**­“Stewardship as a Circle of Trust”**

10 March 2024: Stewardship Sunday

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Durango, CO

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**READING: “Summer,” Parker Palmer**

Human nature …. seems to regard perpetual scarcity as the law of life. Daily I am astonished at how readily I believe that something I need is in short supply… The irony, often tragic, is that by embracing the scarcity assumption, we create the very scarcities we fear. If I hoard material goods, others will have too little, and I will never have enough. If I fight my way up the ladder of power, others will be defeated, and I will never feel secure. If I get jealous of someone I love, I am likely to drive that person away. We create scarcity by fearfully accepting it as law and by competing with others for resources as if we were stranded in the Sahara at the last oasis.

In the human world, abundance does not happen automatically. It is created when we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common store. Whether the scarce resource is money or love or power or words, the true law of life is that we generate more of whatever seems scarce by trusting its supply and passing it around. Authentic abundance does not lie in secured stockpiles of food or cash or influence or affection but in belonging to a community where we can give those goods to others who need them --- and receive them from others when we are in need.

Here is a (summertime) truth: abundance is a communal act, the joint creation of an incredibly complex ecology in which each part functions on behalf of the whole and, in return, is sustained by the whole. Community doesn’t just create abundance --- community is abundance. If we could learn that equation from the world of nature, the human world might be transformed.

**SERMON: Stewardship as a Circle of Trust**

Today let’s consider abundance. Parker Palmer wrote the passage about abundance I just read in the context of summertime flowering, but really abundance can be present any time of the year. If we cultivate a mindset of abundance, we can live into abundance, at any time of the year. Envisioning abundance can help make it happen. Of course, the inverse is also true: if our vision is one of scarcity, alas, we become the scarcity. Today we are talking about financial stewardship for this congregation. Today is the penultimate Sunday of UUFD’s annual stewardship campaign, which began in February. We are nearing the end of that annual period in congregational life when you, the congregation, discern your intentions for financial giving in the coming year. It’s an important time in the church year, especially for congregations organized by congregational polity, that is, governance in which the local congregation is responsible for its own financial management.

I expect there are many paradigms among us, many different reactions to and relationships with financial stewardship. Today I call you to consider stewardship through a lens of abundance and how cultivating trust in the topic of stewardship can enhance talking about money. Perhaps this morning I can offer some thoughts which will expand your relationship with stewardship. Nurturing trust in stewardship helps us ground stewardship in abundance, not scarcity.

Many of you in this congregation have participated in the spiritual practice program “Circles of Trust,” which I have introduced here. In fact, just yesterday we concluded our winter series, on the theme of “Habits of the Heart.” If you haven’t participated directly, you’ve likely heard me speak about the program and its founder, the Quaker writer Parker Palmer, and how Circles of Trust expands compassionate communication and strengthens community. As I’ve been interacting with many of you in Circles of Trust, as well as on this current pledge campaign, I got to imagining how seeing a stewardship drive as a Circle of Trust renders stewardship as real Soul Work, work of the heart, work which affirms to us that “We Are All in this Together,” the first Habit of the Heart, as we support the congregation.

What would it look like if we applied the same principles and habits which we develop during Circles of Trust to this current stewardship period? In our retreats, we learn how trust grows from agreeing on and living out common values, a common mission, a common purpose. How do you understand the purpose, the mission of this congregation, and the broader mission of Unitarian Universalism and its important place in American culture? If we can expand trust in congregational life overall, we can grow in trusting this annual necessity of a stewardship drive.

Definition

Let’s start by reviewing the meaning of “stewardship.” Stewardship goes far beyond fundraising, beyond canvass, money, or pledge. Generically defined, stewardship means “the managing of something entrusted to our care.” In your case, this congregation, which embodies the values of free religion, is entrusted to you, the participants in congregational life. Stewardship is grounded in your covenants --- your promises --- for how you intend to support this congregation in the coming year.

There are many ways to engage in stewardship for the church. We often express Stewardship as giving of Time, Talent, and Treasures, a Holy UU Trinity of sorts. The giving in all three areas in most congregations is on-going all through the year. However, during these particular weeks defined as the stewardship drive, our focus is on one particular aspect of giving: your commitment to financial giving, to the Treasures. It is the time when you are asked to discern how much you hope to give to support this congregation financially. Lying behind the question of how you will give are several other more important questions.

Values

For one, stewardship in the free church is not first about money. It is first about sharing common values that call us to walk and work together in shared activities which require financial support in order to function or operate or survive. Financial stewardship makes it possible for the free church to sustain and promote the values which connect any of us in this community, and anyone in the wider community who benefits from the values we advocate beyond the walls of this building.

Stewardship in the free church is driven by passion for our common values. Every act of financial giving probably comes with a story about the giver’s passion for the cause. Stewardship drives are about encouraging donors to look inside themselves and identify what they care about, what values they want to sustain and increase. Just consider what values you promote and want to realize at UUFD. You are currently engaged in new exploration of common values as you continue to work on the all-congregation covenant which our UUA Primary Contact, Rev. Sarah Millspaugh, which you began here several weeks ago. How will your stewardship support the values expressed in the new covenant?

Through shared common values, we also generate relationships. Giving to one another and to organizations creates connections. Through connections we nurture the potential to touch and transform lives, we create the possibility to make a difference in the world. Having established a relationship with a group or a cause, we are more inclined to give. **Money follows relationship, relationship does not follow money** (repeat). Giving is an act of love that flows through the giver to others and then out into the world to produce a needed change. Giving begins deep within our hearts.

An often-repeated story which I’ve told before illustrates the importance of giving based on shared values. A woman named Lynn Twist worked as a fund-raiser for a Hunger Project. One day she met with a corporate executive to discuss a partnership. Before she finished, he reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a pre-printed check for $50,000. From his body language, it was clear that he wanted her gone as soon as possible. He was afraid to risk true giving. He had done his bit to relieve some corporate guilt from mistakes his company had made. She felt the guilt slide across the desk with the check. Later, at a fund raiser in Harlem which Twist attended, a woman stood up. “My name is Gertrude. I like what you said. …. Money runs through my life like water, but it’s my joy to pass on what I can, to do good for others. I have fifty dollars that I earned doing a white woman’s wash, and I want to give it to you.” Gertrude affirmed the values of Twist’s organization. The next day Twist summoned her courage and returned the $50,000 check to the corporate executive with a note encouraging him to give the money to something he felt passionate about.

What is your comfort level in talking about financial giving? What is your comfort level in recognizing or accepting the basic premise that financial planning is a given part of so many aspects of life --- personal, family, business, institutional, and more. When we come to church, we might wish to focus on spiritual practice or social justice advocacy or children’s faith formation, but all of these arenas also invite us to find a level of comfort in realizing the financial needs for all these programs. They all require financial support.

My experience as an interim minister is that many congregations could expand their trust in talking about money: I’ve heard it said that UUs are more willing to talk about sex than to talk about money. I’ve always found this curious, that many seem to be such reluctant givers. I expect this reluctance has something to do with trust: trust that we’re not perfect enough in our giving; or trust that we will be judged for the amount we give, no matter how large or small; or trust that the range of giving is correlated with a range of privilege and power in congregational life. Instead, what would it look like if our trust in talking about money emerged from deep listening to one another, the single most important habit we practice in Circle of Trust workshops. As we deeply listen to the stories of others, stories about individual’s engagement in congregational life, about what this church means to each of us, about how living out the values of this church in the wider world, we deepen the relationships that call us to financial giving.

How can you grow in trust of this stewardship process?... trust that your dollars will be well spent; trust that this congregation will go forward well through various changes on the horizon, especially as you search for a new minister; trust that no matter the size of your giving, it is appreciated. How does your story of giving intersect with this congregation’s story of promoting liberal religion in the world. How does that intersection call you to a mindset of abundance, to generous giving, to comfort and trust in talking about money when you come here to church?

Emotions

The topic of money generates a range of reactions and emotions, like the woman who was nervous about a meeting with her minister scheduled at her request. She asked for a meeting to talk about giving a gift to the church. She could have waited for the gift to be unveiled after her death but for some reason she wanted to give the gift while she was still alive. Tears welled in her eyes as she handed her minister a check. She admitted that she was nervous, it felt risky. She had never done such a daring thing at church before. She cried as she said that giving felt even better than she thought it would. And when the minister realized that the check could support some very necessary repairs to the church heating system, the minister cried too. Often giving, no matter the size of the gift, can feel risky if we haven’t nurtured trusting habits of giving. Giving often takes courage.

In addition to your comfort level with giving, with what attitude do you approach financial stewardship: with a mindset of scarcity, or with abundance? Notice that I’m not equating this question about attitude with the size of the giving. A smaller amount coming from a place of abundance and love and commitment to community is truly a much greater gift than a large donation given out of obligation or pressure from others.

I want to invite everyone in this room --- old-timers, newcomers, visitors --- to live into the emotions and reactions you experience around the topic of giving money. Be in touch with your reactions and emotions, especially if you tend to sweep money talk under some rug of avoidance. For most of us, discomfort over money talk has deep roots in our life experiences, perhaps as far back as childhood. Perhaps talking about financial stewardship feels risky because money is currently short, or was short at some point in your life. I get it, I know what being on the low end of financial resources feels like. So I can’t emphasize enough that this sermon, and this current pledge campaign is for everyone. Each and every person --- newcomers, visitors, old-timers --- is invited to discern how each can give according to her or his or their own means. Be in touch with feelings and emotions which the topic of church stewardship generates in you. Listen to those inner voices: Is risk associated with financial giving for you? Do your reactions to giving have to do only with giving at church, or giving more broadly? The mindset of HOW we approach giving, in any context, is related to those feelings we experience when we hear the word “stewardship” or “donation” or “pledge,” or when we realize that the phone call we just answered is from our favorite benevolent organization or our alma mater.

No matter your reactions and emotions, I hope that today and through the conclusion of this stewardship drive, your financial giving to UUFD feels life-giving, not threatening or uncomfortable. And that your giving comes from your heart and your soul and your best intentions for this congregation. Most important, I hope that you approach giving with a spirit of trust and compassion and generosity, not from a sense of obligation and power and control. Giving from a place of trust generates a climate of abundance. As our reading said, we create abundance “when we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common store.”

Beyond the common values which inspire us to generosity and abundance, understanding the realities of financial stewardship in the free church is important. In congregational polity, Unitarian Universalist congregations enjoy freedom from top-down, centralized authority and administration. There are benefits in this freedom which I expect everyone in this room values. Yet with this freedom, comes responsibility that each congregation is financially self-sustaining. Each congregation is responsible for its own property, programming, and staffing. There is no UU Pope looking out for this building when it needs repairs, like the new HVAC system which you plan to install, or beefing up the safety plan, or expanding staffing and programs, including ministerial search. Being clear about the values we share and the imperative of enough money to operate our institutions, we can grow in trust that our giving will make a difference.

After the service this morning, if you have not yet done so, please pick up your stewardship packets near the entryway. Members of the stewardship committee will be there to help you. Next Sunday will be Celebration Sunday. This service will include our ritual for turning in pledges for the coming year. May your discerning of your stewardship to this congregation invite you into a Circle of Trust, grounded in deep listening in your heart and soul.

MAY THIS BE SO.

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