

“Why Should We Give?: Stewardship as Spiritual Practice”

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Reston

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‘Stewardship’ means ‘the managing of something entrusted to our care.’ We are all stewards of our free churches. Stewardship means all that you give, not just money and other tangible items, to sustain UUCR. Looking at stewardship as a spiritual practice may offer some new perspective on your participation in UUCR’s current stewardship drive. Stewardship is one way we live out the mission of liberal faith.

Reading: “It Is Rare Indeed That People Give”

by James Baldwin

It is rare indeed that people give. Most people guard and keep. They suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be. One can give nothing whatever without giving oneself ---that is to say, risking oneself. If one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving.

Sermon

A Unitarian Universalist minister told a story. He received a call from a congregant. She wanted to meet with him as soon as possible. He didn’t ask why, but it sounded urgent, so they met. She told him that her family had recently come into money. She had few personal needs for the money. Because her church meant a lot to her, she wanted to give a gift. She said she realized that the donation could wait until after her death, but she wanted to do this now. And then she gave the minister a very large check. As she gave him the check, she was crying. When the minister asked why, she said, ‘This feels even better than I thought it would.’ Not only did she cry, the minister did too, as much over her joy as over the gift, which, by the way, made possible major improvements to their building. There was risk on her part to give the gift. She wasn’t sure what this experience would be like, and she didn’t enter into this meeting with the minister with this outcome in mind. Even from the most generous hearts, giving can entail risk. Giving takes courage. Giving of any type --- financial, time, relationships --- takes courage.

This weekend, this congregation kicks off the community portion of its stewardship drive. A church’s stewardship drive --- what we used to call the canvass campaign --- might feel like risky business for some of us. Talking about stewardship and engaging in personal visits, or conversation, or cottage meetings hosted by stewardship representatives, might feel a touch uncomfortable. Church stewardship drives may involve a lot of hard work and commitment to a cause. It may include goals that may or may not be met. It probably includes talking about money, but it should include talking about other types of giving.

Let us consider how we feel around the subject of stewardship: does it feel risky or awkward or touchy for you; or perhaps giving feels nurturing, or fulfilling. In either case, exploring some basics about giving might expand our horizons about stewardship at church.

Let's review some definitions. Let's start with 'stewardship.' 'Stewardship' goes far beyond 'fundraising,' beyond 'canvass,' 'money,' or 'pledge.' Yes, canvassing is part of the stewardship process, but stewardship is much more. 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 your care, you, the members and friends of Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Reston.

The mindset with which we approach stewardship --- in any context --- has a lot to do with those types of feelings we experience when we hear the word, or realize that the phone call we just accepted is a stewardship pitch from our favorite benevolent organization or our alma mater. What is your mindset toward stewardship? Is it a mentality of scarcity? If so, that will probably keep the conversation in the 'risky' category. Conversely, a 'mentality of abundance' can ground the conversation in hope, in creativity, in possibility, as the woman in the story came to experience.

In a mentality of scarcity, we tell ourselves that there is never enough, we never can, we never will be able to do whatever In contrast, in a mentality of abundance we say, "yes we can," we believe in the possible, we dare to dream, we believe that giving away brings more back to us in return. A mentality of abundance also reminds us that stewardship happens in many ways. Stewardship in its fullest sense means all that you give, to sustain this congregation, or any organization. As 'stewards' of UUCR you support this congregation's mission, its reason for being here, regardless of the particulars of who the members are or how the contributions are used.

I once had a congregant, Bert, who loved to give the stewardship sermon in his small congregation. Bert's description of 'stewardship' as giving of 'time, talents, and treasures' is a good one. I suspect you might hear that phrase from some of our stewardship reps when they call you or visit with you. You are being called to all types of giving to sustain the work and this witness of this congregation. Last week we were reminded about the importance of giving of shared ministry, involving largely your time and talents. Today this congregation is being called to discern how you can give of treasures through your financial pledge. Through shared ministry, everyone in a congregation can see herself as a minister and see all that each of us does as ministry. An attitude of shared ministry affirms one's spiritual relationship to a congregation. Moving from tasks that need to be done, to ministry that serves the mission of the congregation, can significantly transform how we understand our giving.

More Core Values

We might approach the meaning of stewardship from a different angle. We might ask, why should we the people be concerned with the maintenance of a church, a congregation of people? How is money related to the existence of a place that houses a spiritual community. Well, for one, in this congregational way of doing religion, the freedoms that we enjoy from being organized by congregational polity also means that there is congregational responsibility. In congregational polity, each congregation is responsibility for its own property, its building, its maintenance.. There is no higher authority at the UUA, our denominational headquarters, looking out for this building when it needs repairs... and I doubt that most of would want that. One of the responsibilities that comes with religious freedom is our responsibility to stewardship of time, talent, and treasures.

We might back up even further and ask a yet more basic question. What does it matter, if congregations organized by congregational polity continue to exist or not? What would it matter, if our free congregations disappeared because of lack of stewardship? I hope all of you will say, of course it matters that our congregations remain free and healthy and strong. We gain so much from them as places for individuals to come to, to experience personal piety, personal growth, personal transformation based on liberal values. They are safe places that provide radical hospitality, for members, long-term friends, and newcomers. They are places where we can educate our children in values we hope they follow when they have free choice as adults.

Our congregation also promote justice in the community. Being part of an interconnected web of life, religious institutions are called to work for justice among folks we may not even know by name, as well as justice for Mother Earth. Indeed, it matters that our congregations are here, that they don't go away.

Governed as Unitarian Universalist churches are by congregational polity, then, the financial support to sustain this inward and outward work comes not from on high, not from a denominational structure, but from members and friends of the congregation. I have urged UUCR to promote a mindset of 'shared ministry' in your relationship between congregants and professional staff, and in your interpersonal relationships among members and friends. Through shared ministry, everyone in a congregation can see herself as a minister and consider all that each of us does as "ministry." An attitude of shared ministry affirms one's spiritual relationship to a congregation. Moving from tasks that need to be done, to ministry that serves the mission of the congregation, can significantly transform how we understand our giving.

There might be a parallel with the notion of 'stewardship:' each of you seeing yourselves as 'stewards' also influences how you approach life, not only life in this congregation but more widely. Your giving of time, talents, and treasures generates connections. A mentality of shared stewardship keeps one focused on a mission outside ourselves, warding off that tendency toward narcissism and self-gratification.

Stewardship as Spiritual practice

Viewed spiritually, stewardship can take on new meaning. Stewardship can be one of your spiritual practices. A spiritual practice is anything that enhances our spirituality, a concept that I explain as connections at different levels---within the self, with others and the environment, and with what is beyond myself that I can't explain, whether it be a sense of external divinity or mystery that lies within other human beings. Enhancing these connections is the goal of spiritual practice. Last fall I suggested three qualities that make for effective spiritual practice. Spiritual practice is 1) **intentional**, 2) **regular**, and 3) **active**, not passive. When it is working effectively, stewardship can produce many of these same results that other spiritual practices do.

Giving as Intentional

Let's consider these three qualities of spiritual practice in the context of stewardship. First, stewardship is **intentional**. That is, we make a conscious decision to give. Giving is within our control, grounded in our best values. It is an act that assumes the best intentions of everyone, and it honors everyone's particular talents. Intentional giving reinforces community. Intentional giving

is committed to nurturing the entire community, without particular, individual agendas or outcomes in mind.

A few years ago I was part of a touching story of intentional giving among Unitarian Universalists in the Long Island area. One of the UU minister chaplains was working with a hospice patient from En Salvador. The patient really wanted to die in his homeland, but he had no money to return home. To be transported there for burial would have been even more costly. My colleague was committed to helping, but wasn't sure how. He then did something he had never done before: he solicited money from ministers in the local clergy group for this man whom none of us knew. One particular minister heard the request and ran with it. Almost before the chaplain knew it, this minister appealed to her congregation.... Would they contribute to make the end of life of a man they did not know more peaceful?.... A totally altruistic act of compassion. The congregation surprised even their own minister: they contributed more than enough for the plane ticket home, for the patient and his son. The man died around Christmas. The son continued his strained existence on Long Island: his life was very hard, but he was at peace because he had watched his father die in his homeland. The UU congregations gave, freely, without wondering what was in it for them. They gave because it was the compassionate thing to do.

Giving as Regular

As spiritual practice, stewardship should also be **regular**, a matter of course, part of our commitment to being a mission-based congregation, not conditioned by particular outcomes or circumstances. Giving of time, talents, and treasures should be regular and reliable: our work on committees we've agreed to serve on, our attendance at congregation-wide events like worship services and dinners, and more. Giving should not be conditioned by a consumerist mentality of 'what's in it for me' or 'I'll be there if I don't have anything better to do.' I admit I have often heard comments often about how so-and-so limited her or his pledge because he or she doesn't like such-and-such about so-and-so. Regular giving means giving over: not holding power over an institution contingent on how one's personal needs are being met.

The UU minister Patrick O'Neill tells a story about his father, Bill, who gave to his church without expecting anything in return. Bill, an immigrant laborer, was very devoted to his Catholic parish in New Jersey. At one point Bill was laid off and could not meet his financial pledge to his church. This was a blow to Bill's pride, and he knew his congregation needed every penny it could get. So Bill decided to offer his services as unpaid custodian until he could afford to resume regular pledge payments. He asked the church to use that custodian money to do good somewhere in the world. Bill worked several hours a night. The strike finally ended and Bill's job resumed, as did his pledge payments. But he decided to continue working as an unpaid custodian, for the next thirty years. That custodial service was very meaningful to his father. Rev. O'Neill saw first-hand how regular giving, with no return expected, can change lives.

I can relate to the father's situation. I have had periods in my life when income has been low. I have had to cut back, to economize, to measure time parked at parking meters very carefully so as to not waste a dime, to keep the thermostat low even on the very cold days. These stark periods have not been fun, but they did open me up all the more to what really matters in my life. Your stewardship leaders realize all too well any of us may fall on tough times. Remember that stewardship means a wide range of giving: time and talents as well as treasures..

Giving as Active, not Passive

We also hope giving is **authentic**. Has anyone ever received a gift of cash from a relative or friend, with the accompanying explanation: 'I'm giving you cash because I didn't know what to get you.' How does that make you feel? Certainly, the product of the cash --- a new shirt, or book, or computer --- might be nice, but did the gift of cash do much to increase connections between you and the giver?

There is a story recorded by Lynne Twist which illustrates the importance of authentic giving. Twist once worked as a fund-raiser for a Hunger Project. One day she met with a corporate executive in his Chicago office to build a partnership with him. Before she finished her opening explanation for the visit, the executive 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, in Harlem, Twist was at a fund-raiser for her organization. Would she rouse any contributions from this audience, she wondered? Then a woman stood up. 'My name is Gertrude. I like what you said. I ain't got no checkbook and no credit cards. 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.' Twist knew her organization's principles had been affirmed by the woman's donation. The next day she 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 really felt committed to. Years later she received a letter from him. Twist had broken all the rules of corporate giving, and that act turned his life as he came to realize that he really did want to be part of something that was making a difference. Out of his own pocket, he gave personal contributions in excess of \$50,000 many times over.

Call to Stewardship

I call you to commit to deepening your relationship with this congregation through your stewardship. Most of you have probably heard the data: on average, Unitarian Universalists are at the upper levels of education and income. Their potential for giving is great. In practice, Unitarian Universalists are near the bottom of giving among American denominations, for some of whom tithing is standard, motivated to give because they want to assert their values on our culture. One may disagree with the values of some other religions, but the outcome is nothing to sneeze at: in many churches of the religious right, membership and giving are growing at amazing rates. Tithing in the liberal tradition is not impossible: I have many colleagues who offer ten percent of their income to their own churches and other non-profits that support the same life values they believe in.

So why are liberals so reluctant to give? Is James Baldwin correct, that giving is risky business? Don't liberals have the guts to give freely, to support liberal values? I often sense the ugly head of independence rearing itself in our liberal congregations, especially when it comes to stewardship. I often sense a spirit of, 'I can do this stuff of life alone --- I'm bright enough, self-sufficient enough. I don't need to give to a community because I don't need to receive from a community. We find it hard to admit that indeed we DO need one another. This is what it means to be religious: to be connected, to be part of a network, no matter our theological orientation. As the CEO in the last

story learned, you can't put a price tag on community. It can make a difference between simply existing and truly living. Yes, the tangible consequence of the \$50,000 checks matters --- contributions like that can keep religious institutions afloat, keep the paychecks coming to our staff, often the folks who can least afford to be laid off when budgets get tight --- but without the accompanying spirit, the big check isn't what a Community of Compassion is all about.

Our liberal congregations make a unique offering to our communities. The giving in this congregation supports this congregation as well as the Joseph Priestley District and the national Unitarian Universalist Association. Stewardship is an important spiritual practice. Discern if there is a consumerist in you. It's not just what you take away from this congregation: it's what you contribute. Be present and give, to keep this whole institution strong. Give of time, talents, and treasures. Your stewardship today forecasts the legacy you will leave for this religious community years from now. What gifts will you bring to keep this Community moving into the future?

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