

Homework: Service

Service seems like a basic, simple concept—we help someone or some group. But it is actually quite complex spiritually, emotionally, and culturally—for both the server and those being served. Just think of all the meanings around the word “servant” and you begin to sense the larger issues.

Doing for others. Giving back. Altruism. Self-sacrifice. Giving rather than receiving. Responsibility. Duty. Gift. Guilt. Helping hands. “Other” focused. Unselfish. The list of thoughts, feelings, and states of being goes on and on when you try to describe what it means to “serve” others. Our UU principles proclaim the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and call for justice, equity, and compassion in human relationships. Our own congregational covenant promises that we will strive together toward these principles through worship, study, and service.

Without deep reflection one knows from daily life that one exists for other people, and only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.

—Albert Einstein

There is nothing to make you like other human beings so much as doing things for them.

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

[The] notion of “servant leadership” was made popular by the management consultant, Robert Greenleaf. He was especially inspired by Herman Hesse’s novel, *The Journey to the East*, which depicts a mythical pilgrimage undertaken by a group of spiritual adventurers. The main character in the novel is a man named Leo, who accompanies the group, humbly performing menial tasks and sustaining them with his spirit and his song. All goes well until Leo mysteriously disappears one night. Without his quiet guiding presence, the group quickly dissolves into chaos, and the expedition comes to an end. Later on, members of the group discover that the man they had treated as a mere servant was, in fact, the powerful head of the organization that had sponsored their trip. The one who served had been their leader all along.

—Rev. Bruce Johnson

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

—Mahatma Ghandi

Joy can be real only if people look upon their lives as a service and have a definite object in life outside themselves and their personal happiness.

—Leo Tolstoy

We work on ourselves in order to help others, but also we help others in order to work on ourselves.

—Pema Chödrön

Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time, and always start with the person nearest you.

—Mother Teresa

We are in this world to make it better, to lift it to a higher level of enjoyment and progress, and there is indeed a certain amount of responsibility resting upon each one of us from the least to the greatest.

—Florence Spearing Randolph

Questions to Ponder

- When in your life have you felt served? What was the service and what did it feel like?
- Think about times in your life when you have served others. Consider the pleasure you received in pleasing or helping others. When did you do something good in order to avoid having a bad feeling, or so others wouldn't think badly of you?
- Do you believe there's such a thing as "pure" motivation? Give an example.
- Sometimes people resent being helped. When has someone resented your help? When have you resented someone's attempt to help you?
- In the UU tradition, there is no authority telling us that we must be charitable "or else." So why is service so important to UUs?