

“Sermon on the Amount”

APRIL 3, 2016

I want to speak this morning about money. Money is a pervasive element in modern life, but talking about it is generally taboo. Or rather, certain aspects are taboo. It is okay to talk about attending a seminar on investment strategies, or fundraising ideas; it's okay to bemoan the cost of sending a kid to college or lament a drop in property values. But to talk openly about how money actually affects our lives—how lack of it inhibits our self-confidence and makes us insecure and how having a lot of it can make us insensitive to the plight of others—that is taboo. As one New England-born and bred congregant told me, “There were three things Mother instructed us not to discuss in polite company: health, *wealth*, and the facts of life.” She was not alone. Another UU I know, who spent decades in Big Timber, Montana, later told me (in private, following an earlier inquiry) never to ask the size of one's ranch; it's like asking how much money a person has—which, she made clear with a raised eyebrow, is simply *not* done.

With the Fellowship Dinner last night and with this service today, we are kicking off our Annual Budget Drive. During the drive, we ask people to estimate what they hope to contribute to the congregation over the course of the coming budget year. Estimates are called “pledges;” With an idea how much we'll take in, we can work out our budget accordingly. Usually, the budget drive is the only time of the year—in a Unitarian Universalist church—when the minister talks about money. If you attend the Unity Church or the Center for Spiritual Living/Church of Religious Science—both of which come out of Ralph Waldo Emerson as much as we do—you will hear a lot about money. These, and plenty of other congregations, regularly engage in Prosperity Meditations in worship. Congregants are encouraged, as I invited all of you to do moments ago, to contemplate money as freely flowing energy and to envision themselves becoming vessels of that energy—and increasingly prosperous. Unitarians almost never do that sort of thing. We might meditate on bringing others up from poverty; but ourselves? Never. Why is that?

Because, I think, we are *embarrassed* about money. In a year-long “Moral Values” seminar I lead one year in Santa Fe, we studied how, over the course of our history, Americans have increasingly been taught to *internalize*—and hold themselves responsible for—many things our forebears thought of as (at least partially) a *collective* or *cultural* responsibility, including money. If we end up wealthy, we've become acculturated to believe, it's because of *our* own hard work and creativity; if we end up poor, it's because *we* somehow messed up. Social and political structures have nothing to do with it. If Oprah Winfrey can make a billion dollars, so can you! Ambition and hard work *are* important, to be sure, but so are social and economic policies that benefit the well to do and bear down on poor people, impairing their ability to grow and thrive. We're embarrassed if we're out of money because we've been acculturated into thinking that that means we're failures. Paradoxically, we are also embarrassed if we *have* money.

Few of us are what you would call “rich.” Those that are tend to keep quiet about it—they leave their Mercedes at home and drive the Chevy whenever they come to church

because (A) they don't want to be guilt-tripped; and, (B) they don't want the minister walking up, asking them to reconsider their pledge. Among those who are wealthy, many are incredibly generous—not only to the church, but to other charities as well, not to mention nephews and nieces who would lack tuition for college were it not for their aunt's or uncle's largess.

In one of my congregations the largest donor, who pledged thousands of dollars more than anyone else, refused to take a position on any policy-making committee or the Board of Trustees. At the annual meeting, he'd invariably sit in the back where no one could see him and say not a word. Why? "Because," he confided to me, "if I do, others will think I'm trying to shove my weight around." What he received for his generosity was disempowerment. Another significant contributor I knew back East regularly put an unmarked envelope filled with hundred dollar bills in the collection plate, assuming that no one would know who put it there—she didn't want others to think she was anyone "special." Both of these members were extraordinarily creative, loving, and generous people—who did all they could to avoid talking about money.

Not talking about money is a Unitarian folkway, a custom. Hillary Goodridge, Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Funding Program has spent her entire adult life raising and giving away money. Famous for having been the lead plaintiff in the case that legalized same-sex marriage in Massachusetts, Hillary is somewhat of an anomaly among UUs in that she talks comfortably about money. Growing up in Oyster Bay, NY, graduate of a pedigree boarding school and an Ivy League college, she's been around wealthy people her whole life. When it comes to soliciting contributions, she approaches potential donors differently depending on their gender. Men, Hillary observes, want you to be direct: here's what we're seeking; here's what I am hoping you'll consider giving. Women, as a rule, prefer to be coy, discussing arts and letters with a brief reminder that, oh yes, the fundraising campaign is underway; may I share with you some of the details?

Since congregations of all denominations have more women than men, should church leaders always remain coy about these matters? I think not. Money is part of life. We need to demystify and talk openly about it if we want to get free from the unconscious cultural baggage that comes with it. One of the insights of modern psychology is that whenever the prevailing culture relegates any important concern beyond the conversational pale it doesn't go away, it only gets repressed; and, not infrequently, our thinking about it becomes distorted and anxious.

The late Barbara Gittings was a prominent activist for the rights of lesbians and gay men. As a student at Northwestern University Gittings hunted the libraries of Chicago, seeking information about homosexuality. Alas, she found little that was relevant or encouraging. The whole subject in those days was, quite literally, in the closet; information was buried and informants were circumspect. Thanks to open, loving, and committed people like Barbara Gittings, who spent the 50s and 60s getting accurate information published and out there, the American Psychiatric Association deleted homosexuality from its list of diagnostic mental disorders in 1973. UCLA psychologist Evelyn Hooker was another hero in this demystification process, studying openly and empirically what others sought

to hush up. In virtually every case of consciousness expansion the key to opening people's hearts and expanding thinking is getting things out of the closet and into the open.

I think it's the same with money. By not talking about money, we give it more power than it deserves. The roots of Unitarian squeamishness about money are longstanding. Our Puritan ancestors built elegant, if aesthetically simple meetinghouses. One church I served, located on a New England village green, was built in 1826. There were two serious money controversies: in the 1880s (over whether to install central heating) and again around 1910 (over indoor toilets). "Too fancy" was the criticism of those opposed to the improvements. Grace Stammers, well into her 90's, was a regular contributor, but stopped coming to worship, she told me, when they redesigned the sanctuary in the early 50s and put those little brass tops on the altar candles. "Too fancy," she said. This attitude is odd, it seems to me, but I've grown accustomed to it. Apparently, plainness is a UU custom, a folkway; a legacy of genteel shabbiness favored by well-educated—and well-heeled—Yankees. Who, as we've already learned, don't talk about health, the facts of life, or *money*. Thanks to the likes of Barbara Gittings and Evelyn Hooker and to the integration of Universalism's strong "caring community" tradition, we've learned to talk about our ailing bodies and about sex (often too late for those ailing bodies to much care). But we are still queasy about wealth.

Of course, sometimes we have to talk about money—like today, the annual canvass sermon. We have to acknowledge that institutions like ours do not run on thin air, or good karma, or anything of the sort. They run on money—the money freely given by our members to pay for programs, supplies, salaries, utilities, district and denominational dues, and much more. *Institution* is not a very thrilling word. But what it means to me is freedom; the freedom not to keep reinventing ourselves but, rather, to be part of something that has power, history, continuity, and a sustaining beauty larger than what we can create ourselves.

There is a *Non Sequitur* cartoon that shows a man sitting at a table on a city sidewalk with what looks like a petition on the table and an arrow saying, "Sign up here." Next to the table is a large poster with a thermometer graphic on it and the words "Join and help us make our goal!" At the top level of the thermometer is the goal, "Mainstream Religion," followed by "Sect," "Faction," "Cult," "Bunch of Nuts" near the bottom, and at the very bottom, "Handful of Wackos."

I am very glad that fifteen valiant women and men decided, back in 1967, to organize a Unitarian Congregation here in Fullerton. Not content to allow the Unitarian Universalist presence in northern Orange County remain a Handful of Wackos, these intrepid souls had faith that our congregation could grow and mature and adopt a regional identity; that with nurture and care it could blossom into who we've become—and continue to become—on into tomorrow, *becoming settled*.

It's kind of cool when you think about it: a group of people getting together and agreeing to tax themselves for the purpose of organizing and promoting progressive, welcoming,

and spiritual values. And doing so not with the expectation of any immediate or material returns, but in the simple faith that others would then more likely hear about us, would want to join in, and would bring their children so that they, too, would be exposed to the values that have inspired and sustained all of us.

There is a *Sufi story* in which the Sultan, out riding in the countryside, comes across one of his subjects planting a vine well known to take thirty years to ripen. “Why are you planting that vine,” asked the monarch, “when chances are you’ll be dead long before it bears fruit?” “In that case, Your Majesty, someone else will enjoy the harvest, perhaps my sons and daughters—or yours.” The Sultan smiled. “If, years from now when that vine ripens both of us are still alive, please bring me some grapes as I should like very much to taste them.” The vintner weeded and pruned, decades passed, and, lo, the day arrived when his vine finally came to fruit. The Sultan was still reigning. So the man gathered some grapes, put them on his nicest plate, and sought an audience with his king. Upon receiving the offering, the Sultan thanked his subject, turned to his exchequer and said, “Go to the treasury, get a bag of gold, and give it to this man, in appreciation for his foresight and generosity.” A fool in the audience ran to the grocery, bought some grapes, and took them in, expecting a bag of gold for himself. The Sultan dismissed him—it wasn’t the grapes the monarch appreciated, it was the love and foresight that went into bringing them forth; values that any kingdom needs if it is to thrive. They are the values that have been at the heart of our congregational efforts here for nearly a half century—efforts that will continue to bear fruit as long as we continue to weed and prune and plant new vines for those who will follow us.

Will Nettleship and I enjoyed acting out my late colleague Kit Howell’s imaginary dialogue with Money. He excoriated it as filthy lucre, the veritable root of all evil. “You got me all wrong,” says Money. And Money is right. Because of our formative experiences, some of them deeply repressed, we project many of our own issues onto money. And incidentally, it’s *the love of money*, not money itself (according to the Book of Proverbs) that is the root of all evil; loving money for its own sake—a pernicious form of idolatry—when there are worthy people doing valuable work who could use it creatively on behalf of far more people than only ourselves. Money actually started as a divine language of sorts: a metaphor for the divine ability to value. In ancient Rome there was a temple dedicated to money: the Temple of *Juno Moneta*. Moneta is the Roman version of the Greek goddess *Mnemosyne*: from which the words “money,” “measure,” and “memory” all derive. It is *memory* that allows us to accumulate experience and assign it *meaning* and *measure*. Money is not the same as family, art, food, health, or community, but money *does* concretely speak of value. We communicate with money because we can put it where are mouths are; we can apportion our money to that which we find valuable. Without money, it would be all talk.

“Sermon on the Amount.” So, what’s the amount? That is up to you. I will say this, however. Give generously; it will come back to you. The more you pitch in, physically, artistically, and financially, the more you’ll get out of this congregation—and out of life. This is a long-term harvest here, but the fruit that is slowly ripening, the wine we’re making is exquisite. And like the Sultan’s loyal subject, being part of the vine pruning,

wine making team is fun; the more you contribute, the more fun, and meaningful, and the clearer the mark of what you hold as valuable.

As a guide in your calculations—and as a model of someone *learning* how to talk more comfortably about money—this year the Annual Budget Drive is asking for an 11% increase. I hope they—*you*—make it because I know how great things would be around here if we could fully fund the budget the ABD Committee has worked up. I know what a shot in the arm it would be for our dedicated staff, for the whole congregation, for your coming Minister, and for Fullerton, were you to do so. It would prove to yourselves, and the whole community, that you truly *value* this place and what it stands for:

- Its chalice circle, study, and social groups;
- Its progressive RE for children and youth;
- Its affirmation; its mission; its purposes and principles;
- Its comfort and support for one another through hard times;
- Its education and social justice outreach in our community.

The very fact that a Handful of Wackos can turn themselves—slowly, gently, and imaginatively—into a strong voice of liberal religion and progressive values in northern Orange County: I value that and I invite you to gladly support it. Church, as I often told my daughter about school, is one of those things, the more you put into it, the more you—and everyone around you—will get out of it. It is also the kind of place where the fruit of one's labors often takes years to mature—but it does, I promise you. And there is a bag of gold in it for everyone, metaphorical *and* otherwise. Love comes back. And money in support of cherished values *is* love.

Amen. Shalom. So may it be so.

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