

Embrace This Place
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
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Sunday, November 6, 2005

(This sermon refers several times to the children's story. "Julius" is a book about a little girl named Maya who receives a pig as a present from her grandfather. Julius and Maya learn together about sharing and taking care of one another.)

This is an awesome responsibility, to talk about money and stewardship. I've been handed a mixed bag of themes and agendas, and am also sensitive to the random and intense emotional responses to the topic. Addressing all of them is important to a successful canvass. We've got this image of the lighthouse to measure our giving, we've got the canvass committee's desire to create a culture of generosity, we've got the board's necessary focus on the actual dollars that it takes to put our visions into place, and we've got a theme for today that would have us embrace this place...this whole messy, complicated, challenging, wonderful place. It's rather like trying to love the gift of a big pink Alaskan pig who arrives in a crate marked "Handle with Care...Live Animals." This is a topic that must indeed be handled with care. Yet I'm convinced that if we only handle it with kid gloves, if we leave it carefully contained in a box, we will miss the incredible gifts that will come from taking it out, playing with it, and learning from it.

Now mind you, I don't relish talking about money. Makes me rather uncomfortable. I'd just as soon leave it in a box in the corner and never take it out. I heard once that it was the Puritan settlers and their economic gospel that got us all believing that abundance reflected divine favor and, more importantly, that piety led to prosperity. This resonates with me. Somewhere deep down inside, I seem to worry that if I don't have money, or don't have enough money, it's my own fault. I worry that people look at me, poor me, and they'll figure out that God didn't choose me. I get to feeling guilty and like I don't quite measure up. A scarcity mentality creeps in. I get the urge to clasp onto every little bit I can and to claw my way through and over others so that I might earn just a bit of God's favor. I get to feeling like I deserve to keep every little cent I've ever had.

That might sound like an exaggeration to you, but I tell you it's true. Some shadow part of me intimately knows and understands these competitive and selfish impulses! I believe that there is shadow and light in each of us, and I want to work toward encouraging the light. I don't really want to be parsimonious. I want to be generous. I'm darn glad that I found Unitarian Universalism where I can work to replace some of those Puritan ethics with messages that assure me that there is plenty to go around and that God doesn't play favorites. Here in this place I can work toward owning a theology of money that puts it in its proper place... where it is simply a tool and an energy that I can intentionally use to create a better planet. At least I can work toward this, we can all work toward this, but that doesn't automatically ease our resistance to letting our money flow.

Whenever I can't quite get my arms around a concept, when I can't quite embrace or understand it, I like to return to the simple stories, the metaphors and symbols. I chose the children's story *Julius* for today because it shows, in a very simple way, the messiness of caring for something you love, and the surprising joys and learnings that grow out of that caring. Sharing a life, a home, a church with people who come from diverse and unusual places, philosophically and otherwise, isn't always easy, but ultimately, it's rewarding. It gifts us with new understandings... understandings that we can put to use in so many positive ways... to better live out our faith, to make a difference in the lives of those around us... understandings that push us to examine our values and to grow spiritually.

Last week, I asked you to suggest some metaphors that might describe Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship. I gave you options as to the perspective of those metaphors, including how LUF operates, or how you think LUF ought to be seen in the world. Most responded with how you see LUF, and the majority of these responses focused on how the individuals here are joined together ...a necklace of many different beads, a tree with many branches and roots, a mixed forest with diverse flora, or more simply, a bunch of nuts. Clearly you appreciate the community and inclusiveness that you experience in this spiritual home.

A few responded with how they thought LUF ought to, or would like to, be seen in the world. Two people came up with metaphors of nourishment...a pot of healthy

stew, and a loaf of multi-grained bread baked in an open fire. I particularly like these two...hearty, sustaining, made up of multiple ingredients, and most important, up to the task of taking the heat in the kitchen. Clearly you appreciate the way that you are fed here...and the quality of the nourishment you receive.

Others, continuing on the theme of how LUF ought to be seen, came up with metaphors that support the symbol chosen for this year's campaign...a lighthouse, a beacon of light, a candle shining in the darkness. These visualize LUF as providing a beacon that brought us here, and also recognizes that there are those who haven't found us yet who are drifting at sea, or lost in the darkness. Yet I find that these metaphors breaks down in that they also suggest that LUF is standing still, and not making any particularly heroic effort to change the conditions of darkness or to calm the rough sea. We simply turn on our light, light our candle, and then wait to see who will show up. It's interesting to me that only one (of the thirty-two responses) came up with a metaphor that reflects our commitment to work in the world, and that person expressed a hope that this Fellowship would be seen as a vehicle for social change.

It's obvious to me that you each have a reason for being here, and that at least on initial blush, many of those reasons are self-serving. There's nothing shameful about that. It is a natural part of being human to try to meet our own needs, to take. We need to take in order to survive...we take in air, take in nourishment, take support and love. We thirst for those things that will satisfy us, and it's gratifying that you find satisfaction here. But isn't it weird that our survival does not require us to give in return? Certainly a case could be made for the fact that we do give...we expel carbon dioxide...our bodies return to the earth. Many would say that humanity's survival is predicated on a communitarian spirit that cares for others. Still, a lot people go through life without any sense of responsibility to their neighbors. This is quite the human predicament, eh? I'd like to suggest that this is one good reason to be part of this fellowship...to be challenged to do something that is extra-credit so to speak, to give in the interest of the greater good.

Among Unitarian Universalists, charitable giving is viewed as a matter of individual choice.¹ We honor and respect each person's use of conscience to guide his/her decisions in all ethical matters, how we use our money included. But discerning the right choice is difficult because we live very complex lives. It's not a question of right or wrong; it's a question of making the best choices from a confusing pool of possibilities.

Certainly, our ethics of giving must first recognize our individual responsibilities to take care of our families and our basic needs. We are unique beings, and we have unique needs and standards of comfort. There is no shame in wanting to live easily in the midst of beauty. While we might not agree with how and where others spend their money, we have no right to judge them...that is, unless we are blameless in that regard. There are some in this room who do not see LUF as worthy of a large financial commitment, or maybe the church takes a lower priority than other worthwhile charities and causes. I don't mean, really I don't mean, to tell you how to use your money. I only mean to suggest that you be intentional about it. Because with every check you write, wherever and however you spend your precious time, every time you make a financial decision, you are living out your values. As Dom Helder Camara said, "Be careful how you live your life for it is the only Gospel others will read."

The message today is about stewardship, but at its core, it is also about money. This is the beginning of our annual financial campaign, and we have to talk about money, even though this is apparently not a very Canadian thing to do. Many of us resent talking about or being asked for money. Some of you have expressed concern about asking for money from those who can't afford it, saying that they give of their time and their talents instead. I want to sincerely acknowledge that gifts of time and talent are critical for this community, dearly treasured and hopefully adequately appreciated. However, money is the topic for today. Don't focus on your gifts of time and talent in order to avoid critically examining your generosity of treasure. We need all three. This learning struck a chord in me. Even though I made it clear when I came here that I was continuing my membership and pledging at another UU church, I have

¹ Durall, Michael, *Creating Congregations of Generous People*, Alban Institute: 1999, 5.

realized that I need to make a financial contribution to Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship as well in order to feel right with myself. Just as it has been for me, I respect that this is a deeply personal exercise for everyone. Resist hearing any judgment or criticism in my words. Examine your own heart.

It is also important to distinguish the difference between income level and giving level.² Your giving level is a measure of your commitment within the context of your income level. Some of you may remember the story of the widow's mite in the Bible. Jesus said that her two small mites were worth more than the large treasure given by the rich man, because it cost her more. While we believe that we are equals, it's a fact that some people have more money than others.³ It's not about what's fair or democratic, it's about what you feel is right for your own circumstances and your own level of commitment. Resist making any comparisons. My intention is to encourage you to be intentional and to make decisions about your money that you can really stand behind, decisions that are made out of spirit of generosity. Examine your own heart and do what makes you feel right.

In my reading in preparation for today, I came across this sentence: It is out of the stewardship of our largess that our most important values are represented.⁴ As I said to the kids earlier, to be a steward is to take care of something. Most of the time, stewards are seen as taking care of something that's not really theirs...but this quote refers to the stewardship of something that is ours, our own largess, our generosity of spirit, our liberality in giving...and I find this to be a particularly fascinating concept. I'd never thought about taking care of my 'generosity of spirit'. I thought I either had it, or I didn't. This quote would have me believe that I inherently possess a generosity that can be nurtured into largess. How exactly is it that we should care for our generosity? I suspect it takes practice. Might it come to us in the form of an unwieldy crate containing a Julius? If so, perhaps we should open that crate and just enjoy existing in the spirit and presence of it.

² Durall, 64

³ Durall, 96

⁴ "Filthy Lucre or Golden Opportunity?" © Dr. Gary Blaine, First Unitarian Church, Toledo, OH

Now maybe I like the word largess because I'm large. I have a tendency to collect images of big whimsical women...often dancing...surprisingly gracious and bold. One of these, an oversized and capricious ballerina in a sequined red tutu hangs on my desk lamp. I think I'll adopt her as my metaphor for largess, because I'd like to keep the spirit of generosity in front of me all the time. Just so, we should keep our commitment to stewardship in front of us all year long. At the congregation in Oakland, just like here, many members give their contribution by way of a monthly check or bank draft. This means that when the offering is taken each Sunday, we have nothing to put in the basket. The basket is passed, not much is placed in it, and instead of the offering being a celebration of our generosity, it becomes awkward and guilt-inducing. So, the folks at Oakland mime making an offering when the basket passes, in order to acknowledge and to remember all that they give. I would encourage you to try that. Be aware of your generosity. Celebrate it. Make it known to all. Feel good about it.

We hear more and more these days about the tithing required/suggested by the evangelical mega-churches. Frankly, I think they have an easier 'sell' than stumping for a 2-3% pledge in a UU church. I don't have the advantage of being seen as God's mouthpiece. If you believed that, and if I could espouse and preach a theology that claimed that everything we have has come from God and that God requires a ten percent tax, I expect you'd be getting out your checkbooks. Many Christian fundamentalists truly believe that if they don't tithe, God will punish them, if not in this life, in the next. And they also believe that if they do tithe, they will be blessed.

I think you know by now that I love to work to reclaim some of this language. It's clear to me that everything I have has come from somewhere else. Every bit of food I eat comes from seeds or beings that I didn't create and usually comes by means of someone else's harvest and labor. Every piece of money I earn comes, yes, by the sweat of my brow, but also by the fact of the privilege I have in this society, and I did nothing to earn that. Every new thought, every motion of my heart, builds upon or was inspired by the presence of others in my life. Call this God if you will, call it the

wondrous way in which we inter-be with everything, call it grace. How can I ever repay this?

I can begin to repay this by embracing this place...this place that gives me hope. But when I move to embrace, I discover that it feels like hugging or holding tight. Instead, a generous spirit would embrace this place by opening its arms wide like my chubby uninhibited ballerina. I asked for your metaphors because I believe that how we see this community or how we envision this community being seen by others is a determinate in our willingness to make a contribution to it. I would challenge you to begin to think of metaphors for LUF that speak to your dreams for this community...to start thinking about this place in the context of what is possible.

I heard a certain president of LUF say this week that she thinks we are a runaway train. Now at first, I thought she was speaking disparagingly...scared perhaps of what was happening. But her very next words were...We're a runaway train, and I just want to be on it! So this image for her is an exciting one...of a train beginning to move faster than we're used to, moving quickly through uncharted territory toward a hoped-for goal. It's not out of control, but rather it's energized...driven to get to a new place, a better place...we're on our way to freedom land!

I want to go beyond being a lighthouse...I want us to get on that train. I want us to embrace this place and that lighthouse by picking it up and carrying it off into the world, into the dark reaches of heart and mind and society. I'd love to see that lighthouse explode and send its love and its message way outside of these walls, way beyond this street...a runaway lighthouse, if you will. If we are willing to foster radical generosity in ourselves, if we choose to give our money to support all the world-changing potential that exists in this community, I believe that we will experience transformation. Transformation may take many forms... maybe it means that we have more members, or a new building. Maybe it means that Thunder Bay comes to see LUF as a place of hope and justice-making. Maybe it means that, along with other dreaming and generous congregations across this continent and around the world, we can really be a liberal force, infused with a largess that showers our earth with the spirit of freedom and tolerance. Let's begin by transforming our attitudes, in whatever way

they need transforming, about giving our treasure in gratitude for all of the gifts we have already received. Embrace this place.

Amen.