

## TO SAVE OR TO SAVOR?

**A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper**

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Let me begin with a confession about holidays. My favorite holidays are Halloween and Thanksgiving. My least favorite holiday is New Year. Let me tell you why. First, New Year's Day has been **misscheduled**. As far as I know, the choice of the date for beginning a new calendar year is arbitrary. Apparently, it was the Scottish who originally chose January 1<sup>st</sup> as the date. Who else would choose the coldest, darkest, gloomiest part of the year to mark the occasion? I suspect they did so in order to use it as still another opportunity to get drunk and feel sorry for themselves. Why not schedule the start of the new year in the springtime, when new life is returning to the earth and the signs of new beginnings are everywhere?

New Year's is also a time of contradictions. After a night filled with revelry and induced good cheer, we are also expected to make resolutions for self-improvement during the coming year. We vow to eat and drink less right having done both to excess. We vow to exercise more right when weather conditions are least favorable for outdoor activity. We vow to spend less time at work right when we are confronted with a heavy post-holiday workload. No wonder so many of us get depressed at this time of year! I believe that there is too much emphasis on **self** in our observance of the New Year: **self-reproach** for bad habits and past mistakes combined with often unrealistic plans for **self-improvement**. If New Year's is to have some redeeming value, let it be an opportunity for re-evaluating our relationships. Let it become an occasion for re-defining the relationship between **self and others**, in both general and specific ways. What many of us are seeking at this time of year is a renewed sense of **wholeness** in our lives that unites a sense of self-worth with affirmation of the worth of other people.

One of my most admired colleagues is **Richard Gilbert**, who served as minister of the UU church in Rochester for more than 30 years and authored several thought-provoking books about Unitarian Universalism, which are listed on the back of today's order of service. Throughout his career, Dick Gilbert's main concern has been the **ethical implications** of our faith tradition, which is founded on maintaining a balance between individual freedom and concern for others. The precarious balance between attention to self and sensitivity to others is expressed in one of the selections from Dick Gilbert's book of meditations:

I rise in the morning torn between the desire to save the world or to savor it—  
To serve life or to enjoy it;  
To savor the sweet taste of my own joy or to share the bitter cup of my neighbor;  
To celebrate life with exuberant step or to struggle for the life of the heavy laden.  
What am I to do when the guilt at my bounty clouds the sky of my vision;  
When the glow which lights my every day illumines the hurting world around me?  
To savor the world or to save it?  
God of justice, if such there be, take from me the burden of my question.  
Let me praise my plenitude without limit; let me cast from my eyes all troubled folk!

No, you will not let me be. You will not stop my ears to the cries of the hurt and the hungry;  
You will not close my eyes to the sight of the afflicted.  
What is that you say? To save, one must serve? To savor, one must save?  
The one will not stand without the other?  
Forgive me—in my preoccupation with myself, in my concern for my own life I had forgotten.  
Forgive me, God of justice, forgive me, and make me whole.

[Richard S. Gilbert, *In the Holy Quiet of this Hour*, pp. 28-29]

The path to wholeness in our lives that we seek at the turn of a new year can be found in crossing the boundaries that separate self from others. For many of us, those boundaries are thick. Recently, there has been some intriguing neurological research indicating how the sense of self is hard-wired in our brains. This research also suggests that deeply spiritual experiences are accompanied by a sense of **selflessness**—an awareness of profound unity that transcends our “default setting” of separateness. For mystics, these experiences of unity are not unusual. But for the rest of us, they are unique and transitory. These experiences of wholeness and unity can be achieved not only through meditation but through acts of service to others. In their book *How Can I Help?* Ram Dass and Paul Gorman offer numerous personal accounts of how helping others can lead to a lasting sense of wholeness and unity.

Common to all those habits which hinder us is a sense of separateness; we are divided within ourselves and cut off from others. Common to all those moments and actions which seem to help, however, is the experience of unity; the mind and heart work in harmony, and barriers between us dissolve. Separateness and unity. How interesting that these root causes, revealed in the experience of helping, turn out to be what most spiritual traditions define as the fundamental issue of life itself. Awakening from our sense of separateness is what we are called to do in all things, not merely in service. . . . Service, from this perspective, is part of that journey. It is no longer an end in itself. It is a vehicle through which we reach a deeper understanding of life. Each step we take, each moment in which we grow toward a greater understanding of unity steadily transforms us into instruments of that help which truly heals. [*How Can I Help?* pp. 223-24]

What are some of the ways that we can embody the sense of unity and wholeness in our lives? One of the ways is through **random acts of kindness toward strangers**. In the climate of fear that has engulfed our nation since 9/11, it is deeply regrettable that our default attitude toward those who are different from us is one of mistrust. Just this past week a group of Muslim passengers were evicted from a commercial airline flight after another passenger overheard some of them making comments about their seating location—comments that would have been ignored coming from anyone who did not appear to be Muslim. Fortunately, there are inspiring stories about people who have been willing to cross boundaries. Here is one such story:

[Insert here: “Wandering Around an Albuquerque Airport Terminal,” by Naomi Shihab Nye.]

Another way to cross boundaries is through acts of generosity. A few weeks ago I read a letter from a single mother faced with numerous hardships as she approached Christmas. Her

story epitomized the plight of thousands of our fellow citizens whose lives have been overturned by our current economic troubles. Our congregation responded with an incredible outpouring of support for the Children's Christmas Party sponsored by the Staunton Rotary Club. Throughout our history this Fellowship has been unusually generous in offering financial support to worthy charities through our monthly special collections. These expressions of **indirect** help extend our spirit of caring beyond the boundaries of our Fellowship.

What about more **direct** forms of community service, in which we offer hands-on service to others in need? Several of our members have been actively involved as individuals in volunteer direct-service activities such as tutoring Spanish-speaking children, rescue services for animals, working in hospitals and schools, and the like. Our members have also engaged in group projects such as rehabilitating substandard homes, organizing a Red Cross blood drive, and preparing meals for Free Clinic volunteers. I think this is one type of service where we can do even more. We have a talented pool of skilled building craftsmen, as evidenced by the interior finishing work for our recent Fellowship Hall project, which gave us this beautifully remodeled building and saved tens of thousands of dollars in construction expenses. Now I want to challenge the members of our newly formed men's group to come up with a community service project that will extend their talents beyond our Fellowship into the local community.

To savor or to save? Fortunately, we **don't** have to choose one or the other. Think about the times when you have felt like you were part of something larger than yourself. I imagine that they include experiences when you reached across the boundary between self and others through kindness, generosity, or helpfulness. These are moments we can truly savor. And so my New Year's wish is that the coming year will be filled with new opportunities for savoring life through service to others. In the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke,

As once the winged energy of delight carried you over childhood's dark abysses,  
Now beyond your own life build the great arch of unimagined bridges.  
Come to think of it, this is more than a wish. It is a New Year's resolution.