, and lethargy. What credit is there in that?

Just the other night, my 17-year-old was hanging out with friends when they decided to go get ice cream. One of his friends had forgotten his wallet. Liam, my son, offered to pay for the friend's ice cream. He offered several times, and each time the friend declined, apparently unwilling to go into debt, and instead helped himself to a cup of tap water. Liam reported that the first time he offered, it was purely out of altruism, to help out his friend. But as time went on, Liam discovered that it was really not much fun to eat ice cream while his friend drank water. What began as an altruistic urge soon morphed into a selfish one: won't you please allow me to buy you an ice cream, so that I can fully enjoy my own ice cream-eating experience?

There's a fine line between altruism and hedonism. Said no one ever, probably. But let's consider this. Let's entertain the possibility that many of our good and noble acts result in our own personal benefit. Is there even such a thing as a selfless act?

One day I was at the farmers market, waiting in line at the Pretzel shop. The woman in front of me had two small kids, one hanging on each arm. She placed an order, and managed to free her hands long enough to hand the pretzel seller her debit card. The pretzel seller explained regretfully that they couldn't take plastic, only cash. "Oh," said the mom, heavy with disappointment, looking down at the upturned faces of her tired and hungry kids. Oh, oh, I thought, now's my chance to do something nice for someone with no agenda! Pure self-sacrifice! But before I could open my mouth, the pretzel seller, also clearly a mother, said, "Don't worry about it, go ahead and take the pretzel." "Are you sure?" asked the mom. "Yeah, go ahead." The mom thanked her and gratefully left to go divide the pretzel between her kids.

Then it was my turn. I ordered my own pretzel, then asked to pay for whatever it was she had just given away to the mom for free. "Are you sure?" asked the pretzel seller. "Yes," I replied. "I insist." So she rang me up for the two pretzels. Then she insisted on giving me a pretzel second, one of the ones not quite pretty enough to sell, for free. So I ended up with a second perfectly good pretzel. In spite of my best efforts, my attempts at altruism were once again foiled.

Just recently, a friend was struggling to figure out how to get her kid from point A to point B while she herself was at work. "Yes! This is my chance!" I thought, and I offered to do the driving myself. My friend was embarrassingly grateful, and asked how she could pay me back. I told her she could drive my kid to soccer. She agreed. But then

the next day, she showed up with homemade chicken soup a bouquet of flowers! Once again, I tried to do something purely selfless, and I got paid back threefold! So much for my sainthood.

I have tried to do selfless things here at BUF. But I am constantly foiled. I agreed to join the ministerial search committee, a task which entailed having meetings every week for an entire year, including homework. Going into this I thought, oh yeah, there's a lot of credit here, I'm going to be storing up a lot of treasure in heaven with this one. Yes, it was a lot of time and work. But what did I get in exchange? Confidence in my skills, a deepened connection to our fellowship, and enduring friendships with people I respect no end. Also, we got Paul, whose wit, wisdom, and camaraderie have enhanced my life ever since.

I've volunteered in RE, I've served on multiple committees, I've cooked numerous meals for various events, and none of them can be called a sacrifice of any kind, because they have given me back far more than I ever put in, mainly in the form of lasting friendships. I have given money to BUF, and in exchange I have this building and this community. No matter what good I try to do, I am re-paid in unquantifiable ways. What credit is there in that?

Wouldn't it be nice if life always worked this way? But we know that's not always the case. We know that bad things happen to good people. And I imagine we're all familiar with the maxim that no good deed goes unpunished, as anyone knows who's

ever come to a committee meeting with a useful suggestion, and found themselves made chair of that committee. There is no absolute guarantee that because you are good to others, others will be good to you. There is no guarantee that if you buy one person a pretzel, you'll end up with two for yourself; no guarantee that the money that you give away will come back to you threefold. In fact, most likely it won't. Generosity doesn't usually come back at us, it ripples out away from us. Sometimes we see the tangible results, like when we donate money for an RE program, and we get to see a group of friendly, welcoming, confident young UUs perform for us during a Sunday service. Often, we never see the results of our generosity, we can only trust that it made a difference.

The quick among you are thinking, wait a minute here Roz, aren't you contradicting yourself? Here you've been complaining how hard it is to find good deeds to do that don't reward the doer, now you're saying that generosity ripples outwards, rather than bouncing back. Which is it? Well, that's a good question, and one that brings me back to those geese.

Geese migrating in flocks are one of the most beautiful sights in nature. And they don't fly in perfect straight lines. They meander, according to the air currents, and their needs for food and rest. Sometimes they even circle back, but they always get to where they're heading, eventually. As will this sermon.

Scottish writer and musician Karine Polwart picked migrating geese as a metaphor for human community in her musical essay “Wind Resistance.” In an interview with Fiona Ritchie, Polwart explained that she was inspired after learning why geese fly in that distinctive V formation. The geese arrange themselves so that each creates a pocket of wind resistance for the one behind it, minimizing the physical effort of this grueling migration. The lead goose takes the full force of the wind for the flock, but they take turns being that lead bird, so that no one goose gets burnt out. (This is why you were made committee chair that time, by the way.) Polwart describes this formation as creating “pockets of sanctuary for one another.” She says, “To me it was the most beautiful metaphor for creating refuge for one another. ... And it made me wonder, how are human beings like geese? What are the ways that we create sanctuary for one another?”

Geese do not agonize about being good. In fact, they can be downright naughty, just ask St. Werburgh. They don’t have law books or sacred texts telling them what to do, and I’m pretty sure they don’t feel guilt. And yet primal instinct guides them to live in such a way that caring for one another is second nature.

We humans, in contrast, are constantly striving to be good. We’ve built entire religions, not to mention complicated civic institutions, all to guide us down the straight and narrow. We tell stories, write books, teach classes, give sermons, all more or less on the importance of being good. And when we get things wrong, we have elevated guilt to

an art form. We are a species capable of feeling guilt when we put a banana peel into a bin marked “landfill” (or maybe that’s just me). Yet when it comes to taking care of one another, we are lagging behind the geese, as any installment of the evening news makes plain. People, we are lagging behind the geese.

We have forgotten what the geese understand instinctively, that their well-being is inextricably bound up with the well-being of the flock as a whole. We humans have strayed into an illusion of separateness. So many of us prefer to hoard what resources we have for our own personal use, rather than support institutions that serve us all. So many resent being asked to contribute to the collective good. They have forgotten how much they benefit from living in community with healthy, educated, informed people. There they are, eating their own ice cream, while their buddy sits there sipping water. How is this okay with them? How are they enjoying that ice cream? We’re so panicked over our personal survival that we have forgotten we’re part of a whole that ultimately will stand or fall together. We’ve been taught to think small, to think that security means accumulating a certain amount of money in our bank account. The geese understand that their safety depends on the health, strength, and vitality of their flock, and of the ecosystem that supports them.

Looking out for ourselves has become so normal to us, that when someone goes out of their way to help others, we see it as a heroic sacrifice. We make a saint out of them. Maybe we don’t need saints. Maybe what we need is to dispel the illusion of

separateness. We need to grasp that we are all, as Charles Dickens put it, fellow travelers to the grave. Should we flap in a panic on our own through stormy headwinds? Or should we travel together, taking turns to absorb the brunt of those winds, creating pockets of sanctuary for our fellow travelers as we go, and being sheltered by them in turn?

How do we do that? Here's a hint: Geese are not capitalists. I'm no zoologist, but I feel confident in that claim. Either you organize your social structure around the well-being of your flock, or around maximizing corporate profits. One or the other. If we want to live in a world where we collectively take care of one another, it's going to require major systemic change. I know that many of you are working on exactly that. (Hopefully backing off and allowing others to take your place now and then, so you can rest.)

In the meantime, in our daily lives, we can give away pretzels. We can feed the birds. We can desist from spraying our dandelions. We can join committees that are doing work that we appreciate. We can cook for and serve others. We can reduce our carbon footprint and work towards climate justice, for example by riding bikes instead of burning fossil fuels. (That was one of those self-righteous moments there.) We can treat one another with kindness. We can buy our friends ice cream when we're able, and when we forget our wallets, we can allow our friends to buy it for us. We can give our hard-earned money away. Not because we expect a return on investment, or even a

pretzel. And not because we're *selfless*, but because we're building the world we want to live in. Call it selfish, if that makes it sound more fun. I don't entirely believe in a tidy, transactional system of karma, but I do believe that the more we put out into the world, the better our own lives become.

We can nurture the pockets of sanctuary that we have right here in our communities. Maybe this building, this fellowship, is a pocket of sanctuary. What can we do to keep this place open – not just in the sense of keeping the lights on, but keeping it open to others, holding space for all those others who are not here today, but might blow in tomorrow, looking for a place to rest. If we could think of BUF as a pocket of sanctuary that we create and sustain for one another and for those yet to come, a place where we can rest and renew and recharge and reconnect while struggling through this strange and wonderful human migration to the grave that we call life – how might this affect the way we feel about this place? And coincidentally, how might it affect the smoothness of our upcoming annual canvass? (Did I mention that I'm on the stewardship committee? And yet, still no word of imminent sainthood.)

But seriously, there is one thing that we need above all else in our pockets of sanctuary, and that is not money. It is hope. Like Mark Tapley stranded in America, we are living in times where despair is so easy. In her Christmas Eve homily, Rev. Barbara Ten Hove said that, in spite of the rational evidence of her senses, she had hope, although she wasn't quite sure why. Well, how about this for a reason – the rest of us

need it. The flock needs it. No one can fly in the full force of despair day after day and keep going. We need pockets of hope to rest in. If you have hope, put it out there. If you have hope, pay it forward double, triple. If you have none, I hear you. Here – take mine. I’ve got it to spare. Hope and dandelions, man, I’ve got so much. Why? I don’t know, it’s my special talent, it’s my super power. Take some and pass it on. It costs me nothing to give it away. And still, though it’s no sacrifice, to have hope in these times is a holy act. Go on, try it. Store up some treasure in heaven. You’ll get a lot of credit.

We all need to put all the good things that we can – time, energy, love, compassion, money, hope – out there, where it’s needed. Not because we’re selfless or saintly or heroic, but simply because we grasp at an instinctive level that our welfare as individuals is inextricably bound up in our collective welfare. No, you don’t need to be good. You just need to recognize your place in the family of things.