

*Sermon, "Money Matters", for Annual Pledge Appeal Sunday,  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016.  
Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman*

I never met my father's mother. I knew her only through stories. I'm told she loved her green English garden, and stitched lavender blossoms into sachets each year. She was said to be an excellent cook, and a great reader. And she was known for her witty sayings. At rare giddy moments of extravagance she would say, "bother the expense, throw the cat another goldfish!" This was rhetorical, I believe. No goldfish were harmed during the making of this sermon.

And if the family were going on a visit, she would remind folks always to call ahead. After all, she would say, "You never know—they might be counting their money!" My family background is British, and for us money is the ultimate tabu. Most of my family would rather talk about their digestive tract, or share intimate details of their sexual relationships, than discuss their finances.

It's a risky thing, talking about money. We expose our hopes and fears. We reveal hard choices we have made to meet pressing challenges. Each of us carries a different sense of financial health and comfort zones when we talk about money. It may not really matter how much money there actually was when we were growing up. Even in less prosperous homes we may have grown up with a sense of abundance, that there was always enough. And for some of us, no matter how prosperous, there might always have been an anxious sense of scarcity, that there was never enough and never would be.

At the same time, money is also a sincere affirmation in our culture. Money is freedom and power, the power to make a home for liberal religion. Your annual pledge sustains this religious community. Your affirmation helps us heal the world.

Money is not all it takes. It takes good will and commitment to sustain a religious community. It takes time and trust. Our volunteers bring a wealth of time, making all things possible. Our volunteers walk through this building ablaze, or perhaps quietly glowing, with the warmth and satisfaction they find through being here. Here we build that most fragile of human constructs, trust, in a relation of mutual care, with gentleness, patience, honesty, forbearance, and the courage to speak the truth in love.

We need this. As human beings we need food and light and shelter. We also need purpose, and we need hope. We need the respect and acceptance of other human beings. And on a really good day we can reach for the spark of connection to the whole and an opportunity to be creative. We can hope to find these treasures here. We can bring and build these values here.

There is one more thing we can hope to find here, more than anywhere else. This is a religious community. Here we engage the big questions, about ultimate reality. This is a community that

engages deeply moral conversations. This is where we come to celebrate new life and grieve our deaths. This is where we continue learning who we are, in the fullness of our humanity. Here we face our mortality in honest truth. Here we commit to new life and redemption.

Your pledge is the basis on which the budget will be established, and the budget of this congregation is its most profound and sincere theological statement. The budget is where we live out our foundational ethic, for love and hope and courage. Here is where we bring our time and trust and treasure, for the sustaining of this place of memory and hope, healing and celebration.

And having said that, dear friends, I need to tell you I am scared to death. We live and work in close proximity with our neighbours, north and west and south of us. Their choices impact us mightily; their most significant recent choice seems most unloving. I feel more and more fearful with each new embolden-ment to bigotry. They make their choices. We make ours. As Dumbledore said to Harry Potter, "It is our choices that define us, Harry." We know who we are and we will make our own choices on how we will act. Humanist Viktor Frankl related that when all else was lost, in the most dire circumstance, we were still free to choose our own attitude. That is what defines us.

The late sixteenth century Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius worked his way towards a similar argument around free will, that by grace we are given the ability to choose, and therefore all humanity may in time work their way towards union with the holy; free will and mindful choice are at the root of the doctrine of universalism, of which we are the inheritors.

I, personally, am very glad my parents chose to bring me to Canada to be born. I can think of no greater triumph of love over fear than the Canadian health care system. It's not perfect, but much of it is excellent. Universal health care is the objective, in response to need, in support of the greater good.

Some things one never forgets. I remember one night, flying home for Christmas at the close of the shipping season, when I was a deck officer on Great Lakes freighters. I rode on the same plane that night with Tommy Douglas, father of the Canadian health care system. As we waited for the flight, there he was, out in the open with the rest of us, chatting with anyone who cared to step close. That night I flew with a living national treasure.

I remember, one day in Alaska, chatting with the clerk who was bagging my groceries. She was on crutches, after a bad fall on the ice. I asked her what her doctor said about her swollen ankle. No doctor, she told me. That's three hundred dollars deductible.

I am mindful of the care my doctors offer me in Canada, because I need it, not because I can afford it, and I am grateful. Despair is easy. Hope is more difficult, but more helpful. I choose to take the larger view.

There are some things I need to say. First, some of you are sustaining and major donors. You know who you are. What I need to say is, thank you. I know that liberal religion and this church are important to you, and so you reach deep. And I'm glad you do. Thank you.

We do what we can. Permit me to offer a benchmark. I pledge. I pledge at home, with the First Unitarian Church of Victoria. I pledge with the denomination. I pledge here in Olinda. I think about what my income is, per month. I think about what one percent of that income would look like, per month. I think about what two percent would look like, what three percent would feel like. And I make a pledge that feels right for me, in my circumstances.

There is a visceral aspect to this, a gut feeling. Imagine one percent of your income, per month. How does that feel? Okay so far? Now imagine two percent, per month. How is your tummy doing with that? Some of us will be starting to feel a little queasy, maybe, maybe not. Now three percent. How does that feel? Most Unitarians start to choke by three percent, or so I'm told.

Dear friends, your neighbours who attend evangelical churches by and large still feel okay at ten percent. They tithe. Some Unitarians do also. That's how they were raised, and that's what they do. And some do not. This is a very personal question. I invite you to give it thought.

We do what we can. Some of us might feel bad that we cannot do more. Please, give till it feels good. If it feels bad, don't do it. When it feels good, when you know that it fits with the other needs and wants and responsibilities in your life, good. What I want is for each of us to have some stake in this enterprise, to make some contribution, so we can say, "This is my church too. I am part of this." I want your pledge to be a good fit for you. I want you to walk into this building feeling good about what you do here.

The saddest thing I can think of would be if you stayed away because you felt you were not able to contribute as you would like. We all contribute in many ways. Times change. We change with them. Please, do what lets you walk in here feeling glad to be here.

The saddest thing I can think of would be if someone made a pledge in good faith, then found they could not meet that pledge, and they felt ashamed, and stayed away. I would be so sad, that at a time when someone might need this community more than ever, they felt they had to stay away. Ridiculous. If this should happen to you, heavens forfend, but if this should happen to you, just tell the treasurer or the minister, tell someone the facts of life, adjust the pledge to something you can live with, and come to church. Be with us, being real. Trust us with your true self.

We all contribute in many different ways. Sometimes, just being here, just being a warm body that walks in, sits down, and is present in this company, is enough. It is sufficient. We could have chosen to be anywhere, but we chose to be here. Here we bring our time, our trust, our treasure. Here we are together, here we are part of something greater than our isolated selves.

I invite you to take time for some serious thought and undertake a reliable, hopeful pledge on which we can build our next budget, our annual theological pledge to the future.

Here we bring our true selves. Let us rejoice and be glad of it.

Now, I could stop there. But I would be remiss if I did not say more. I need to say stirring enthusiastic words about how valuable is this thing we call Unitarian Universalism, and how important it is to reach deep, stretch out, and make our sincere affirmation in support of our religious community.

As mentioned above, I'm British. I am moderate. I don't much do enthusiasm. But I know where to find it. Some rainy day, a person might wander into the website for All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where religion is not for the faint of heart, and they have enthusiasm galore.

I close with these words from John Wolf, minister emeritus, All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa Oklahoma. John Wolf speaks with enthusiasm, about why we should support liberal religion.

“There is only one reason for joining a Unitarian Universalist church and that is to support it. You want to support it because it stands against superstition and fear. Because this church points to what is noblest and best in human life. Because it is open to women and men of whatever race, creed, color, place of origin, or sexual orientation.

You want to support a Unitarian Universalist church because it has a free pulpit. Because you can hear ideas expressed there that would cost any other minister his or her job. You want to support it because it is a place where children can come without being saddled with guilt or terrified of some celestial Peeping Tom, where they can learn that religion is for joy, for comfort, for gratitude and love.

You want to support it because it is a place where walls between people are torn down rather than built up. Because it is a place for the religious displaced persons of our time, the refugees from mixed marriages, the unwanted freethinkers, and those who insist against orthodoxy that they must work out their own beliefs.

You want to support a Unitarian Universalist church because it is more concerned for human beings than with dogmas. Because it searches for the holy, rather than dwelling upon the depraved. Because it calls no one a sinner, yet knows how deep is the struggle in each person's breast and how great is the hunger for what is good.

You want to support a Unitarian Universalist church because it can laugh. Because it stands for something in a day when religion is still more concerned with platitudes than

with prejudice and war. You want to support it not because it buys you some insurance policy towards your funeral service but because it insults neither your intelligence nor your conscience, and because it calls you to worship what is truly worthy of your sacrifice. There is only one reason for joining a Unitarian Universalist church—to support it!” \*

The word according to the Reverend John Wolf, emeritus minister, All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa Oklahoma.

May it be so.

*\*[This excerpt, the words of John Wolf, was cited on the web in a sermon identified as “To You I Give”, delivered on March 2, 2008, by Rev. Eliza Blanchard at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Grafton and Upton. Blanchard locates the excerpt in “The Abundance of Our Faith”, edited by Terry Sweetser and Susan Milnor, p. 35]*

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