

We Make It Happen (Pledge Sunday)

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The Unitarian Church in Summit

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Meditation

Spirit of life, ground of all being, source of love and courage,
that which some call "God":

We gather this spring morning in a world alive with color and fragrance.

Daffodils dancing like yellow fairies on lawns and in gardens,
tulips waiting in the wings for their debut.

Cherry trees with their dark and mangled trunks,
covered in diaphanous pink blossoms, like feathers.

And we walk, breathing and fed, and gather our voices to sing,
prepared to laugh, and possibly to cry,

greeting old friends and new,

and even if we don't say it out loud or think it every day,

every moment it is true that life is good for us.

Every moment it is true that we are blessed,

rich beyond compare, living a dream,

even with our challenges, our broken hearts,

bodies that fail us in various ways,

bumps in our career paths,

the struggles of tax time.

Even with all this we are richly blessed.

Let us not forget to give thanks:

To get down on our knees somewhere where no one can see us

and thank no one in particular, if that is our preference,

but to give thanks nonetheless.

And, so grateful for this life,

from our knees may we resolve that others should have as much.

And let us not rest until they do.

Consider it our mortgage on a life this sweet.

For this life, this incredible life, we are unceasingly grateful.

So may it be. Amen.

Reading

from *The Good Book* by Peter J. Gomes (p.286f)

I remember very well the excitement of the offering in the little Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Plymouth, Massachusetts, where I worshiped as a child fifty years

ago. The custom of long standing in Bethel Church, and still in use in many rural African-American churches today, was for the congregation to take their gifts to the table at the front of the church, and thus there was even more movement and excitement than in those churches where the plate was passed among the people. Here the people got up while singing rousing hymns and made their way up front with their gifts in hand, and, wonder of wonders, the stewards counted it as the process continued. At the end of that procession, if the day's financial goal had not been achieved, the congregation would be asked to pass up front again, and so on until the desired goal was reached. The minister would say, "We need only fifteen more dollars. Who will stand up for Jesus and give him fifteen dollars?" The congregation would sing some more, the stewards would count some more, and only when it was settled would the doxology be sung and the prayer of thanksgiving offered. It was high theater for a child, with the whole congregation on view and in motion, the murmuring of the stewards as they counted, the relentless rhythm of the singing, and the anxious moments while awaiting the result.

It was also the perfect example of what one of America's most famous black preachers, Father Divine, called "the art of tangibility." From his Harlem "Heaven" in the 1930s, Father Divine would urge the throngs who attended his services to make their faith real by the reality of their gifts: "You got to learn how to tangibility!" he would thunder, and the people would bring their tangible gifts and lay them, New Testament style, at his feet. The black church has never had a problem with the problem of the material, and it may be because the black church has had so little of the material goods of this world with which to have a problem. White Christians who visit black churches are often surprised and not a little shocked at the number of offerings given, and with the fine art of encouraging the people to generosity. It takes them some time to realize that in the black church the giving of money is not a necessary concession to the material needs of the people of God, but that rather it is the central drama in the act of worship.

Sermon

I cannot begin this sermon without thinking of a story Peter Gomes relates -- a story first found in Benjamin Franklin's autobiography. According to the story, Franklin went once while in Philadelphia to hear the famous evangelical preacher George Whitfield preach. It was said of Whitfield's homiletic powers that "he could make grown men cry with the mere pronunciation of the word *Mesopotamia*" (Gomes, p.288). On the occasion that Franklin found himself attending church, Whitfield was raising funds for an orphanage in Georgia and Franklin resolved that Whitfield should get nothing from him. Franklin wrote:

I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold. As [Whitfield] proceeded I began to soften and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that and determined me to give the silver; and he finished so admirably that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector's dish, gold and all.

So hold onto your wallets! Thanks to Franklin's autobiography, I know what I have to do.

I am thinking also as I begin of the reading I shared with you this morning of the Bethel church and others like it, with the offertory being the central drama in worship and no embarrassment about going back a few times to invite the congregation to do more. The fine art and respect for the practice of tangibilization!

In my experience, we Unitarian Universalists tend to be more circumspect about giving. Our UU churches tend to see the offering as more of a necessity in worship than a spiritual practice. And our models of giving reflect a more circumspect vision of giving.

As far as I can tell, there are three models for giving. Some of us think of our giving in what I will call a consumeristic model. It means we decide what we will give, just like we decide what we will pay for anything else -- based on some market comparison. This approach is only recently making slow inroads into religious life from the culture at large.

When we evaluate according to a consumeristic model, we find ourselves asking what we *get* out of our involvement, and asking what it is *worth to us*, and then setting some sort of equivalent "fee" in our minds. We'll know if we have fallen prey to this model when we find ourselves thinking in formulas like: "Well, church is about two hours, which makes it like a night at the movies, which runs about 9 bucks a person, so there are two of us and 52 Sundays..."

To be fair to this model, those using it (and I have sometimes fallen into the trap) are trying to find a way to be equitable to their religious community. However, in reality, I have come to see that this kind of evaluation shows a stark misunderstanding of how what we do here is different from a purchase of some kind of service or goods.

Church isn't a club that you join so you can get a spiritual workout, it's more accurately a discipline. It is a commitment to a community, through good times and bad, a labor of love, a stake in the ground that allows you and the others around you to hold fast to the things you hold dear. My concern about people making consumeristic evaluations isn't how much they give (which, depending on what service/goods they compare it to, can be a lot), but that they miss the larger sense of what their membership really means. Lived right, what we do together here is more like a committed relationship than a purchase.

So that's the consumeristic model. I hope we'll all inoculate ourselves against it.

Next is the stewardship model. I talked a bit about this at the canvass kick-off sermon. "Stewardship" is that age-old religious word that is about being keeper of something that comes before you and that you care for and deliver stronger than you found it, into the future. It is a noble, duty-centered, other-centered, future-centered vision of what communities like this are for and how we are to see our part in them. Those who give out of a sense of stewardship give what must be given in order to keep the institution alive and strong so it can survive them. Over a community's history, a sense of stewardship costs its members more -- in devotion and planning and resources -- but no great institution (and we have all benefited from many) has been there for us except because of such nameless, gracious, selfless stewards.

So stewardship is a wonderful model. If we were a congregation of stewards (and I think we are), we would be a congregation of folks who see their place in the world in the largest sense -- as keepers of the future and protectors of what is good.

However, the more I thought about these two models, the more I read, the more I became convinced that there is a third way, and that this third way asks even more of ourselves than for us to be stewards -- as wonderful and noble as stewardship is.

I'm not sure exactly what that third way is, but I have glimpses and pieces of it. I know it has something to do with living and giving in an even less calculated and careful way than stewardship asks of us. It has something to do with a kind of spontaneous, overflowing generosity of spirit that would affect our charitable giving, but would affect our lives positively in other ways, too. (For the record, I think you can be both a steward and generous of spirit, although you can also be one without the other.)

What does that mean?

The answer that comes to me comes to me in stories. For instance, I think of the black and white evangelical chapels and churches that have three offerings a Sunday and sometimes send the plate back for more, and hear no grumblings because people know that what they have is there to share -- not theirs to keep.

I think of my friend who, while walking one day through town, gave money to everyone on the street who asked her for money, in the end borrowing from me when her wallet ran dry. She told me that in Midrash (the Talmud's explanations of the underlying meaning of biblical texts), it says that when people are reduced to having to ask, you respond by giving, without hesitation. It's so much easier to give, she told me, as if relieved of the burden of having to say no to their requests all those years.

I think of a man I know who grew up in a family of four kids with a stay-at-home mom and a dad who was a schoolteacher, and how they tithed to their church and, he remembers, also sent \$20 each month to a boy in the congregation who was away at school. And I think of how this man looks at money so differently than I do, and how his notion of generosity is so much larger than mine.

On the other side, I think of an offering that was taken up at the ministers' convocation this March in Birmingham. It was to go to the Alabama ministers in their work for justice in light of a recent Alabama Supreme Court decision by Chief Justice Roy Moore. (Moore awarded custody of two children to their allegedly abusive father instead of their mother, because the mother had come out as a lesbian. He called her homosexuality a sin and said in that state, they could punish it by jail, by death or anything in between.)

After the offering was taken, someone came to the mike. From what he said, it was clear that people had been asking more about where this offering would go, wanting specifics before they wrote their check or handed over their cash. And the person said, "I know these ministers, and I know they know how to pinch a penny. So I'm sure they will spend

your money wisely in service of our principles. So give generously." Stop worrying about where it will go, he seemed to say.

In light of that experience at convocation, I wonder: How often do we all hold back from giving because we don't know where it is going? Or just because holding back is a natural instinct? When they train you in improvisation, the first lesson is exercises in saying "Yes." And you think it is easy -- someone offers you an apple to start off an improv scene, and you just need to take it or say something positive about it -- but you'd be amazed how often, without thinking, you say "No" first, in one way or another. Many of us are *trained* to say no first. Generosity of spirit, as I am coming to understand it, is not about rampant, crazy giving, but about living a life that says "Yes" first.

I've been thinking also of that offering we took on that first Sunday after September 11th. And how you emptied your wallets and we raised \$2,400. Some of that money went to help make the local interfaith worship and later memorial service possible -- paying for the bagpipes and orders of worship and candles. Some of you may not know that with what was left, we wrote two \$1,000 checks to widows who needed help paying their bills until their insurance monies arrived. We didn't know who the folks were to whom we gave it. We wanted to protect their privacy. St. Theresa's passed the money along with a card saying the support and love of the members of the Unitarian Church in Summit were with them. One of the folks did write us a thank-you, but I can guarantee that both of those women will remember that after this tragedy in their lives, the Unitarian Church reached out to them out of love to ease their burden.

I want us to do works of witness like this all the time. I want us to give as naturally as we breathe. And maybe I am speaking to myself here, because this is something with which I struggle. I want to be more generous: Saying yes before I say no. Trusting that what I give will do more good in the world than if I kept it (whatever it is) to myself.

The fact is, I'm not just talking about, or even chiefly concerned with, the church's fund-raising. I'm asking us to see fund-raising as an outward sign of the inward reality. We all know you cannot hide a generous spirit, just like you cannot hide an ungenerous one. Both color the whole character of our lives. So I want us to be generous givers, seeing generosity as the spiritual practice that it is.

So, for instance, what if, as a practical discipline, we started by taking two offerings a week? One would be for the works and ministries of this congregation, and one for others -- a kind of love offering. What if we picked a group of people, who would rotate regularly, to decide where the money would go each week? What if we had to work to give our money away -- \$700, \$1,000 a week? And if it irked you to reach into your wallet twice in one Sunday, and not have control over where the money was going, what if you looked at that as a growth opportunity?

In our spiritual work, this place is our laboratory. It is in part a gymnasium for generosity, a greenhouse for the growing of a generous soul. So may we continue to give generously, stretching those muscles, making the offering the central dramatic moment in the act of

worship, because it is evidence that all is right, right here. What's that phrase? "You make a life by what you give, not what you earn." So may it be for us here. Let us be joyful tangibilitators, every one!

Bless you all. I love you. Amen.