

A GIVING PLACE  
A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton  
All Souls, New York City  
November 23, 2025

As we allow the echoes of the choral Amen to settle and sink in, we know why we showed up this morning. We're held here in this place of refuge.

We're held by the resonant music of composers Durufle, Bruckner, and Brahms, by the organ mingled with the voices of our superb choir. We're held here by the architectural majesty of this pristine cocoon, the plaques reminding us of our history and the windows properly floating above our heads, proffering leaves, light and sky. We're held by Michael's Opening Words and his story of formation in Unitarian Universalism and the enduring influence of his mom, by Laura's reading of thanks for the wonders of New York City, by singing together, by praying and meditating together.

We have this refuge in which we share our experience and support each other just by showing up. Sharon Brous writes in *The Amen Effect*: "By repairing and rebuilding our own hearts, one by one by one, by taking the time needed to slowly knit ourselves back together, we begin the process of healing the overculture."

We heal, quietly, maybe even unknowingly, and we recognize that we are connecting with the others who are here—subtly or not so subtly. We develop the wish to comfort each other, to be curious, to connect. The wish may stay concealed in our hearts or it may manifest in smiles and greetings.

And we're held here by an ineffable bond that Sharon Brous refers to as the amen effect. She writes: "That very human longing for connection—in our most intimate relationships, in community, with strangers, perhaps with God—is what I call the amen effect. It is a spiritual strategy, a sacred call to the faithful and the cynical, the believer and the atheist, perhaps especially those alienated by religious certainties, but still yearning to find meaning in moments both sacred and mundane. It is rooted in an ancient hard-won wisdom that offers us tools to navigate times of heartache and uncertainty with a deeper sense of meaning, direction, and connection."

This experience of the amen effect in a place of refuge together, expresses the mission of All Souls: “We are an open and welcoming religious community that nurtures possibilities and builds connections to forge redemptive change in ourselves, our city, and our world.” As Unitarian Universalists, we don’t need to look beyond this life for a force that sustains us, we are focusing on what we can do in this fleeting time here and now. Our time in a state of refuge here in this community—and wherever else you find peace—is essential to the well being of our city and our world. Here we cultivate gratitude for this day we are given. And thus we cultivate generosity which is an experience of both giving and receiving. Generosity liberates us from feeling separate and brings us a sense of feeling closer to our fellow beings. Even if you are in pain today and your heart is heavy, this beckoning to connection can provoke generosity.

When generosity impulses well up in our hearts, impulses that have great potential for transformation, they manifest in all sorts of beneficial interchanges. As I make my way around this city, there are countless invitations to the generosity of truly seeing my fellow New Yorkers. I can sense my urge to snag a seat on the subway and holding back so someone else can take it. I can sense my speedy transactional self tapping my credit card in exchange for a smoothie or a Reeses and then pausing to smile and ask the cashier a friendly question. When I ask a security guard for directions, instead of treating them like a map that speaks, I start with “Good morning, How are you?” This is on a good day when I’m not tired, distracted, or in a rush, and the weather is pleasant and I’m wearing sensible shoes so my feet don’t hurt. On a not so good day, I might hypothetically grumble at a neighbor in front of me in the lobby who missed the elevator and delayed me by 30 seconds. Not so generous. Sorry, Mary.

There are counterintuitive ways to be generous. A few weeks ago I was walking briskly, on a side street in the rain, running late for a meeting, when a woman ran up beside me and asked if she could share my umbrella. It was a small New York City wind beaten umbrella already meager in its protection. She pressed up next to me and told me she knew it would be raining but she never brings an umbrella because she always ends up leaving it on the train. She was unfamiliar with the neighborhood and asked me to point her to the nearest subway station. In our two block walk we exchanged names and a little about ourselves, and then she disappeared

down the stairs to the 6 train. In decades of living here, a stranger has never asked to share my umbrella. I'll never forget our vignette, her unintentional gift (or maybe not) in making her way around New York depending on those of us who do remember umbrellas.

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As A. Powell Davies wrote in our Chalice Lighting, "I come to church—and would whether I was a preacher or not—because I fall below my own standards and need to be constantly brought back to them. I am afraid of becoming selfish and indulgent, and my church—my church of the free spirit—brings me back to what I want to be." This place of refuge gives us the opportunity to rest our minds and let the voice of generosity prevail more often.

When I first started coming to church here 30 years ago, long before I started a career in ministry, I was seeking the tools "to bring me back to what I wanted to be." For a long time my sporadic Sundays here were the entirety of my spiritual practice. And slowly but surely I came more often and I deepened my connection. The offerings of Sunday Worship led me to consult our Senior Minister Forrest Church for spiritual care which led him to invite me to volunteer on the Lifelines Planning Committee. And then I made a friend. And I was invited to give Opening Words, and I was a Kindergarten Religious Education volunteer, and...eventually the giving and receiving of connection here were fundamental to my well being.

So I got a little carried away and landed in the pulpit. This is not what I had in mind. It is one huge surprise to me. I did not see myself as doing public speaking, much less preaching. While in seminary, I took alternatives to the preaching classes because I wanted to be a hospice chaplain, and I "knew" I wouldn't be a congregational minister. But with our recent Senior Minister Galen Guengerich's encouragement and with yours, I took on the challenge. I came to understand what an extraordinary institution this is and I came to know your stories and your own wishes to transform your lives and the world around you.

And preaching wasn't the only class I circumvented, there was also "Fundraising Fundamentals for Faith Leaders." That was the last class on earth I thought I'd need. And for my first ten years in ministry here, I saw myself purely as a spiritual care provider, offering comfort and inviting

spiritual growth. I thought that I would compromise your trust in me and my own clarity if I had anything to do with fundraising. As our organizational needs shifted, I needed to reconsider that framing of my role here.

I spent months this year in discernment, talking with my teachers and colleagues, reading about the practice of generosity and how it shapes our well being. And I concluded that I could take on responsibility for fundraising with integrity and conviction. It is in fact deeply spiritual for me to ask you to make financial gifts to All Souls because I am dedicated to caring for you by means of this precious refuge.

I've come to hold deep respect for how we make a Sunday worship service happen at All Souls. Sunday mornings create a space for nourishment because Kenny makes sure our boiler is maintained, because Elaine and Rudy went to the flower district to decorate our chancel, because Taylor sends a weekly email so you know what's happening, Maxine takes care of payroll, and Alejandro and Trent practice in this sanctuary on Mondays and Tuesdays and Saturdays, and the Choir rehearses on Wednesdays and Sundays, and Robert lets me into my office when I lock myself out. And the whole staff meets every Wednesday to talk about how we can do better.

The employees here do a lot and we care a lot. But most of all, you care a lot. Ten years ago this sanctuary had the same gorgeous bones, but there were some aesthetic flaws. I remember hearing someone say he didn't sit under the chandeliers because he wasn't convinced they'd hold steady. (I'm sure that was a joke.) You could hear the traffic noise through the window panes that didn't fit correctly. There were patches of bubbling and chipping paint. Not to mention roof and electrical issues. Now this space is pristine, thanks to you all, the many donors who gave to the last Capital Campaign in 2018, and the extraordinary expertise of our volunteers on the Building Advisory Task Force, who contributed full time hours in their retirement.

This community is sustained because your generosity is expressed in a thousand ways—creative sign making and passionate protesting, long hours reviewing financial reports, weekly visits to aging congregants who live in fifth floor walk-ups, recreating a ministry for small groups, leading meditation sessions, tutoring children in after school programs, a constant churning of kindnesses expressed to each other and beyond this

community. This congregation is intensely alive because of your efforts, and I want to do all I can to support that, including asking you to make financial gifts.

You may wish to support this institution as an act of gratitude because you find refuge here and you want others to find refuge here. Some of us are especially moved by one or another facet of our community. Some of us see potential in absolutely everything we do. I think of Marilyn Scott Murphy who was a member here for almost 40 years. Marilyn died earlier this month. She was an enthusiastic supporter of everyone and everything she encountered here—ministers, congregants, programs. Marilyn never failed to support a cause, our Garden Fund, our feeding programs, our music, Thanksgiving dinners, our Capital Campaign, our Mindfulness Meditation Buddhism programming, collections for special justice causes, and of course the Annual Giving Fund for our operating expenses. You name it, Marilyn pitched in. She wanted to help everyone here and everyone we could possibly reach from here. She exemplified the giving and receiving of generosity and she shaped this refuge.

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In what ways have you found refuge at All Souls? What comes to mind— a story, a relationship, a program, a musical moment, a sermon. I'd love to know. Please share it with me. Tell me or write to me or reach out to meet with me.

And now imagine someone who hasn't come to All Souls yet, someone who some day will walk in and find refuge here. And how they may be transformed.

As we approach the holidays and the end of the year, please give generously for the sake of your own transformation and for theirs. If everyone here gives as you're able, we will have what we need.

Thank you.

Happy Thanksgiving.