

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester – February 17, 2008

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Modern-day American society does not make it easy to believe that we have enough.

Enough time, enough money, enough energy, enough love, enough stuff.

Whatever the thing we're measuring, we live in a culture in which we are taught that we're lacking in it.

Entire industries exist to convince us that we need things we don't have. Self-help gurus write books by the thousands promising us the secrets to a happier life, more wealth, and getting what we want. Every week, a new fad diet promises us that we can lose weight and eat more—and have more energy to boot!

We are lured through the store by packaging promising “20% more,” “new and improved,” “buy one, get one free” and “longer-lasting” as if all we need to fill the great void in our lives is two dozen floral-scented dryer sheets or a free forty-cent can of beans.

Today's e-mail programs have to have special filters so that we aren't overwhelmed with the hundreds of messages arriving each day promising us easy ways to get what we don't have—be that lots of money or increased romantic prowess.

All of our problems, it would seem, could be solved if only we had *more*.

So we amass more and more things, we fastidiously guard our time from others, we obsess about our self-image so that at least we can love ourselves. We pile more and more around us, and still we're taught that we are lacking—we cannot satisfy the hideous cycle of wanting more.

It is harmful to us to live in this cycle of scarcity. It is harmful to our health, to our spirit, to our relationships, to our society.

Buddhist teachers have been warning people about this cycle for centuries. To Buddhists, suffering itself comes from the notion that happiness can be attained by getting things that we want. The craving of more leads to attachment and disappointment and suffering.

We must break this cycle, as counter-cultural as it might be. We must refuse to accept that we are mired in scarcity.

We must believe that we have enough.

And one way to cultivate a mindset of abundance is through the spiritual practice of generosity.

Throughout time and in many different cultures and religious traditions, generosity has been seen as a virtue in people. Whether as the practice of remaining loosely attached to material things, or as an obligation to help those less fortunate than we are, as a celebration of thanks to a God who has provided us with abundance, or as a way to cultivate loving-

kindness and compassion, generosity has been cultivated by generations and generations of people who have understood its necessity in human relationships.

Buddhist teachers helping us rid our lives of craving and suffering tell us that one of the six practices necessary to reach enlightenment is the practice of *dana*, or generosity. Dana has many different aspects to it—it is described like this by one Buddhist community:

“Dana is The Gift.

It is both giving and receiving....

It is responding effectively to what the world offers to you; as well as to what it asks of you.

It is recognizing that we start with nothing, that we knew nothing; that everything we now know, and will ever know, passes through us; through our eyes, ears, nose, mouth, skin, mind.

It is knowing that these are not boundaries; that they are themselves gifts, continually changing and adapting to circumstance.

It is gratitude and energy, confidence and a lightness that comes from knowing you are safe.

If you were to lose everything you would still be ahead.

Your connections mean that you have it all, always, forever.

The net of life is unbroken.” (Manzanita Village, http://www.manzanitavillage.org/meditation/fr_ongoingevents.html)

Thus, the practice of generosity is itself the practice of connection to all of life, and those connections bring with them the possibility of the enlightenment of being a Bodhisattva.

Generosity is all of this and more—it is a powerful symbol in a world filled with greed. Generosity is a way to truly live our values out in the world.

When I worked with people to help them identify their calling—where their gifts and passions met the needs and hurts of the world—one thing I asked them to do was identify the values they claimed and the values they lived.

Claimed values are those things we think are most important. They are the values taught to us by others, the values we have internalized in our own minds and hearts as the ones that illustrate for us the right way to live. They are what we proclaim to others as the values our lives are based upon.

Lived values were the values that are reflected in how we live our lives. They are the values we project to others by virtue of what we do—not what we say—and the values we support on a daily basis.

In the classes I taught, it was usually the case that claimed values and lived values did not match up entirely. It is, after all, a great challenge in this world to bring our lives in alignment with the values we claim as most important.

What are your claimed values? What are your lived values?

Years ago, I learned from my minister, the Rev. Dr. Arvid Straube, that one way to help us determine what our *lived* values are is to examine our datebooks (or their electronic equivalents) and our checkbooks (or *their* electronic equivalents).

Where do you spend your time? Where do you spend your money?

The answers to these questions might be eye-opening to us. In asking these questions to myself, I have, from time to time, realized that I was spending my time doing busy-work, mindless tasks that filled up my day. I realized that I was spending my money on whatever came along, with no sense of purpose or vision for what I could do with it.

Time and money are only two things with which we can be generous—and I encourage you to be generous also with your love, with your forgiveness, with your compassion and with your passion.

This being said, time and money are good indicators of our lived values in a culture in which our time is squeezed down to the last second, and money is simultaneously a signifier of status and a taboo subject to talk about. Our attitudes towards time and money are good ways to understand whether or not generosity is truly a spiritual practice in our lives—whether we are able to be generous with our resources in a way that helps us live the values we claim.

Generosity, when taken as a spiritual practice, has distinct effects. How does it make you feel? I know how my life is different when I am being generous.

In 2004, I set out to give 10% of my income, to practice the ancient art of tithing spoken about in the Hebrew Scriptures. I did it in the modern way, though—I set out to give 5% of my income to my home congregation and another 5% to causes I believed in—social justice agencies, educational institutions that supported me, environmental groups and even a few political causes.

In the end, I wound up giving away something like 13% of my gross income, and I never once missed a penny of it. That year, I found that had fewer worries about money than in any year of my adult life before or since.

In 2005, I got scared—money seemed tight, and I stopped this practice. The fears and anxieties returned full-force. I have since pledged to make generosity a regular part of my spiritual practice again, which is why my first act upon accepting the call from this Fellowship to serve as your minister was to make a pledge of 5% of my income—a pledge that increased once Eric had found a job.

It felt good to be able to do that, and it feels good to make good on my generosity.

Generosity makes us feel good. It makes us feel empowered to make a difference in the world. It makes us feel engaged and alive and proud. The act of giving multiplies itself in the rewards it gives us every day.

Generosity requires us to understand that we not only have enough for ourselves, but that we also have enough to share.

In 2004, I believed that my monetary resources were abundant. I gave them away deliberately, and I felt great. In 2005, with the same income, I feared that my resources were scarce. I spent them without intentionality, and felt anxious and afraid.

The practice of generosity requires us to begin from a place of abundance. Generosity means examining and rejecting the culture of scarcity in which we find ourselves.

Many times, I've met people whose bank accounts would label them as poor, but whose lives are full—not of things that cost money to buy, but of contentment with the abundance that is. Similarly, I've met people who have more money than they could possibly spend, but who are constantly wanting more—thinking that their lives are ruled by scarcity.

It is harmful to live from a scarcity model—in our lives and in our congregations. What does it do to our religious community to operate from a place of scarcity? It provokes fear and competition, and not love and relationships. Scarcity keeps us holed up in fear, and prevents us from opening our doors, meeting new people and starting new ministries.

Of course, in the coming weeks we, as a community will have the challenge of breaking free from the scarcity model that has plagued us for so many years.

Over the course of the next month, we will be engaged in our annual campaign for the financial stewardship of this congregation. This year, it will look and feel a little different than it has in years past—because we are starting with the assumption that there is enough.

This year, it is my fervent hope that you won't hear talk about average pledges, or supplemental campaigns, or turning off the lights. Our focus this year will be on understanding that each of us has an opportunity to be generous—and if we take that opportunity, we will be able to do great things as a community.

And I truly do believe that there is an abundance of resources here in this Fellowship. What that means in terms of dollar amounts will be very different to different families here.

This approach is based both in new wisdom about congregational stewardship as well as in my own experiences.

You see, when I first joined a UU congregation, I was a graduate student. My annual salary was barely \$10,000 a year. My expenses were somewhat more than that, to be honest, and I found myself mostly surviving on credit. Somewhere in there, the annual giving campaign came around, and I began receiving calls from the canvasser assigned to me.

Ivor Collins—I still remember who it was—patiently left message after message on my home machine. I avoided his calls steadfastly. I got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach every time the phone rang, thinking that I was going to be outcast from my newfound religious community for not having lots of money. You see, talk was that year that the congregation needed an average giving of \$1000—and I didn't have anywhere near that to contribute.

A week or two into my avoidance of the canvass, Ivor caught me at home on the phone. He calmly explained to me why he thought it was important to be generous with our congregation. He let me know a bit about the congregation's vision for the next year's budget. And then he asked me how much I thought I could pledge.

I hemmed and hawed, avoiding a response. "Michael," he said, "I know you're a student. This is about generosity, not amount—let me know what you can afford." I told him that I might be able to pledge \$100 if I really stretched. His response? "Thank you. I know that that's very generous." At no point in that conversation, and at no point in the following year was I ever made to feel guilty for my \$100 pledge. I was trusted—by Ivor and by the congregation—to be generous with my money, however much that meant.

Ten years later, I was a major donor to that same congregation, and I got the same response to my much larger pledge: Thank you for your generosity.

As we proceed in the next few weeks, I want to be able to trust that each of you will be generous with your resources to this community of faith, this Fellowship that represents more than any individual one of us.

I want to be able to say, whether your pledge is \$100 or tens of thousands of dollars, “thank you for your extraordinary generosity.”

And I want you to be able to know—whether your pledge is \$100 or tens of thousands of dollars—that it represents real, unadulterated generosity. A gift given freely, and not reluctantly or under compulsion. A gift given from a place of abundance and hospitality, to create something together that we are unable to create by ourselves. A gift of connection, and of trust in the abundance of the future.

Spiritual teachers throughout time have told us that the practice of generosity is rewarded with abundance. Different faiths, in different ways, have taught us that we should be generous because the act of generosity pleases God, or creates harmony in the universe.

I take a slightly different view. I believe that generosity makes the abundance that is already around us evident.

Many of you are familiar with the Christian story of the loaves and the fishes, in which Jesus and his disciples collected a handful of fish and a few loaves of bread and fed an entire mass of people. Many say that this was a miracle. Perhaps, though, there is a better explanation.

Modern biblical scholars suggest that it is possible that something else entirely was happening there. It is probable, given the norms of the day, that pretty much everyone who gathered there that day had brought something to eat—a fish, perhaps, or a small loaf of bread—and that most of the people, when asked to share what little they had had chosen instead to hide their food, tucked under their cloaks or in a sack.

When a generous few stepped forward to share their meal with the crowd, those who had kept their food hoarded to themselves were inspired by that generosity, and, as baskets of fish and bread were passed around they took what they needed and added their extra food to the collection, thus making those loaves and fishes last a lot longer than it would have otherwise. The food was never scarce, generosity was.

I believe that this is an important lesson. I believe that the practice of generosity uncovers the abundance that has been there all along. It feeds the masses despite the voices of naysayers and those who insist on a culture of scarcity. Rather than being an act for which we are rewarded, generosity is a practice that creates rewards in our lives—the rewards of abundance, of good will, of compassion, and of being able to live the values we claim.

I believe that each of you has the ability to be generous, and I trust that you will do so when asked. Together, we can transform the culture here from one of scarcity into one of abundance.

There will be enough. There is enough. There has always been enough.

Blessed be.