

# Reciprocity and the Art of Being Human

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

March 3, 2024

People loved my giving sermon last year so much that some of you have been saying, “Just plug and play!” (Meaning, do it again.) I debated preaching that sermon from last year, but I knew it wouldn’t work this year. Maybe next year!

I do know you love to say, “*This is our church!*”, and I love to hear you say it. Come on, please join in. Whose church is this? *This is our church!*

The theme of this year’s giving campaign is “Strengthening Sacred Connections in Our Interconnected World.” Our goal is \$575,000. This campaign will fund the first half of our 300th anniversary year activities as well as many other exciting program initiatives and building preservation needs. It will also help to ensure that we are able to hire our assistant minister and fill other open staff positions. Please come back to the Sanctuary at noon to hear more about those changes or to ask questions.

I need to thank this year’s campaign leadership, including co-chairs Sue Creed and Ray Wilson; and members of the advisory team, including Tina Benik, Bart Bracken, Vern Ellis, Lark Madden, John Mercer, Susan Ricker, Forrest Speck, Jim Supple, and staff members Diane Carroll, Cynthia Walsh, and me. These folks, along with 42 stewards, are working hard to make this year’s campaign successful and a lot of fun. Won’t you join me in giving them a round of applause?

We want this campaign and its results to strengthen our sacred connections. It is so needed at this time in our world as we work to uphold democracy, offer spiritual worship services, community gatherings and programming, have wonderful and diverse music, and care for our children and youth.

I also must thank our staff team, those who are departing and those who are remaining: Diane Carroll, Mara Flynn, Julie Parker Amery, Justin Murphy-Mancini, Donny Rogers, Cynthia Walsh, and our volunteer affiliate ministers Reverends Stan Barrett and Jane Tuohy. Please join me in thanking our staff.

When I think about our theme, *Strengthening*

*Sacred Connections in Our Interconnected World*, I think about reciprocity. The Society for US Intellectual History blog defines reciprocity as “An alchemy of reciprocal gifting, in other words—you receive a gift, you’re grateful, and you give a gift, and that creates a bond.” The blog goes on to say that “Robin Wall Kimmerer...gives this a more systems science description: new arrangements are created, old ones transformed, by a joining of “obligate symbiosis.” (343)<sup>1</sup>

A healthy spiritual community or city or family or any relationship embodies reciprocity. We give to one another, and we receive from one another. We receive even as we give. Healthy and vibrant religious organizations are on the fast decline in our country. The statistics are sobering.

Fortunately, that is not true here, and that is because of you—because of us.

First Religious Society is the 23rd largest Unitarian Universalist congregation in the country and the second largest in New England. This is not to boast but to realize that what we are doing here matters. It matters for all of us, and for the larger community, and for our Unitarian Universalist faith. Now more than ever our country and our world need healthy examples of spiritual communities who care for each other and the world.

In December and January we held our congregational insight workshops. One hundred twenty-five people participated, including parents in Young Church, staff, young adults, and middle schoolers. The span of length of membership at FRS was well-represented, from attendees who are not yet members to those who have been here for many decades.

Altogether, 757 ideas were generated. Fifty-two percent of these ideas were related to Parish Hall,

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1 “An Alchemy of Giving: Reciprocity in Robin Wall Kimmerer’s Braiding Sweetgrass,” USIH Blog, July 29, 2022, <https://s-usih.org/2022/07/an-alchemy-of-gifting-reciprocity-in-robin-wall-kimmerers-braiding-sweetgrass/>

# Reciprocity and the Art of Being Human

March 3, 2024 page 2

communications and planning, worship, and social justice and inclusion. An additional 30 percent of ideas were related to program features, environmental impact activities, and adult and youth programming.

As I read all the data and the amazing analysis done by the lay leaders, there were several key takeaways: better member engagement with newer and older members and across generations; outreach to the unchurched (get to know them and draw them in); change up worship (more rituals, more sacred time, and also more social justice, but mostly change it up); diversify the music; include children more in worship and in all areas of church life and support their families/caregivers; engage with other churches; and use Parish Hall for the community at large as well as for our own uses and needs.

You can learn all about these findings and more, including next steps, during and after the worship service on April 7.

Last year, I talked about this being our church. I want to extend that idea this year.

This *is* our church. But the question is, who is "our"? Is it you and me? Is it those who are here and those who are not here? Is it young or old? Members of the LGBTQ+ community, spiritual seekers, or environmental activists? Is it people who are introverted or those who love having a good party?

My friends, it is all of the above. We know that and we're good at that. And there are other ways to understand how this is our church, and who "our" is.

When I first came here, you told me you wanted a community minister. You didn't just want a community minister to look good. You wanted a minister who was part of the community because we are part of the community.

As we started our journey, our "hike," as John Mercer writes so eloquently, I wondered what we might grow into together. Growth is about so much more than numbers; it's about depth and breadth.

FRS is so much more than a place where

people go to worship or even learn. We are a beacon of liberal religion and a moral compass in this community, and our neighbors and area organizations confirm that.

We hold memorial services for community members, many of whom have lived or worked here for decades, though they may not be members of the church.

Belonging here and FRS being someone's church is more than the status of membership, or when a person last pledged, though those are important too, of course.

I want to share two stories about how we are a community church, and how the "our" is so much larger than those of us who sit here.

One day only a few months after my arrival, a gentleman called to schedule an appointment. He was sick and was looking for pastoral counseling.

On the day of our appointment, he walked into my office, sat down, and shared his cancer diagnosis and how it was still so hard to believe. His adult children had stepped up and were ensuring that all his needs were met. He then shared how FRS had always been his church. He and his wife had raised their children here, and then life got busy after they went off to college, and, you know...

He talked about his memorial service, what he wanted and how he couldn't imagine it being anywhere but here. He then shared his life story with me because he wanted me to know him before I officiated his service. We had a warm and heartrending conversation that lasted a couple of hours.

This person knew that FRS was his church even though he had not attended for decades. It was where he belonged and where he wanted friends and family to gather to celebrate his life.

It soon became clear that this was true for many people. I suppose one could hold a grudge in situations like this: "Where have you been!?" But then, I look at the person, consider their life circumstances, open my heart, and know that this is their church too.

Belonging is a matter of the heart as much as

# Reciprocity and the Art of Being Human

March 3, 2024 *page 3*

anything else. When a person says this is their church, I believe them.

My second story is from Jane Tuohy, one of our volunteer affiliate ministers. I share this with her permission.

Reverend Jane serves as a volunteer chaplain at Anna Jaques Hospital. One day not too long ago as she was making her rounds visiting people who were sick or dying, a nurse came up to Rev. Jane and asked if she would be willing to say a prayer with a patient who was asking for a chaplain.

Rev. Jane replied, "Yes, of course." As she approached the room, another nurse on the floor alerted her that this patient was constrained to their bed. She didn't want Rev. Jane to be surprised.

Rev. Jane entered the hospital room to find two police officers guarding the door. She began to speak to the man in the bed, whose arms were shackled. He explained that he hadn't seen his wife or children for years and he wasn't sure he would see them again before he died. He was returning to prison soon.

He asked Rev. Jane if she would pray with him. Rev. Jane turned the police officers and said, "Officers, we are about to pray. You can either join us or be quiet." After the prayers, the patient asked Rev. Jane what church she was from. She explained that she was with the First Religious Society in Newburyport, the big white church on Pleasant Street.

The patient's eyes lit up. He leaned forward as much as he could and said, "That's my church!" She smiled and he continued. "Yes, I used to go to recovery meetings there every week."

*This is our church.*

Our campaign this year is \$575,000, a five percent increase over last year's goal. We've had people die, and others move away. Other people's life circumstances have changed. I ask you from the bottom of my heart to consider your gift and see if you might give just a little more than last time or maybe give for the first time.

Every dollar counts, and I mean that. Five dollars counts, so does \$500, and \$5,000 is... even

better.

If a financial gift is simply not possible but you want your name among the supporters, just let me know quietly and I will make that pledge for you from my minister's discretionary fund. You belong. You all belong. Membership is not a prerequisite for giving!

We can reach this goal if each of us does what we genuinely can. I'm asking for your help. I can't do this alone. We need a strong and appropriately-sized staff, and I need you to give of your time, talent, and money.

Join me in caring for our church. We are the lucky ones. We have both the privilege and responsibility to care for this beautiful space and our sacred connections so that our doors may be open to everyone who seeks a welcome and safe place. We are doing what we can, strengthening sacred connections in our interconnected world, together.