

"Money & Spirit"

Sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno with a story shared by
Rebecca Bryan
February 2, 2014

Blessed are those who know that the work of the church is the transformation of society; who have a vision of Beloved Community transcending the present, and who do not shrink from controversy, sacrifice, or change. John Buehrens

Blessed are they indeed.

Blessed is this congregation, indeed.

The wise man once remarked, "When a pickpocket sees a holy person, he sees only the guru's pockets." (Ram Dass) In other words, the pick pocket may imagine money in the pocket but is missing the spirit in the soul. Some may look upon the faith community with suspicion: "You want my money and only my money. All the church cares about is money." But at All Souls, we care deeply about transformation – about transforming lives for to transform ourselves we begin the process of creating a kinder, more compassionate and just world.

I had hoped that keeping one's sites on transformation and all that All Souls brings to your lives would translate to an approach to giving that was akin to a sense of exuberance. I learned differently at the Open Question discussions this past fall. To remind: these were thoughtful discussions about giving here at All Souls and about money in general. "Exuberance" didn't seem like it was quite the right descriptor and quite a few participants in that discussion said as much.

Among other things, there was this point about which we are all painfully aware: many are affected by the challenging economic times in which we are living. So many are feeling jittery to fearful. Will my job be vaporized next year? Next month? Will I find a job to replace the one I lost? Will I have to move from SE CT? The savings I'd counted on is now worth less than it was worth six years ago. How will I manage on my fixed income while the economy shows little sign of being fixed? Of truly recovering?

So I get that it may be hard to come to All Souls on a Sunday morning to hear about money that you may be afraid that you won't have or have enough of. Add to this underlying reality the discomfort with dressing up Stewardship Sunday like a prom queen. Although everyone seemed happy enough to eat cake, the overall feeling was expressed this way: "We're a bunch of pragmatic New Englanders! It sounds forced! It sounds phony!" "Agh. Here we go again."

I hear you. The leadership hears you. Notice the absence of balloons and cake and anything that hints at a celebration, *Puritans*.

But when the conversation turned toward why we give, the tone changed.

One Soul expressed pleasure in “witnessing the kids in our religious education program growing into our values.” Said another: “All Souls is an extension of my home. So I want to make sure that everyone is taken care of. It’s a caring giving. I want what’s there to always be there for me and for anyone who comes in.”

I’m sure many of you feel the same way. We have the sacred responsibility not only for the next fiscal year – that’s an important but limited vision – but also to those who will come after we are all long gone. And it’s up to us. We are all we have. To be clear, this denomination is unlike some others in that the local congregation is wholly responsible for its own financial support. We do not receive money from a diocese or presbytery. In fact, the reverse is true. All Souls sends dues to the Unitarian Universalist Association to support its work that in turn supports our own ministries on the local level.

So, we are the ones who create and support the life we dream of here at All Souls.

Therefore, the matter of giving and supporting and stewardship is a weighty one that we cannot brush under the rug, or treat as mundane or routine. Rather, it’s one we want to lift up and ask plainly in the same way that we ask plainly when the congregation is in need of your time and talent. On that front, we are getting even better at clearly outlining the needed task, the timeframe to follow, and the amount of work one could expect to offer. And then we say thank you – profusely.

And then you set out to do that task and the encouragement from me, your minister, is to do so joyfully. The work of the congregation should always feel good. You’re helping in the classroom? It should bring you joy. You’re weeding the grounds? It should bring you joy.

Making a pot of coffee? Joyful.

Laying out the newsletter? Joyful.

Sitting at the head of the table at a Board meeting? Lynn Tavormina, are you joyful?

Setting up Unity Hall for the memorial? Joy.

Resetting Unity Hall for Sunday morning? Joy.

Resetting the RE Rooms after the memorial and before Sunday morning because we needed all of the chairs in Unity Hall ... okay, maybe you're not quite feeling the joy ... (but still)

Helping at the Community Meal? Joy.

Greeting all the Souls who arrive on Sunday morning? Joy. Joy. Joy.

And you know why you're feeling good? Because you're likely doing so in partnership with others. You're having fun and fun lifts the spirit. Because you have the satisfaction of knowing that your contribution is making a real difference. Because we depend on each other and it feels good to help.

This is all about Spirit – the breath of life. It's about making meaning and keeping hope kindled. And the work of the church – within and beyond our walls – is a practice in meaning making.

As is giving of our treasure. Giving – especially when times are tough – is part and parcel of meaning making. And it's not about what you are able to give. It's about how you approach the decision. It's about how you feel when you place your financial commitment in the basket next Sunday or the Sunday after. It's about how you feel when you fulfill it over the course of the weeks to come.

Because to give is to be reminded that each of us is an important part of this congregation. Each pledge matters as each Soul that is part of this congregation matters.

Last week I gave each of the children \$2 in “lucky money” and I encouraged them to give it away. To think carefully about who might need it. To talk to you, their families, about that decision. Because I want for them to experience the joy of helping others with their money as well as through the many other ways we encourage children to help others. To be part of All Souls is to come to that understanding that our financial support goes beyond, even, the congregation as it is today. Our giving reaches toward all of those who are yet to come ... to our neighbors and those beyond our walls with whom we partner and welcome.

Giving is a way of life that changes us whether we are on the giving or the receiving end of the experience. Rebecca had an interesting experience that speaks to this mystery on her very first day at All Souls. Wait 'till you hear ...

Rebecca tells her story:

It was my first day at All Souls. It had been a busy day. Carolyn and Arlene of course, making sure that I was entirely welcomed! There were freshly picked flowers in a little vase on my desk in the Vail Library. Arlene had made sure that I had pens, notepads and stationary. We went to lunch together, Carolyn gave

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me a tour around the city. We met with a parishioner, and yes, believe it or not, we even had a committee meeting that night.

I was exhausted, and grateful.

Carolyn, being the wise teacher that she is, gave me some time to myself around 4 p.m. She closed her office door and went onto a conference call that she had scheduled. I went to my desk, sat, took a deep breath, began to look at my emails – when all of a sudden, I heard this strange sound. It was pounding. I listened. It got louder. Pound, pound. And I realized, someone was at the door. I got up and there were two young adults standing there, waving and clearly wanting me to let them in.

Great, I thought. I have no idea who these people are! But of course, I open the door and greet them.

"Hello!" I said.

"Do you take donations?" the man asked urgently.

"Um, yes, we take donations. This is a church." I'm thinking to myself, what kind of donations, who are these people?

"Are you a charitable organization?" he asked even more assertively.

"Well yes. I'm wondering if you're looking for the Homeless Hospitality Center. It's right up there..." I said pointing across the parking lot.

"No, no" He said. "Can I get a tax receipt if I give you a donation? I need to give a donation now."

Come on Rebecca, I tell myself, for God's sake. Do something here.

So I jumped into gear. We went on a tour of the building, I told them about UUism. They were interested and patient, but after about 5 minutes, he turned to me and said.

"Ok. So I want to give this donation to you. Can you give me a tax receipt?"

"Of course." I start.

"Right now." He says.

He is now holding \$400 cash in his hand.

"I am opening a Papa Ginos in a nearby town." he said. This is my tradition. I need to do this today. It will bring prosperity to our business."

"OK" I say.

So I open Carolyn's door. She is on her conference call and looked at me like, "What are you doing?" I'm sure she was wondering what kind of intern you had gotten here... (Editor's note: I wasn't.)

Somehow, we managed to communicate what was going on with notes and hand gestures. She typed the tax letter for the man, we printed it. I went back out, gave the (very happy man) his letter, and gratefully received his \$400 donation.

This story may be funny, and it was.

But it also wasn't.

Here was a man who wanted/needed to share, to give, in order to honor his tradition. I got to learn on my feet, draw in life experiences, introduce Unitarian Universalism to someone and share in their joy of giving.

You tell me, who was the more fortunate?

Both of us, I think.

Indeed. Neither giver nor receiver was more fortunate than the other. Both received in the giving.

All Souls will be more focused on stewardship in the next few weeks. We heard you: we're not going to make a big deal of it this year. No cakes. No claims of celebration. I hear you, pragmatic New Englanders. But this is what we are going to do: encourage a prayerful, reflective, serious reflection of the ways that All Souls has transformed you ... the ways that your heart leaps when you show up for worship, service, learning ... the delight you experience when a child or one of our youth seems to be grasping our liberal religious values in order to heal an aching world ... all of which fuels the central religious task: That's what we're here to do.

And so to start you in your decision-making process, Rebecca is going to offer a meditation that you will be able to hold close as you decide.

Rebecca offers a guided meditation ...

We're grateful to have every one of us along for the journey. We are grateful that through the past six years All Souls has weathered the economic N'oreaster that has so sadly rocked so many faith communities, non-profit service organizations, and businesses. And we were able to do so because those who

could, gave more or kept steady to cover others who had to give less. I mean that whether you are the Soul who gave \$11,000 or you are the Soul who gave \$56. All of your contributions got us through.

Blessed are those who support the church and its work by their regular, sustained, and generous giving; and who give of themselves no less than their money. Blessed are those who know that the work of the church is the transformation of society; who have a vision of Beloved Community transcending the present, and who do not shrink from controversy, sacrifice, or change. John Buehrens

Amen.