

"Grace and Giving"

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

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"Caution Church Ahead" by Victoria Safford From *The Abundance of Our Faith: Award-Winning Sermons on Giving* Terry Sweetser, Editor

[A new-ish congregant once said to a Unitarian Universalist minister:]

"But you don't really ask for anything. You don't ask for dues. You don't ask for a tithe. You don't ask for money a lot. You don't make us feel guilty."

And the response is, "But, friends, we ask you to be each other's shelter, to be each other's sanctuary. ... We're asking a great deal of you."

We ask that you weave here, together, some kind of sturdy, gorgeous web, because without that among you, the building doesn't stand. There's no sanctuary here that is not made of your flesh and bone and love and will. The building will not stand. The ministry won't stand. The staff fall down. The lights go out. Religious education shuts down, and the kids are on their own in the wild world. The thing won't work. So, yes, we ask you to fund it.

.... We ask you every year for a financial pledge. And because "we" are "you" we can be neither apologetic nor coy nor subtle about this.

.....

Scene 1: The Nash Room where about 20 Souls are getting settled into our monthly Elderjourney gathering. There's the jostling for seats at the table; the smell of coffee that fills the air; the last minute touches to the refreshment table; friends greeting friends with the sound of laughter floating through the lobby through which I walk and then enter the room.

"Hi Everyone!! I have Stewardship envelopes for a few of you who weren't here last Sunday. Figured I'd pass them to you now and save some postage."

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An unmistakable hush falls over the room. A sudden pall, in fact. My typical enthusiasm is met with untypical sarcasm. I choose to fly right over the grumbling.

Scene 2: I am sitting with the fabulous Worship Team. We're talking budget and the scarcity of funds. The conversation turns to the annual campaign – the one we're now in the middle of. I express my optimism about the approach.

Let's step away from that table for a moment.

Here is where I'll tell you about the new approach because some of you are new and some of you aren't aware and some of you may've only read about it but may not be clear.

The Stewardship Team: Tom Lescoe, Liz Binger, George Dowker, Jennifer Hunt, Karen Mangiacotti, Leanda Zupka and Nick Evento thought carefully about the under toe that accompanies each of our stewardship campaigns. They went to stewardship workshops offered by our UUA Regional Staff. They read books. They offered classes. They met and talked and kept all of you in the center of their careful consideration. Then they made the bold and courageous decision to strip it all back because you seem not to love all the bells and whistles of yesteryear and frankly, this new approach seemed more grown up. Mature. The approach is lean. Simple.

There would be an assumption that each household would increase your financial commitment by 10%. You would receive a letter that indicates your current annual financial commitment and then a figure 10% higher than that for next year.

So for example, if you committed to \$50 this year, your commitment would be \$55 next year. If you committed \$12,000 this year, your commitment would be \$13,200 next year.

(And those two figures, Friends represents the actual range of the financial commitments offered by the congregation.)

If you're good with a 10% increase, you don't need to do anything. You're done.

However, if you want to increase your financial commitment by more than 10% or if you want to decrease your commitment or if you'd like your commitment to remain level, you indicate as much on the form and then your return it to the church office.

We have in the past asked for an additional and separate donation to tend to our fair share contribution to the Unitarian Universalist Association and the New England Region of which we are a part and owe allegiance. We are not doing that this year. Instead we are reinstituting a budget line to fulfill our financial commitment to each of these.

Okay. Let's go back to the table and the Worship Team.

So, I share the strategy I just shared with you with these congregational leaders infusing the sharing with my typical enthusiasm.

But again the hush. The pall. And then this:

"You know, there were quite a few people who by choice, didn't participate last year. They didn't like the approach and so they ignored it."

And in these moments I don't recognize the congregation I serve. I don't recognize you.

What I typically recognize as this congregation's defining characteristics are these: Welcoming. Caring. Justice-seeking. Qualities that our mission statement itself calls us to be. I would add courageous. Dedicated. Creative. Joyful. And important to hold up in this moment: you are generous in spirit.

So, what's the goal of this sermon? Here's my big dream: I want to bust the stewardship grump.

My big dream is that you will be as open and clear and good humored and as supportive in the annual stewardship campaign as you have been with the 4<sup>th</sup> / 5<sup>th</sup> grade class's fundraiser for the Humane Society in which you have been invited to show your allegiance to either cats or dogs by stuffing the ballot boxes with your money.

However coy, it's a brilliant fundraiser. And so far, they've raised a good chunk of money.

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I am, in fact, a little grumpy myself about the tired and oftentimes very grumpy attitude that flares up in this more often energetic and even-tempered congregation when we launch into our annual campaign.

I want to never again hear “All we talk about is money” because honestly, we don’t talk about money enough. We talk about sexuality. Teach our children and youth all about it. We talk about racism. Teach our children and youth all about it. Money? It’s the third rail.

Friends, as a congregation, we are confused. Some of us have felt burned in the past by other faith traditions and that disappointment remains. Some of us feel awkward about having more than enough money. Some of us feel awkward about not having enough. We stubbornly resist the invitation to consider money as a spiritual and ultimately religious currency.

In fact, some of us stay home on the Sundays when money is the topic. So, I’m glad to see all of you here this morning. And I’m glad to get this topic back on the table and in the pulpit. And like in all things, perhaps a few stories will help us to find our way. Perhaps a few good stories about money – cash – and grace, true stories about this congregation, may be a balm for the stewardship grump. I will hold up grace through giving as in:

“I know that fill in the blank is struggling with health issues but does not have insurance. Get this money to her to help make that happen.”

“I know that fill in the blank is struggling to make ends meet while needing training for a different line of work. We think she would be great in this other line of work. Get this money to her to help make that training happen.”

“We know that fill in the blanks are struggling in the wake of the job lay-off. Get this money to them to help out.”

And then those who had been on the receiving end of that grace, they remember and they pay it forward. They do the same.

It’s like a never-ending Secret Santa but the currency is much needed cash. Cash that alleviates anxiety. Cash that reminds the receiver that they are not alone. Cash that inspires hope that the hard time will be endured.

As well as these private sources of financial support, the Minister's Discretionary Fund functions as a bucket full of grace. This is the fund that's filled every Christmas Eve and raises more than twice of every other Good Neighbor Offering, this year upwards of \$4000. There are hundreds of stories born from the grace of your giving to this fund. From the man newly released from prison who needed money for work boots to congregants who are in a jam or fall on hard times who need monetary support. In every dollar there is a story.

We are so generous in so many ways – and joyfully so. So why the resistance to the annual stewardship campaign? Because it is organized? Because it reminds us that we are each of us part of a religion that is, yes: *organized*? If that's your issue, let me ask you this: how **dis**-organized would you like us to be? We are beautifully organized in every aspect of congregational life. Just one example: every Sunday you witness over 50 children leave for their religious education classes led by Caitlin O'Brien. No one in the world is more organized than Caitlin O'Brien. And that's why it works! It's why the whole thing works: we're organized.

The grace-filled stories I just shared represent money given apart from our operating budget. These are stories for specific people and causes. And current wisdom tells us that we are all more willing to give when the giving is specifically targeted. But the operating budget – for which our stewardship campaign is crafted – is about all of it. In the lovely pamphlet that was part of your stewardship packet, I wrote about this very point: the annual campaign is about *all of it*.

It's about Sunday morning. It's about the coffee you'll enjoy after the service. It about the curriculum the children and youth are experiencing in their religious education classes. The sheet music from which the choir sings. It's about preparing for our new construction. It's about 25 Jay Street – the house next door that will house refugees. It's about fairly compensating a dedicated staff and yes, your ministers, too. It's about supporting the Unitarian Universalist Association and our New England Region so that Unitarian Universalism stays strong and grows in the ways we need in a changing world.

The wise woman said: *So, yes, we ask you to fund it. .... We ask you every year for a financial pledge. And because "we" are "you" we can be neither apologetic nor coy nor subtle about this.* (Victoria Safford)

So without apology or subtly without being coy you are being asked to make a financial commitment to this amazing faith and congregation.

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And I am personally asking you to bust the grump. I am asking you to respond to the ask in the same ways that you respond to all other aspects of the life we share:

I am asking you to bring to this task what we all know: that it's about being here for all of us in all ways. Forever and always.

I'll end with my own "Why I give to All Souls". Here's why I'm giving \$2200 this year and 10% more than that next year.

I give to All Souls because I believe that by doing so, my money becomes the currency of hope. In my book, the great religious task is to keep hope kindled. And I'll put my money down for that any day.

I invite you to thank the Stewardship Committee that works with hearts filled with love.

To give in order to be sanctuary for others.

To give until it helps.

I'm inviting you to yes, give joyfully knowing that it's for all of it and for all of us.

The annual stewardship campaign is about all of it. And all of it is worthy of your money. *And certainly worthy of your good graces.*

I'm asking that we finally, and with great maturity and resolve: bust the grump.

Amen.