

A Generous Universe?

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March 4, 2007

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Reading: From *The Active Life* by Parker Palmer

The quality of our active lives depends heavily on whether we assume a world of scarcity or a world of abundance. Do we inhabit a universe where the basic things that people need – from food and shelter to a sense of competence and being loved – are ample in nature? Or is this a universe where such goods are in short supply, available only to those who have the power to beat everybody else to the store? The nature of our actions will be heavily conditioned by the way we answer these bedrock questions. In a universe of scarcity, only people who know the art of competing, even of making war, will be able to survive. But in a universe of abundance, acts of ... generosity become not only possible, but fruitful as well.

Sermon: *A Generous Universe?*

This morning we kick off Stewardship month, the time of the year when we get the chance to practice generosity by making a financial commitment to our religious community. This is my first canvass at ERUUF and I am excited about it. Helen told me I need to preach one of my best sermons this morning so that you are as excited about the future of ERUUF as I am, and, hopefully, be as generous as possible. Today is a day when the preacher must sound spiritual and not too material, inspiring but practical and not too idealistic. My challenge is illustrated by two differing perspectives on minister's preaching about money.

The first comes from Benjamin Franklin who wrote in his autobiography about his experience when he heard the charismatic, evangelical preacher George Whitefield: "I happened soon after to attend one of his sermons, in the course of which I perceived he intended to finish

with a collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistols in gold. As he proceeded I began to soften and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that and determined me to give the silver; and he finished so admirably that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector's dish, gold and all."

Before you grab your copper, silver and gold to protect them from my oratory this morning, I offer this sobering – and humbling - thought from Jim Rice, who writes for Sojourner magazine. "Sermons on money, especially when seen as an attempt to encourage members to give more to the church, tend to lead to less giving by congregants." I guess it could be said that this morning I am damned if I do and damned if I don't.

I spoke about the tensions of speaking about money in a religious community last October when we gave away magic dollars in the offering plate. I have been sharing the stories some of you told me about that experience, and how much money was raised as a result of it, with as many people as I can. Three of my colleagues have copied us and are reporting positive results. As we launch this year's stewardship campaign today, as we reflect on how much to pledge to fuel our vision, and sail to new heights, reaching for the stars, hoping to make our dreams for next year come true, I offer two possibilities for how we can be in the next four weeks. They come from two long time pledge volunteers from other congregations.

Jeff Bradley claims that, "The annual pledge drive in my church is a kind of congregational root canal." Ouch! I hope you long time members don't have too many memories of years like that; although every congregation has had years when they would have rather gone in mass to the dentist than sit through one more pledge sermon, dinner or request to help balance the budget.

I much prefer that we spend this month living up to these words from Rem Stokes. Stokes was a member of the UU church in Palentine, Illinois, with 44 years experience doing

volunteer church fund raising when he said in 1997: "We have come to believe that giving is a burden. A canvass is not just a request for money. It is not just for the church. It is an opportunity to confront our essential selves."

My hope is that our annual stewardship campaign *is* an opportunity for each of us to confront our essential selves. A time when we reflect deeply, for some even prayerfully, on how much we wish to share – not only with this religious community but also with the world. A time when we ask ourselves how deeply the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship has touched our lives and how deeply we wish Unitarian Universalism to touch the world. A time to celebrate our commitment to this religious community and a time to answer the questions that Parker Palmer asked in our reading this morning – do we believe in a world of scarcity or do we believe in a world of abundance?

This morning I want to dream with you and tell you some of my wishes upon the stars for the future of our Fellowship. But before I do, I invite you to consider with me the questions that Parker Palmer asks and how our answers to those questions may go a long way in determining how generous we believe the universe to be and how generous we wish to be.

Perhaps our answer to Palmer's questions depends on how much we value the practice and trait of generosity. Generosity is not one of the practices we seem to value much in this country today. We value making as much as we can make – sometimes whether it is legal or not. We value buying as much as we can afford – and then going into debt to buy more than we can afford. We value cutting taxes as low as possible because we know what to do with our money better than the government does – even if that means millions go without health insurance and the number of children living in poverty rises every year. The statistics say that charitable giving has gone down for over twenty years – and so has our savings rate.

What makes people generous? If I asked you to quickly think of the three or four most generous people you have known in your life who would they be? My hunch is that your list would

not only include people who were generous with their money but would also include people who may or may not have had much money, but were generous in all aspects of their life. One of the most generous people in my life was my nanny – my grandmother. She did not have much money but she always made me feel as if she had plenty to give – whether it was the perfect Christmas present, my favorite raisin toast for breakfast or the time to play a game of Yahtzee with me. Generous people are like that. They seem to have an abundance of love, an abundance of time, an abundance of attention to give away. In the words of the Buddhist author Sharon Salzberg, "People who are generous awaken in us openness, love and delight."

Most of us would like to be people who awake in others openness, love and delight but it seems that some people are able to do it more often than others. Why? Maybe it was a coincidence that my grandmother was the only person in my family who was religious but it does not seem to be a coincidence that studies show people who attend churches, synagogues and mosques give more money and time away than others. Maybe the world's religions have something to teach us about generosity.

Every religion encourages generosity from its followers. The Judeo-Christian tradition encourages tithing. One of the Five Pillars of Islam encourages giving away a percentage of one's net worth each year. And the first of Buddhism's ten paramis, or qualities of the awakened mind, is dana, the practice of generosity.

The Buddha felt so strongly about giving and generosity that he always began his work with new students by teaching them dana. The Buddha said that no true spiritual life is possible without a generous heart. Sharon Salzberg in her book, *Loving Kindness*, adds: "The Buddha also said that people who are generous can enter any group without fear. Part of the delight that comes from giving is in the love we feel for ourselves. A sense of courage, strength, and brightness grows within us as we learn to give. People are drawn to us, and their sense of trust in us grows very strong."

How do we cultivate a generous heart? How do we cultivate the sense of fearlessness the Buddha describes? Let me give you a hint. Take a moment right now to look at the picture of the galaxy that is on the cover of your order of service. Imagine that the picture you are looking at is not simply our galaxy but the entire universe.

What do you see? Do you see a place of abundance, a place where anything is possible, where there are enough of the basic things that we need – food, love, shelter and competence for everyone? Or do you see a universe where goods are in short supply, a place where only a few can win, only a few can have what they really want and need?

At one time in my life I would look at a picture of the universe and I would feel my smallness, my meaningless in the big, BIG picture of life. In those days I was not someone who was faithful. I was not someone who was very generous. I was not someone who did much wishing on the stars.

Today if someone asked me to show them a picture of God I would show them the picture on your order of service. Today I am someone who believes, not that I am a speck of sand on the endless beach that is the universe, but that the possibilities for my – and your - life, and for the difference we can make in the lives of others is beyond our comprehension. As is how large our generous hearts can become.

The people who are generous, who are willing to give away their most precious gifts have figured out intuitively, or with study and practice, the secret that the Buddha taught. That the universe is a place of abundance, not scarcity. They have discovered that there is more goodness and possibility in the universe than they could ever give away. They have learned that we are not diminished by what we give – whether it is money, love or our time – but that we are replenished by what we give. To believe in giving and overcoming our fear there won't be enough is hard work. It takes practice, it takes a commitment to trust – RADICALLY trust – something

larger than ourselves – our religious community, the spirit of life, God, or the abundance of the Universe. And it takes learning a different lesson than what we are usually taught in this country.

Sharon Salzberg tells the story of a Buddhist meditation master from Thailand who visited the United States several years ago. After a short time in this country he observed that Buddhism was taught and practiced very differently in the United States than it was in Asia. In Asia the sequence of training and practice is first generosity, then morality and lastly meditation or insight. In this country the sequence is completely reversed, meditation and insight is taught and practiced first, then morality and lastly generosity.

Even if we are not Buddhist many of us can relate to this sequence when we consider how generous we wish to be. Most of us usually start with ourselves. When we put together our budgets we begin with everything we need to live on - food, mortgage or rent, car payments, credit card bills, and so on. If we have any money left we might put it into savings and maybe, after everything else, we give to our favorite charities including our religious community. What would happen if we lived more like the Buddhists in Asia do? Instead of deciding everything we need for our own personal insights and transformation first, we begin with others.

Since Kathleen and I began tithing fifteen years ago we have been able to do this with our money. We start by putting 10% off the top into our tithing fund. This spiritual practice has transformed our lives and has helped teach us how to be more generous but even more importantly to be more faithful and peaceful as well. But this year, as happens every year at pledge time, I wonder if 10% is enough. I am forced to look at my essential self once again, in both my relationship with money and my level of commitment to my spiritual and religious home. This is a good thing.

I hope this year's stewardship campaign invites you to look at some parts of your essential self – especially those parts that make you uncomfortable about money, about how generous you think yourself to be and how generous you wish to be. If it does, we will be

successful no matter how much money is raised or how many programs we are able to expand and grow.

I promised that I would share some of my dreams with you about the future of our congregation this morning. The theme of this year's stewardship campaign is "Fueling Our Vision" and the symbol Helen and her team has chosen is a hot air balloon, a balloon, that can only go as far and as high as the heat of the fire below it. So it is here at ERUUF. Our future depends on how much we give, how generous we are, with our money, our time, our compassion and our love. I spent the last week in California with 40 ministers who are leading our largest congregations in the country. I left North Carolina on Monday morning with lots of ideas and dreams for our future, in the last few days I have added many more to the list. You will hear about some of those in the next few weeks.

But as I thought about which vision, which dreams I most wanted to share with you this morning I was reminded of something my friend and colleague, Marilyn Sewell said about why we come to church a few years ago. "People come to church because they need something. A woman comes because she has just lost her child in a court case. An older couple has moved from another state, after retirement. A young couple comes, with their child, because they want to provide some religious education for the family. A young man comes because he can hardly stand to listen to the news any more. Two gay men show up because they hope to be accepted as they are. "What now?" all these people are asking. "Where will I find meaning?" "What can I give myself to that has value?" "Where will I find the love and support to take me through this tough journey called life? This is why people come to church. To find, and to serve."

The vision I hold most dear, the vision that we fuel with every dollar we give and every gift we share, is a vision of a congregation that touches and changes every person who walks in our doors, a congregation that helps people find what is missing and what is meaningful in their lives, and gives them a place where they find acceptance and love so they can serve with joy. I

dream of an ERUUF a lot like today but even better. An ERUUF that touches more lives and teaches more children, an ERUUF that gives more money and generates more hope, an ERUUF that creates more peace and cares more widely, an ERUUF where spirit and science, young and old, straight and gay, rich and poor, come together to help save the world.

In the next few weeks we will determine what dreams we can make true at ERUUF next year and beyond. I hope you will take every opportunity to celebrate, to share, to connect with another and to give as generously as you can. Parker Palmer says "the quality of our active lives depends heavily on whether we assume a world of scarcity or a world of abundance", so does the quality and shape of our life here at ERUUF.

As you reflect on how much you chose to give to this congregation next year I offer you two thoughts. The first is from my one of my mentors, Michael Durall, who writes in his book *Creating Congregations of Generous People*, "Our giving should make some difference in how we as religious people experience life from day to day. If giving to your congregation is similar to writing a check at the end of the month to pay the phone bill or the electric bill, and then forgetting about it until the end of the month, you are not giving enough." Whatever you give, no matter how small or how large, have it make a difference in your life. Have it be a reflection of how much you value this faith, this community and, maybe most of all, your spiritual growth.

The second and final thought I leave you with this morning is from Brian Swimme in his book *The Universe Is A Green Dragon*: "Our deepest desire is to share our riches, and this desire is rooted in the dynamics of the cosmos. Take supernovas as your models. When they had filled themselves with riches, they exploded in a vast cosmic celebration of their work. What would you have done? Would you have had the courage to flood the universe with your riches? Or would you have talked yourself out of it by pleading that you were too shy? Or hoarded your riches by insisting that they were yours and others did not deserve them because they did not work for them? Remember the supernova's extravagant generosity and celebration of being."

You have given me the chance to be the Lead Minister of the supernova that is ERUUF. I wake up every morning and thank the universe that this is so. On this day when we begin the campaign that among other things helps to pay my salary and the salaries of those dedicated people I am privileged to serve with every day, I thank you too. ERUUF is a supernova, a supernova that is waiting to explode with more riches than we can imagine. May we remember the supernova's generosity and celebrate our being by practicing as much generosity as our hearts, our spirits and our bank accounts will allow. May it be so. Amen.

Benediction:

Winston Churchill said you make a living by what you get but you make a life by what you give. May we craft a life as rich as the stars in the cosmos, and may our love explode in extravagant generosity everywhere we shine. Go in peace. Go in love.