

The Best Money I Ever Spent  
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship  
November 5, 2006

In my youth, there was an annoyingly repetitive chewing gum ad on television that featured identical twin girls, dressed in stripes, with gleaming white smiles. They repeatedly knocked their chewing gum packs together, claiming that their gum was two – two – two mints in one. On the final collision, the girls and their packs of gum magically merged into one being holding just one pack of DoubleMint Gum in a fresh green wrapper. This gum was touted as the incredible blending of two distinct varieties of mint, highly improved by the merger.

My friends and I, as well as I'm sure many others of our generation, would make fun of this ad by banging into one another with such inane parodies as "two-two-friends in one." We, however, were never able to successfully complete the merger into one being. No matter how hard we threw ourselves into one another, we remained separate.

We often forget, I think, that each of us is already a mysterious and complicated mixture of two worlds – the world of organic life on earth where we must live between birth and death<sup>1</sup> (42,) and the world which could be called Being, or Truth, or God (159.) Unlike two varieties of mint, our two worlds are of completely different species – one is matter, one is spirit. One mortal, one immortal. One visible, one invisible. One transitory, one ultimate.

Throughout history there have been attempts to deny one world or the other...the Gnostics and other monastic-type sects have tried to live a spiritual life in complete rejection of the physical world. Certain manifestations of socialism and humanism have denied the existence of any spirit-realm. In fact, Protestantism played a role in turning us more fully toward the physical world (87)...with an insistence that humans had agency to

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<sup>1</sup> Needleman, Jacob, *Money and the Meaning of Life* (Currency DoubleDay: New York, 1991) All parenthetical page numbers in this sermon refer to this book.

reason and to perform good works, thereby taking charge of our own salvation and making God's part in that somehow less important.

We need both worlds, and to exist between them is our metaphysical destiny, (55.) They may be diametrically opposed to each other, yet they have to live in relationship (96.) And, to the degree that consciousness is involved, this bi-worldly existence is a uniquely human experience.

These worlds are not identical in power, energy, or scope...at least not in our experience of them. Certainly the outer, material world is, at least for most of us, the more vivid. In this world we eat and drink, protect ourselves, help our family and friends, maintain our health (116)...these endeavours organize our days and consume our energies. The inner world, on the other hand, can seem illusive, even unreal, and secondary to our survival...so much so, that it is easy to ignore. Yet this inner world, this contact with something beyond us, is what provides our connection to purpose and meaning; it feeds our consciousness and is, on some level, our reason for existence. Without a connection to the inner world, the material world is both vapid and prone to raging out of control, assuming overwhelming proportion in our lives (154.) Indeed, what else is materialism, but the absence of spiritual awareness in the outer world.

So here is a basic assumption in my message today...that given the fact that we humans are blessed or endowed with a consciousness that allows us to touch that inner or higher realm, using this consciousness to search for understanding, to pursue transformation of the self, and to find ways to live in service of greatness must be part of our purpose. No other earthly being is capable of this motion inward, this quest for higher intuition, this experience of god. All of the great teachers and religions of all times encourage this inward reflection (2.)

Let me see if I can put it another way. Consider what the best things are about being human. What are the elements of existence that make life worth living for you? Whatever your answer, this is the 'inner life' or 'higher level' that I'm talking about. We want, and need, to be able to make authentic and meaningful connections in the realm of

relationships, love, knowledge, creativity, family... and these things are primally rooted in the interior of our beings (166,) not in the material world. These are the things that should, if we can access them, ground and inform all of our actions and thoughts.

Our ability to process and feel and share our experiences, to actually experience our experience, is the source of our greatest wealth as humans. Therefore, to live between the worlds is, to turn a phrase, the best use of both worlds. The spirit can't experience anything without the body, and the body, literally, is empty without the spirit.

A Mary Oliver poem comes to mind...as they often do for me...it's called:

*Poem (the spirit likes to dress up)*

The spirit  
likes to dress up like this:  
ten fingers,  
ten toes,

shoulders, and all the rest  
at night  
in the black branches,  
in the morning

in the blue branches  
of the world.  
It could float, of course,  
but would rather

plumb rough matter.  
Airy and shapeless thing,  
it needs  
the metaphor of the body,

lime and appetite,  
the oceanic fluids;  
it needs the body's world,  
instinct

and imagination  
and the dark hug of time,  
sweetness  
and tangibility,

to be understood,  
to be more than pure light  
that burns  
where no one is --

so it enters us --  
in the morning  
shines from brute comfort  
like a stitch of lightning;

and at night  
lights up the deep and wondrous  
drownings of the body  
like a star.

Ah, to have that kind of a relationship between the body and the spirit... such a deeply understood connection, one that often is beyond our reach. We tend to live in the one immediate reality of the body and the mind, and the longer we dwell there, the more vivid this material world grows, the more distant and vague the inner world becomes.

Jacob Needleman's contention, in his book *Money and the Meaning of Life*, is that the way to intensify an experience of the inner world is to consciously and intentionally work to live in both worlds simultaneously and to experience the many contradictions that exist in the relationship between the two (161.) This bi-worldly existence allows us to carefully and seriously consider who we are and who we want to be; by studying our impulses in the outer world, our familiarity with the inner world intensifies.

I imagine you're wondering what this has to do with the question of money, or perhaps you're hoping it has nothing to do with money and that I won't even speak of it again. Well, I'm going to speak of it. If we can clearly see that we exist in two worlds, and that the inner world provides the guidance for the deepening of the outer world, which provides the experience for the understanding of the inner world, then we can begin to look at causes and effects, or means and ends.

Money is simply a means, and is clearly a part of the outer world... society and culture... life here on earth. It is perhaps, in modern times, the most intense reality in our lives (159, 165.) Even those things that could be purely inward motions – love, family, relationship – have been embedded with money (166,) so that it tricks us... it pretends to be part of the inner world. For example, those in my generation, raised by children of the Depression, learned, however subconsciously, that how we handle money and even how much money we have, is the measure of our value and worthiness as persons (266.) It's not even true anymore that money can't buy love. For some, and in a certain amount, it can.

Take the children's story today<sup>2</sup>. The beautiful rainbow fish with the sparkling scales gives them away in order to make friends. Isn't this buying love? Maybe. But we shouldn't overlook the fact that the giving fundamentally changes the rainbow fish. It is not the friendships that make the real difference in his life, though they do make a difference. What is different for the fish is his study and contemplation of the value of friendships held up against the value of his shiny scales. It is the creative moment of decision-making about what do with his scales that carries him into that place between the worlds, the place of meaning-making.

See, money, or scales, or whatever our resources are, can be instruments in our search for truth, implements for our inner journey by serving the aim of self-knowledge. Money is not an evil thing. It's a tool... it's an energy... it's a necessary device in current society. It's okay for us to need money. We do need it. You need it to pay rent and buy groceries. LUF needs it to pay staff and heat this building.

But let's not confuse needing money with a LOVE of money. If the love of money conflicts with your values, then you are living only in the material world, and not paying attention to your inner life, not looking through the window into your soul. If the aim of human life is understanding, or a search for meaning, then beyond what is necessary for our physical needs, it only makes sense that we should devote our resources to gaining that understanding.

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<sup>2</sup> Pfister, Marcus, *The Rainbow Fish*

As I said in an email earlier this week, which I realize doesn't get to all of you and I apologize for that, I have really been pondering this question of what might be the BEST money I've ever spent. I'm not much one for hyperbole. There are always so many competing factors, outcomes and interests...I think it's impossible to rate my spending choices in such a way as to come up with the 'best' one. But where this pondering, and especially Needleman's book, has brought me, is to a deeper understanding of the monumental importance of choosing to live in the creative tension between the demands of the outer world and the yearnings of the inner world, in that place of incredible contradiction.

I believe that each of us, in that creative tension, has the ability, nay the responsibility, to make choices about how to use our resources beyond those we need for survival. Where will those resources best serve our values? Where could those resources be used to help lead us and others into greater understanding and relationship?

Like me, I'd be surprised if you came to one BEST answer. There are thousands of honourable and legitimate demands on our money. Many of these are humanitarian concerns...helping others to have the basic necessities of life. Others of them are justice issues... working to insure basic freedoms for those who have been marginalized and dehumanized. Still others are labouring to prevent future crises through education and awareness programs. All of these, and so many others, deserve our attention.

So why support the work of this Fellowship? Is this the best way to spend my money? I believe it matters that this church and our greater movement exist because this is one of a very few places in our world that calls us to chew on the dilemma of what it is that prevents truth from penetrating into our lives. Here we are challenged to act ethically in the only real sense of that word...that is in a negotiated relationship between our bodies and our spirits. Here we find a spiritual community that continually and doggedly leads us to a place between the worlds where we question and contemplate. The more time we spend in this questioning, the more we are willing to see ourselves as we truly are, the more our two worlds move into relationship, the more we experience the uniquely human

experience of conscious existence, the more we are able to live fully and deeply. That's why Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship is so important.

When canvass time comes around, as it does every year, there are many who dread it. There are those here who think we focus too much on money, that we are worshipping it. I hope that's not true. I hope that what the canvass does is to pull us into that liminal space between our worlds where we must both take money seriously as a powerful force, and examine our actions and impulses in relation to money (170, 171, 206.) I hope that what the canvass does is force us to consider how to use what resources we have in service of our values and the greater good. We are not worshipping money, but rather being challenged to bring money back to the place it belongs (70,) as a vehicle for expressing our sincerity and our longings. Money may, in today's world, be able to buy literally anything, that is as long as we want what money can buy. Our task is to spend it on the few things that money can't buy...like meaning (239) and awareness.

Another favourite poet of mine, Marie Rainer Rilke, says that the other world, the higher world, is nothing but this world consciously experienced (287.) So, meaning is ours to make...ours to create in the process of searching for what we are meant to be...in this delicious conundrum of matter and air, material and spirit, body and soul.

We don't need to bang our two worlds together in an attempt to get them to magically merge into an indistinguishable combination. Rather, let's celebrate the wonderfully frustrating human experience of living in two worlds simultaneously.... worlds that, even when in relationship with one other, create both tension and resolution, contradiction and understanding. Let's support those places and avenues in our lives that bring us face to face with what it means to be human...the mysterious and delightful reality of being "Two- two- two natures in one."

So be it.