

Generosity Reveals Your True Identity – Rev. Doug McCusker

In his book, *The Delphic Boat: What Genomes Tell Us*, genetic scientist Antoine Danchin reflects on an age-old riddle of the Oracle at Delphi – if you consider a boat made of planks, what is it that makes the boat a boat?

“The question,” Danchin says “is more than just a mind game: As time passes, some of the planks begin to rot and have to be replaced. There comes a time when not one of the original planks is left. The boat still looks like the original one, but in material terms it has changed. Is it still the same boat?”

To the owner of that time-tested vessel, the one who has taken it out again and again and hauled in the catch over decades of work, the answer is an unequivocal “yes.” “Yes, that’s my boat, the fisherman might say. It’s been my boat for as long as I can remember.”

Which means that the substance of that boat is more than just the planks that make it up – it’s the relationships between the planks and not only the one’s currently nailed together, but the ones that once stood in their place. The object is defined not by the stuff of it, but by its relationships.

So, too with ourselves. What is it that makes you, you? What is it that makes me, me? Like the Delphic boat, everything we physically are, changes as we shed layers of skin, replace cells, and leave bits of our being along our path like calling cards. And yet we are the sum of something greater – namely, our relationships. We are part of the family of things and thus exist in a constantly expanding network of interconnection.

When people become members of our Fellowship, we hold a short ceremony to honor the commitment that they are making. Before they sign the book, we light a chalice, and I say a few words that include this passage:

“Inevitably in our lives we commit ourselves to something whether worthy or not. The direction and intensity of our loyalties give shape and meaning to our lives. Loyalties, commitments, covenants, the promises we make to one another; these are the things that relate to the deepest meanings of membership. They tell us what we belong to. And by doing that they tell us who we are.”

When we commit to this community, we acknowledge that we are both the planks of this boat, and we are the boat. Only one or two of the original planks of this boat remain. And yet the boat is still intact. It started out as a dinghy and now it is morphing into a sleek sailboat. The true essence of the boat remains in the relationships of all us planks.

And what is relationship, if it isn’t giving and receiving? They are the yin and the yang of relationship. Nothing exists without being part of something in which it both gives and receives. Everything is part of the constantly expanding network of life. Life itself is a giving and receiving. Together, they are the breath of life; the inhale and the exhale.

Imagine if you could see the network of life like a web of threads. And imagine if you could color code the network somehow so you could see the places where you interface with others. Bits of you would be concentrated in some places and then in others you would be spread out far and wide. Every interface would be a connection where something of you is given and something of someone else is received. Now

imagine this Fellowship as the mosaic of colors representing all our interfaces with each other. Wouldn't that be a beautiful piece of art?

Well here we are, interfacing right now. Ever since we rang that bowl about 45 minutes ago, we've been interfacing, lighting up that beautiful mosaic. Some of our interfaces are obvious, like me talking right now, or Mikey getting his emblem earlier. But there have been lots of subtle ways that we have given and received, such as every time you applauded something. It was in recognition of something you received. Or the smiles that I am looking at right now. The money you all placed in the basket was a giving, and I received it on behalf of all of us. Your very presence here is a generous gift and you have no idea how it is being received.

Let me bring it down to something more concrete. Several months ago, our Stewardship Council, asked everyone to fill out an on-line survey so we could develop a Time and Talent database. It took a while to complete because it asked lots of questions about your interests, talents, and things that you would like to do here at the Fellowship. We received over 100 responses. That is phenomenal. It's one of the coolest things I've ever seen as a member of a religious community.

We listed all sorts of political, spiritual and cultural topics and numerous volunteer opportunities that comprise the ministries of this Fellowship. We asked you all to check the ones you are interested in.

Think about it, over 100 people were willing to share that information about themselves through a survey. That was faith, trust and commitment all rolled into one. I want to thank everyone of you who contributed to this monumental task of populating a database of the things that we are interested in and what we are willing to do.

I'm sure many of you blew it off. Some were quote-unquote "too busy". And some of you weren't willing to give that information to the Fellowship. Whatever your reasons for filling it out or not, we now have an invaluable knowledge base of what makes a large segment of our congregation tick. And now we can provide things that speak to our collective intellectual, philosophical and spiritual interests.

Check out our Mission Statement. We did exactly what our mission calls us to do: "foster a welcoming and intentionally diverse community of those who seek philosophical, spiritual, intellectual or religious growth in a forum of mutual respect." How else can we do that, if we don't know what your needs are?

If you missed out on the survey, don't worry. We have paper copies in the foyer. It is never too late to tell us what would help you in your intellectual and spiritual growth.

We just completed the first version of the database, and already people have been contacted about serving this community in precisely the ways that brings fulfillment to their lives. I am starting up a prison ministry at the State Prison near Culpeper. I now know who wants to do that. I don't have to beg, or cajole anyone.

When you fill out a survey like that, knowing full well that someone is going to take you up on your responses, you are being generous. And that generosity is both a giving and a receiving. Because, when you give of yourself, you are opening that interface for something to come the other way, right into your heart. Now, we have the delightful problem of finding enough outlets for us all to serve in the ways that we want.

Maybe you are sensing my excitement, but I can't overstate how incredibly generous you all are. Friday night, 25 people showed up to talk about how they are willing to get involved in social justice after being inspired by the Women's March on

Washington. Most of these folks had never done a social justice action before. But now, they are ready to get out there and change the world.

Do you know what it looks like when people are on fire? Yeah, you do, because this Fellowship is on fire. We are each finding our groove that makes us grow. In turn, the Fellowship is growing. We just reported the latest figures to the Unitarian Universalist Association for the last year. We grew by 22 members. That's a 14% growth rate. Not too shabby. Our Religious Education enrollment went up 11%. And we're not just showing up, we have been backing up that energy with real money. Serious money. Our donor base shot up 15% last year. We went from 109 people who pledged their contributions to 125 in one year. Since 2014, our average pledge contribution has increased 26%. I'm telling you, this place is on fire.

All this generosity is revealing our true identity. We are a caring, compassionate community that is ready to deploy wherever we are needed. We understand that we are all interdependent on each other. We all succeed when we give of ourselves. Our relationships are our most precious commodity. We have demonstrated that we are willing to invest our time, talent and treasure to build on those relationships.

Specifically, we are investing in our ministries – the things we do to serve the world. We recently looked at all the things we spend money on here, and built what we call a program budget. We grouped everything into 5 ministries; 5 pillars that hold up this community: 1) Worship Experience, like we are doing right now; 2) Faith Development, like our children are doing right now; 3) Outreach, which those twenty-five people committed to on Friday; 4) Fellowship Community, which we will do right after the service over coffee and cake; and 5) Infrastructure so we have a place to meet, worship and grow.

I was amazed at how evenly our expenditures are over each of these ministries. All those volunteer opportunities that you all committed to fall into those 5 ministries also.

Today is the official kickoff of our Stewardship Campaign, as Kit told us about earlier. This is the time of year, when we renew our commitment to the ministries of this Fellowship. We contribute throughout the year, but this is when we make promises to one another. When we relate our livelihood to the deepest meanings of our connection to one another. These pledges of financial support tell us what we belong to. And by doing that they tell us who we are.

Your investments in time, talent and treasure are what's fueling this fire we are experiencing. In the next couple of weeks, we will be asking everyone to reflect deeply on how we would like to channel the growth in our ministries over the next 5 years. Our Board of Trustees, has laid out a budget for next year that capitalizes on our current growth. They are asking all of us to seriously consider raising our financial pledges by 10% in the next year. I turned in my pledge on Thursday, and I raised my pledge by 10%. You pay me, and I'm giving you back 10% more than I did last year. What a deal!

Giving and receiving is a circle of our faith in this community. We can never put a dollar amount on the value of this Fellowship. The substance of our boat, that we identify as our spiritual home, is more than just the planks it's made of. It's the relationships between the planks that identifies us. Now is your chance to commit to doing everything in your power to make those relationships priceless. May it be so!