

CHOOSE TO BLESS THE WORLD
By Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School for the
Ministry

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—
can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind's power,
The strength of the hands,
The reaches of the heart,
The gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting

Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
Bind up wounds,
Welcome the stranger,
Praise what is sacred,
Do the work of justice
Or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door,
Hoard bread,
Abandon the poor,
Obscure what is holy,
Comply with injustice
Or withhold love.

You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude
To search for the sources of power and grace;
Native wisdom, healing, and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into community,
The endeavor shared,
The heritage passed on,
The companionship of struggle,
The importance of keeping faith,
The life of ritual and praise,
The comfort of human friendship,
The company of earth
The chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.
Together—that is another possibility waiting.

How Will You Use Your Gifts?

By Rev. Don Southworth

August 27, 2006

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“One of the first things I saw on my first day at seminary in August 1996 was the official Starr King School for the Ministry T-shirt. On the front of the shirt was a beautiful drawing of a sand dollar. I discovered the importance and meaning of the sand dollar later that morning, during our opening worship service. Rebecca Parker, the President of Starr King, spoke poetically and movingly about the sand dollar’s history at the school and its symbolism for our time at Starr King. We were each invited to choose a sand dollar to take with us on our journeys.

With tears in my eyes, I prayerfully selected the sand dollar that I knew would be the perfect companion on my road to ministry. When I returned to my seat, and as I lovingly fondled it, my precious sand dollar shattered into several pieces and soon was nothing but sand dollar dust. I realized this probably wasn’t a good omen for my future, so I snuck back to the basket to take another. Certain that nobody saw me, I slunk back to my seat and gently placed the new sand dollar in my pocket. Fifteen minutes later when I went to touch my sacred sand dollar, I discovered it too was in pieces.

Convinced that the Gods were telling me something about my choice to pursue the ministry, I quietly dumped my sand dollar dust into the garbage and wondered if Starr King was the place for me.

Fortunately the t-shirt on the wall had writing on the back as well. “*How will you use your gifts?*” was the simple question. Since sand dollars did not seem to be my thing, I hoped I could do a better job with that question. Since that day that question became one of the guiding lights of my life & my ministry. “*How will you use your gifts?*” It is a question that has the power to transform the world...even on those days when we feel as imperfect as a broken sand dollar.”

I said those words the night I graduated from Starr King in May of 2000. They are as true today as they were then, in fact now that I have served three congregations since that night, I am even more convinced that discovering and sharing our gifts – those unique skills, talents, passions, dreams, desires, abilities, yearnings – and helping others to share theirs as well, is some of the most important work religious communities call us to do.

This morning I invite you to reflect with me not only on the question I raised that night, *how will you use your gifts*, but also on the exciting theology, a theology of gifting as I call it, that such a question is grounded on.

Some of you may wonder how the theology of anything could be exciting. Someone once asked John Buehrens, the former President of the UUA, if he had developed any special strategies for dealing with all the airplane travel he had to do as president. He said he had. “If I want to have a conversation with the person I’m sitting with, when they ask what I do I tell them I’m a minister. If I want to have long uninterrupted time alone, I tell them I’m a theologian.”

When I went to seminary I was not sure I wanted anything to do with theologians, or theology. Theology felt like a scary word to me, doing theology was something that really smart, really old, often dead, white guys did. Theology’s only purpose, I thought, was arguing about the nature of God, and arguing about the nature of God did not seem very practical or helpful to me at all. After taking a couple of classes and learning about the different types of theology, and that many theologians – at least these days – are not white, old, male or dead I changed my perspective a bit.

But what really made me a fan of theology was leading the most popular Unitarian Universalist Adult Religious Education class we have, Richard Gilbert’s “Building Your Own Theology”. Gilbert believes, and he has convinced me, that all of us are theologians if we care about the big questions of life and are willing to reflect on and, sometimes, struggle with the answers. He writes, “Religion is that core of

ultimate meanings, values, and convictions to which we commit our lives. Theology is the reflection upon and criticism of those meanings, values, and convictions.”

When it comes to reflecting upon the meaning, values and convictions of gifts and sharing gifts I get very excited. Why? Because encouraging, teaching, inspiring, challenging people to discover and share their gifts is what I believe ministry – and maybe even my life– is all about.

And the main reason is because of theology.

What is the greatest, most amazing and miraculous gift any of us have ever received? That’s right – LIFE!

This life that we have been given comes with only one expectation – that we use it and share it with every ounce of passion and commitment that we have. Where did this life come from, what or who gave it to us?

That’s where our theology comes in. Now we know that we have many different theological perspectives in our fellowship. We have humanists and atheists, theists and agnostics, scientists and mystics. But when it comes to appreciating the gift package that each one of us is, it does not matter what theology we espouse – we all should all be awed and blown away by the miracle that is our life.

If we believe God is the reason for our creation, it is probably easy to embrace the idea that each one of us comes into the world not only unique but with a purpose, a calling, to be and do something wonderful. But when I think about the amazing miracle that life – and each one of us –is, thinking that God is the reason I am here is too simple a thought compared with the larger reality.

Imagine everything that had to happen in the last two billion years for us to all be alive and sitting here this morning. If that does not blow your mind and rock your world, I don’t know what will. Think of all the atoms and molecules that had to dance around just perfectly to come together as a human being. Think of all the accidents and coincidences that had to happen just right for our great, great, great, great, great grandparents to meet and fall in love. If you like mathematics factor that number by about 1,000,000 for each generation in our family tree. Infinity seems to be WAY too small a number.

Think about all those eggs and sperm who did not want to get out of bed, so to speak, on the night or morning of our conception, and think about those two who did.

And think about all that had to go right for you just this morning for you and me to show up and be here today – the power had to work, the alarm clock had to ring, the car had to start, the caffeine had to kick in, the newspaper had to be thin enough, the car behind you had to follow the law and not rear-end you, the Search Committee had to pick me from the 37 people who wanted to be your Lead Minister – the list goes on and on.

When I think of the incredible odds against me being alive, against us being together at this time and in this place, I am humbled and I am awed. One of the reasons I love the religion that is Unitarian Universalism is because it focuses not on what may or may not happen after we die, it focuses on how I, how we, can squeeze every ounce of goodness, love, wisdom, compassion and justice out of life.

The gift package that we call life, the miracle, that we all have been given is so precious, so wonderful, so unique to each and every one of us that we owe it to ourselves and to the world to do everything we can with it. And that is where the theology of gifting comes in.

Julia Cameron, the author of one of my favorite books, The Artist’s Way, writes about something she calls our spiritual DNA. Our spiritual DNA is a good term for the special and unique talents, dreams and skills each one of us bring into the world, and each one of us are invited, maybe even called, to share. She writes, “I am talking about a stamp of originality that is as definite and specific as my blue eyes, blond hair, medium height. Just as our physical potentials are encoded at conception, it is my belief that we also carry the imprint, or blueprint, of our gifts and their unfolding. Often we have far more gifts than we imagine. For example, a love of music may indicate a gift for it as well – a gift we may not have developed due to the circumstances of our birth. Similarly, many voracious readers are closet writers, afraid to step into the arena of their dreams. This arena, the panoply of a more colorful self, is our spiritual DNA, the treasure chest we bring into the world and are charged with developing. The tricky part is recognizing it.”

The tricky part **is** recognizing it and then once we do, sharing it with the world. That is one of the main reasons religious communities like ours exist. It is hard to recognize our gifts. Often too many

people have told us that there is nothing special about us. Often we have told ourselves the very same thing. “Everybody draws as well as I do.” “Everybody knows how to make great pancakes.” “Everybody can stand up and preach a good sermon.” “Everybody knows how to make a plant grow.”

Well the truth of the matter is everybody does NOT. Each of us has gifts that we pretend or sometimes really believe are not special, unique and wonderful and belong to only us. My job as a minister, our jobs in sharing this ministry, is to tell those voices inside of us that tell us we are not special to SHUT UP! And say to each other “You are an amazing and special person! I love the way you _____ - fill in the blank. I wish I could do that as well as you do!” And our job is to say thank you. And that’s it. Not “well anybody could do it” or “it’s nothing”. It is something. It is something that has been crafted and developed and honed over millions of years to live inside of you and ONLY you.

So our first step is owning, *really* owning that we are special, unique and wonderful and we have gifts that nobody else has. For some that can take years to achieve. Brian Swimme, the author of The Universe Is A Green Dragon, put it this way, “Did you think that the universe went to 20 billion years of work to create you if there was not a particular function that you – and only you – could do?”

So what stops us? What gets in our way of finding out what that function is, discovering what we are good at and love to do? How do we overcome our own inertia, our own fears, our own laziness to live and share life - and our gifts - to its fullest?

Let me answer that question by telling you about one of the things that makes me a bit sad when I stand before a congregation. When we are invited “to stand as you are willing and able” and join in the singing of a hymn, I notice how many people stand and do not sing even a single word. Now to tell you the truth I do not really know the reason why people don’t sing. Maybe they have a sore throat, maybe they get dizzy whenever they stand and sing, maybe they hate the hymn we are singing, maybe they can’t see the words (a growing problem of mine) or maybe their mother told them it wasn’t polite to sing in public.

Even though I don’t know their truth, I do know mine. My truth is that I love to sing and I have not met many people, in fact I cannot think of anyone I know who has ever told me “I hate to sing”. I tell you what I have heard from people, and what I have often said, “I do not know how to sing. Or I can’t sing.” I have a hunch that many of those who do not sing hymns on Sunday *do* sing when they are alone in the car or in the shower.

I suspect people don’t sing because they think they sound bad – and chances are someone has told them that at some time in their life. If you haven’t noticed yet you will notice soon that I sing every hymn, loudly, not because I sound very good – I still hear from my wife and others, and I have listened to myself enough to know that’s not the case – but because I love to sing and because a religious community is a safe place to practice and share all our gifts – even singing hymns.

Singing is one of those gifts we have that many of us are sensitive about. This is especially true for gifts that expose our sense of creativity – gifts like drawing or writing or singing or painting. Creating is the very stuff of theology, of our deepest selves, for some, of God. When we share the gifts that we are the most unsure of, that we yearn for in our hearts and souls to give away but fear will not be well received, we are vulnerable. We need to feel safe when we share them. Too often in our lives people who love us have not been a safe place to share our gifts. Usually because they had long ago been squelched by someone else, they will tell us that our gifts are not very good and we should keep them to ourselves.

This happens often when we are growing up. “You can’t be a minister”, “you sound like a dog in heat when you sing”, “you call that a painting?” After awhile we cannot remember if someone told us we were no good at something, or we simply have told ourselves so many times that we have come to believe it to be true.

Let me share one example from my life. Somewhere along my growing up I decided I was not an artist, at least not an artist in the painting and drawing way. I was good at school but never good at art. I could color in my coloring book okay but I never felt creative enough to do something on my own. A few years ago when I read *The Artist’s Way* I began to own my creative gifts and started to call myself an artist. But I was still convinced that I could never draw or paint.

Which is why the class in the seminary catalog titled “Art and Healing” scared the hell out of me and called to me at the same time. I signed up for the class and brought all my wounds and fears with me. We talked in the class about the negative messages most of us had gotten in our lives about sharing our

creative gifts and we worked on creating art – in a very safe space – to overcome our fears and to discover the creative artist that lives, I now believe, in everyone. (**Take out mask.**)

This was the first piece I did. It is a mask of my face that I keep on my altar at home. I don't care much what you think of my mask (which is something new for me when it comes to my art), because I think it is one of the most beautiful pieces of art I have ever seen. This mask reminds me of how easy it is to hide my gifts from the world, how easy it is to let fear and doubt block my spirit and love from shining through and that I – and each and everyone of us - have gifts to share, gifts that not only bring joy and healing to each one of us – but also have the power to bring joy and healing to the world when we share them.

Our task, as I see it, is fairly simple but not easy. Each of us must continually discover our gifts, then we must discern how we wish to use those gifts in the world and then we must share those gifts as widely and as often as we possibly can. How do we do that? By being in community with other people, by practicing – our singing, our speaking, our listening, our art – in the safety of a place where we love you just the way you are and want nothing but the best for your spirit and your life. A place I hope and pray like ERUUF. I envision a place where nobody ever serves on a committee or volunteers for a task out of obligation or resentment. That we never become the fellowship of the twisted arm, but instead are a place where people serve only when they can do so by sharing and developing their gifts.

Why? Because, as Parker Palmer writes, “Our deepest calling, is to grow into our authentic selfhood whether or not it conforms to some image of who we ought to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks – we will also find our path of authentic service to the world.”

You and me are miracles my friends. We are packages of gifts that have never been seen before in the history of the world and will never be seen again. Our potential, our greatness lies in how well we open our packages, our lives, and share them with other people. To paraphrase the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “Everybody can be great. Because everybody can share their gifts with the world. You don't have to have a Masters of Divinity degree to share your gifts. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to share your gifts with the world. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.” Or in other words, choose to bless the world. May it be so.