

The Power of Presence

STORY FOR ALL AGES



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A Riddle for Ralph Waldo Emerson: **Give Love**

BY DENISE TRACY

“What do you want for Christmas?” the father asked his daughter. Ellen wrinkled her nose and scrunched her eyes and thought. “Daddy, I have to think. I want this year to be a special year, a year to remember.”

“All right. You think and let me know.”

Each day her father asked her, “Ellen, do you know what you want for Christmas yet?”

And Ellen would shake her head. “No, Father, I’m still thinking.”

After four days her father said, “Ellen?”

“Yes, Father, I’ve decided.”

“Well?”

“I have a riddle. It will tell you what gift I want for Christmas. The riddle is this: You cannot buy it, for it is worth all the money you have, but only you can give it.”



“I need to repeat this riddle because it will tell me what gift you want for Christmas—I cannot buy it, because it is worth all the money I have, but only I can give it. Is that right?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Well, now it is my turn to think about your riddle. I have to find the perfect present in the mystery.” Her father paced and pondered. He repeated the riddle over and over: “I cannot buy it, but only I can give it.” He paced and pondered. Finally, he smiled, “I know

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The Family pages are adapted from Tapestry of Faith lifespan faith development programs.

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what it is! I know what it is!" Now he had to think how to give it.

Under the Christmas tree there was no present from her father. Ellen didn't expect one. After the presents were opened, Ellen's father said, "It is now time for Ellen's present from me. Ellen, come and sit with me."

So Ellen climbed into the armchair and sat on her father's lap. "My present to you is very special. I hope it is what you wanted—for it is not a book, or a toy, or clothes, but instead it is a present that is for all seasons and for each day. This year your Christmas present from me is that we will spend time together every week, just the two of us. For you are my very special daughter, and I love you dearly."

Ellen hugged her father. "Oh, Daddy, I knew you would figure out the riddle."

Her father said, "It took me a long time to figure out the answer, but when I did I knew what gift you wanted. The answer was simple—give yourself."

"Oh, Father, I wanted a gift to make this year special. Time together with you will make this year the very best year of my life!"

Ellen looked into her father's eyes. "Why, Father, you are crying!"

"Yes. You teach me more than any book I've ever read or written. By giving you time, I will gain more than I give."

In his essay on giving, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Give yourself." For he had learned the gift of giving from his daughter, Ellen Tucker Emerson. ❀

Whether we are old, or young, or in-between, the power of

EXPLORING TOGETHER

WITNESS

Unitarian Universalists stand on the side of love through actions of quiet witness that say: **I SEE YOU. I STAND WITH YOU. I AM HERE FOR YOU.**

- Multigenerational members of the First Unitarian Church of **Orlando, Florida**, joined an informational picket with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), to convince a supermarket chain to pay one penny more per pound of tomatoes to support fair wages and safe working conditions for farm workers.
- Ninety UUs of all ages from **Milton, Massachusetts**, walked alongside families who have lost members to violence in Boston neighborhoods, joining the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute Mother's Day walk.
- Youth of the UU Congregation of Minnetonka in **Wayzata, Minnesota**, traveled to their state capital to witness with a Faith Rally for Marriage Equality and hand-deliver personal Valentines from their congregation to legislators.
- Unitarian Universalists in **Ventura, California**, created an organization, Lift Up Your Voice, to eliminate homelessness. Each year they read aloud the names of people who have died homeless, at an annual memorial service.

What issues concern you and your family?

Where do you notice others experiencing pain, loss, or injustice?

Where can you bring the power of your presence to bear witness?



Massachusetts



Minnesota



Florida

Photos courtesy (from left): First Parish in Milton, Unitarian Universalist; Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka; and John Hartgering, First Unitarian Church of Orlando.

A Time-Honoring Tradition: Time Coupons

Begin a family ritual. Exchange "time coupons" that entitle the recipient to a half hour of the donor's time to be spent as the recipient wishes. Choose activities where the focus is on the time, not the money, you spend: planting flowers, taking a walk, writing and drawing a book together, going to a playground, listening to music, or cooking a meal. Teach a child how to play your favorite game. Or, ask a child to teach you one of theirs.



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I Wonder... What Gifts Can I Put in the Wonder Box? What's Inside for Me?



Does your home need a Wonder Box? A gift box with “nothing” in it can remind family members of the intangible gifts you share in your home, such as caring, patience, and simply being there for one another.

Make a Wonder Box. ■ Use a box with a bottom and a separate lid.

■ Cover the box and the lid with solid color paper, then decorate both pieces with markers, paint, fun stickers, ribbons, glitter—whatever you like.

Create a family ritual. ■ Pass the Wonder Box around, inviting each person to name an intangible gift they offer the person to whom they pass the box.

■ Then, go around in the other direction. ■ Make intangible gifts concrete with examples: What action shows love? Kindness? Respect? Keep the Wonder Box on display and repeat your ritual as needed—the gift that keeps on giving.

Giving Time

Show children how their presence can be a gift. Encourage them to offer their time to a younger or a much older person. Help a child plan what they will do with the time. Let the child make the invitation—it’s part of the gift.

A CHILD CAN:

■ Intentionally share, inviting someone to join them in play with their toys, arts and crafts materials, or even a friendly pet.

■ Read to a child who cannot read yet, or to an elder who enjoys being read to. A pre-reader can show a picture book to someone else.

■ Be a listener! Ask an older person who could use some company to tell them a story or teach them a skill.

■ Be a helper! Walk a dog, shovel steps, or water plants at home or for a neighbor.

AS A FAMILY:

■ Visit a relative or friend who could use some company.

■ Visit someone who has experienced a loss—not just immediately after the loss, but some time afterward. It is common to contact someone after a death or other loss, but it is a special gift to be present in the months that follow.

REFLECT AFTERWARD:

■ How did you like giving your time?

■ Do you think this person enjoyed your gift? How do you know?

■ What is different about giving an object and giving time?



Time for Adventure



Schedule time with your child to do something they love to do that does not cost money.

■ **Follow their lead** on an adventure in the mud, in the woods, in the gym.

■ **Be willing, open, and nonjudgmental** so you can give your time and join them in their interests.

Tell Your “Give Love” Story

Children can interview family members and friends about special times when someone spent time with them.

Scrapbooking can be a way for older relatives, family friends, and uncles, aunts, and cousins to enjoy and document quality time.

Find a wall you can paint with handprints, and keep a few bright colors of paint nearby. Invite visitors to dip a palm and make a mark on the wall, to show you value their presence in your home.



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PARENT REFLECTION

The Power of Presence

We tend to think of expressing power in terms of “doing,” that is, leading, organizing, acting, speaking out. Yet sometimes we express our power most effectively through simply being present and bearing witness.

Find a place to be quiet with your thoughts. Close your eyes and breathe deeply for about five minutes, perhaps repeating a word or phrase to separate yourself from the activities of the day. When you feel settled and relaxed, consider:

- Can you think of a time when someone’s silent presence has made a difference in your life?
- Can you think of a time when your own silent presence has made a difference to someone else?
- What does it feel like when someone is truly present to you? What does it look like? What do they do? What do they not do?
- How completely present are you to your children? Your spouse or partner? Your friends? Your co-workers? People you disagree with?
- In what situations do you aspire to be more fully present to others?

“Presents” to Give Yourself

The power of presence is not only something to give others; it is also something we can give ourselves. Many worship and spiritual practices are ways to gather our own presence. Yoga, journaling, gardening, meditation, swimming, and prayerful singing can bring us home to ourselves. Commit to a practice. The more you are present to yourself, the more you may discover you have abundant presence to share.

While you practice the creative art you have chosen as your meditation, try not to be concerned with how much you have accomplished or how much there is to be done. Stay in the moment of creation—let it fill you and feed you.

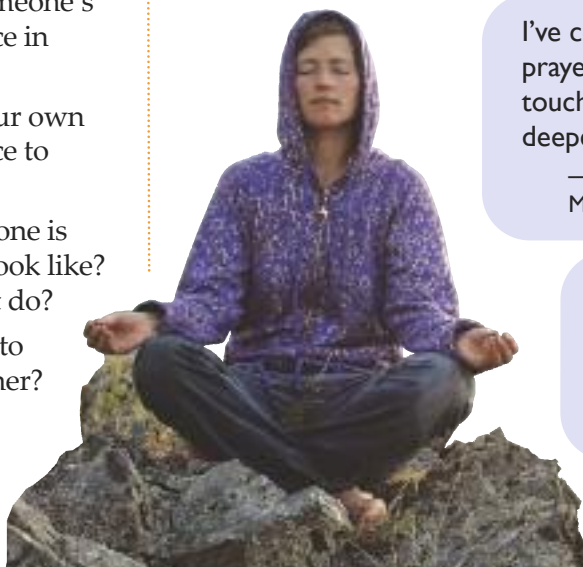
—L. Annie Foerster, “Meditation by Hand”

I’ve come to think that prayer is simply being in touch with the most honest, deepest, desires of the heart.

—Arvid Straube, “A Spiritual Maintenance Schedule”

Our inner landscape is more lush when we are more aware.

—James Austin, “Mindfulness”



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Quotations from essays in *Everyday Spiritual Practice* (Skinner House).

We convince by
our presence.

— Walt Whitman

FAMILIES:

WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH

Provided by the Ministries and Faith Development staff group of the Unitarian Universalist Association

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FIND OUT MORE

The story “Give Love” is adapted with permission from the version by the Rev. Denise Tracy in her collection *Stream of Living Souls*, available by writing to Tracy at 535 Arlington Ave., Elgin, IL, 60120.

Living Simply with Children: A Voluntary Simplicity Guide for Moms, Dads and Kids Who Want to Reclaim the Bliss of Childhood and the Joy of Parenting by Marie Sherlock gives advice on how to slow down and enjoy quality time together with your children. Other books with ideas for spending time with your children include the *Williamson Kids Can!* series.

Look online for guidance, inspiration, and local opportunities for witness action. The UUA website’s WorshipWeb offers a worship service by the Rev. Darcey Elizabeth Heggvik Laine, a response to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Find inspiration and local opportunities for witness on the Standing on the Side of Love website, www.standingonthesideoflove.org, on www.uua.org, and on your UUA district website.

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