

“Moral Documents”

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Here we are again. Longtime members of the Winchester Unitarian Society know this annual tradition, the beginning of the pledge drive and - the joke that was funny the first time – the “sermon on the amount.”

Every day is a day to celebrate the amazing things that happen here. I call these moments to mind as I ask members and friends to join me in beholding what this community stands for and the changes we make real in the world.

Since our last Pledge Drive Sunday though, I have learned a number of lessons, lessons about generosity, about the spiritual dimension of money. Lessons about not taking gifts of life for granted. These lessons serve as the primary inspiration for my reflection this morning.

It was close to bedtime one night when I received a text from a member. It read "My wife and I would like to meet with you. For about an hour."

Here is a window into the psychology of ministers: when longtime members want to have a long meeting with you and their spouse, this often means one of two things. Either they are both upset about something or one of them has a serious illness. No one wants anyone to be upset about anything and the thought of either of these people being seriously ill broke my heart. I replied with times to meet and uttered a silent prayer as I hit “send.”

A few days later, the couple and I sat in my office, late morning sun streaming through the windows. After I offered tea and we exchanged small talk, the couple told me why they asked for this meeting. "And as you know, we are getting older..." the wife began. For a moment, my heart stopped. It was the terrible diagnosis.

She continued, "...and we have been thinking about what we want to give before we're gone. You mentioned that we need about \$100,000 to fix the organ. That is about the amount we were thinking of giving."

Needless to say, I did not see this coming.

They were referencing a sermon I preached about leadership. I reminded us that sometimes leadership means suggesting unpopular ideas to navigate difficult challenges. For example, I said, we will soon need to replace the console of the organ for about \$100,000. What if we just stop playing the organ? I asked the question hypothetically, to make a point. Yet, they heard an invitation. They saw an opportunity to be generous.

We talked about ways their gift could not only repair the organ but inspire giving throughout the congregation, turning the invitation they heard into an invitation to all of us to care for this beloved place and its people. I loved the idea of their gift serving as a benevolent challenge as generosity is contagious. Generosity is promiscuous.

Much has happened since that late morning meeting. With money in hand, we felt confident to go forward in the repair process. A third opinion by an organ company revealed we did not need a new console. After some significant-but-not-extraordinary repairs, the organ was fixed and plays like a dream. And then the next big item on the list, the chairlift by the front office so people with mobility challenges can navigate all floors of the building, was sponsored by another generous donor who learned of the need and responded by fronting the money.

While we have \$100,000 in the bank, we have building needs that far exceed this amount. And these needs are beyond what it takes keep this place going, week by week. That is why we are here today considering how we will contribute to keep the Winchester Unitarian Society going strong.

There is a saying that a budget is a "moral document." When we articulate and execute our plans for donating our money or allocating resources, we make statements about our values. Or, as community organizing teaches us, money is "congealed commitment." Giving to a nonprofit is not a fee-for-service relationship but an investment in a health we sustain and a vision we strive to reach. In this way, when this generous couple filled out the paperwork to transfer thousands of their hard-earned dollars to the Society's bank account or when the donor wrote a check to pay for the chair lift, these secular documents had an ethical and hence spiritual dimension.

But these three generous givers are not the only ones I have witnessed executing moral documents this year. There is another family in the congregation who, due to the current administration's tax changes for mid-sized businesses, received a retroactive refund in excess of \$100,000. I don't know what they did with their total share of the money but I do know that, once the check cleared, they began writing checks of their own. This was right before midterm elections; they did their homework and began writing generous checks for candidates across the country, candidates who articulated a very different vision than the administration that clearly served their economic interests. They focused on candidates that valued the inherent worth and dignity of all. Not only did this family forego themselves the pleasure that the money could have brought - experiences like travel, things like new cars and the primal relief of security - but they actively invested in movements which, if successful, would likely deny them money in the future. Perhaps there was a partisan pleasure that had no price. But their ability to see the needs of those below their income bracket rendered each donation a moral and prophetic act.

We all need role models in generosity. For life in this country, especially around here, is expensive. And many of us have complicated relationships with money – earning it, saving it, giving it. This moment of the pledge campaign encourages all of us to seek role models and, if we can stretch, to become examples for one another.

But visible role models depend on transparency. Another annual tradition is sharing the observation that “in the Catholic Church, you can't talk about sex but you can talk about money. In the Unitarian Universalist congregation you can't talk about money but you can talk about sex.” Along with praying that the Catholic church radically reforms how it understands human sexuality and gender roles, I aspire for the liberal religious to open up about money and how we use this resource to sustain our shared convictions.

I'll go first. According to the UUA Fair Compensation guidelines, a settled minister serving a congregation of this size in this area should earn between \$76,700 and \$122,800.¹ My salary is \$99,567.25, about the midpoint of the range. It is a testament to this congregation's integrity that the Society practices fair

¹ https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/salary_recs_18-19_geo_5.pdf

compensation as an employer, rendering employment contracts moral documents unto themselves.

I regularly pledge and pay 5% of my annual income to the Society. I do this because, first and foremost, I celebrate what happens here. I am not only a minister here but also a member. We believe different things about the sacred, but, at our best, we believe in each other and we believe the wider world is worthy of our service, our gratitude and our love.

I also give 5% or \$4,978, because I want to counter a sobering statistic. The podcast *Freakonomics* reports a correlation between generous giving and conservative theology and a parallel correlation between progressive faith and, shall we say, frugality. On average, Unitarian Universalists give less than 1% of their annual income to congregations.² Perhaps when there is no perceived connection between giving and eternal salvation, there is less incentive for generosity.

But I also give because if I am to look you in the eye and ask you to give, I, too need to come from a place of integrity.

This community is not the only recipient of my giving. For years, I have been donating \$900 a year to my seminary, Meadville Lombard, honoring the people who donated before I became a student, allowing me to receive crucial financial aid: “We drink from wells we did not dig. We profit from persons we did not know.”

I also give \$360 a year to my local public radio station WERS. Beyond these regular gifts, I often donate to my friend’s Jimmy Fund walk, an annual celebration of his son’s survival from brain cancer. And, as my father often encourages me to give to charity in lieu of Christmas gifts and we both love animals, I often donate to Mexican rescue group, knowing our dollars go further there and the situation is more dire. And there is the occasional GoFundMe appeal which, as some observe, is now a de facto health insurance policy in our country.

² <http://freakonomics.com/podcast/does-religion-make-you-happy-a-new-freakonomics-radio-podcast/>

I ask you: What percentage of your income do you give away? Does this giving fully reflect what you value? To be direct, if you are a committed member of this Society do you give more than 1% of your income? How do you feel about the statistic about liberal religious giving?

Lest you hear these questions as a self-righteous lecture, complete honesty requires sharing additional lessons I have learned about money and generosity, about preserving and enhancing what we hold dear. Lessons of humility.

A month ago a man and his dog, for lack of a better term, washed up at our door. In my 14 years of ministry, I have met many people seeking assistance from faith communities and have learned to screen fraudulent appeals. But this man's story seemed authentic. As our administrator Alison and I observed later, perhaps it was his dog, who would not leave his side, that made his story convincing. We know dogs as excellent judges of character.

The man was out of work due to recent surgeries. He thought he had room with family lined up but a conflict robbed him of that possibility. With no more money, he and Buddy literally had nowhere else to go.

I knew they could not go to a shelter together. As some Airbnb hosts welcome pets, I looked for an inexpensive place for them to stay. One listing welcomed pets, was close to family and would only cost about \$400 for the week. The man sent a request to the host.

But they soon got a response saying that the host did not allow dogs. The man thanked him for his reply; we eventually found a hotel that would welcome them both. This crisis was managed, at least for the moment, through the generosity of those who give to our discretionary fund and contribute to the upkeep of our outpost here at Main Street and Mystic Valley Parkway.

A week later, I reviewed my credit card record and noticed the Airbnb host never refunded the week's stay. The short version of the saga is that it was the guest's responsibility to cancel the reservation. When I explained to the host that the man was homeless, that I fronted my own money, he replied indifferently: "He should have cancelled," even though the host violated his own "pets welcome" policy. Thus began my passionate appeal to Airbnb headquarters. When I heard

from a member of their “Care Team” named Harley – is that even a name? – my case was not promising.

Then began the self-recrimination. How could I have been so careless? And resentment. How could the host be so selfish? If I am going to throw away \$400, I would rather it go to the man and Buddy or someone else in need.

But miracles happen; I prevailed in receiving a refund, bringing much relief.

But here is the lesson. Even though I did not lose \$400, I still felt the desire to put that money to better use. \$400 could make a real difference to someone in crisis or it could enrich the greedy people of the world. Whom do I wish to serve?

So when I heard that one of my colleagues, a seminarian dependent on her spouse’s income, was struggling as her husband teaches for the Coast Guard and they and their four children were no longer receiving paychecks during the shutdown, I sent her money. Not \$400 but enough to say that she and her family were not alone.

And there was one more lesson, one that really gave me pause. Last time I stood in this pulpit, I described my college days, living among the smartest and strangest people one could ever meet on bucolic Massachusetts farm land. I refer to Hampshire College, an experimental school without tests or grades, a place where students develop critical thinking skills in lieu of passive acceptance of intellectual conventions. It’s motto is Non Satis Scire – “to know is not enough.” If Unitarian Universalism is – inaccurately – described as “the Democratic party at prayer,” Hampshire College is “a Unitarian Universalist congregation at study.”

As named before, I make a monthly donation to Meadville but, besides volunteering, have yet to contribute to Hampshire. My plan was to pay off my debt to Meadville donors and then give to Hampshire. Call it “phase two” of my alumni generosity.

But Hampshire College just announced its intention to find a partner with whom to merge so it may survive, a move inspired by an insufficient endowment – typical for a school that produces artists, teachers and, in my case, ministers – and the decreasing college-aged population. The news was a shock to many, including

me. I cannot imagine a world without Hampshire and its unique pedagogy within it.

And, yet, what was I thinking, all those years I never gave? I am embarrassed to admit that in December, when I learned a generous donor pledged to give a quarter-million dollars if a certain number of alumni donated something, anything, I did not give. Yes, I was a minister and it was December. Perhaps I was too busy to pay attention. But all the times I did not pay attention, all the times I did not invest in Hampshire's vitality; I played a role in the College's current existential crisis.

This Sunday, we begin a month exploring what it means to "trust." At the heart of any experience of trust is relationship, an expectation of care founded on past experiences of compassion, respect and dependability.

I thank those who teach me that how we promise and spend our money is one way we participate in relationship – relationship with our values, made real through relationships with human beings. And I give thanks for the institutions – religious, academic and beyond – that gather people like me and amplify the impact of our engagement with the world.

And, although it is difficult, I give thanks for the painful lesson that I cannot trust that these people and these institutions will endure forever. Endurance requires that I make personal sacrifices to follow the example of the generous and keep values-based institutions healthy and strong. This is the spiritual challenge and the spiritual commissioning. And every day we can say, the time is now.

Or, as the beloved poet Mary Oliver wrote, in her poem "Moments":

There are moments that cry out to be fulfilled.

Like, telling someone you love them.

Or giving your money away, all of it.

Your heart is beating, isn't it?

You're not in chains, are you?

There is nothing more pathetic than caution
when headlong might save a life,
even, possibly, your own.³

³ <https://poetrying.wordpress.com/2016/03/14/moments-mary-oliver/>