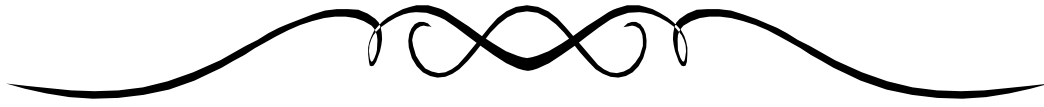


The Unitarian Universalist Association
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Annual Program Fund
&
Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association
&
Liberal Religious Educators Association
2006 Stewardship Sermon Award Winner



“The Land of Enough”
by
Cecilia Kingman Miller © 2005



Wy'east Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Portland, Oregon

The Land of Enough

I get these catalogues and magazines in the mail – I’m sure you do too. They are filled with pictures of things I must buy and bodies I will never have. Trips I ought to go on, and cars I should drive. We live in the Land of Not Enough, and these are the coins of the realm.

These magazines and catalogues carry in them the constant message of our lack, of what we do not have and cannot be. We live in a society that sells us our own unworthiness every day. How can we possibly practice generosity and a belief in abundance amidst a barrage of scarcity?

This is hard, hard work. And one sermon will not get us out of the Land of Not Enough. And so, I bring you greetings, as fellow travelers, and word of the place to which we are going. And I can bring you a sign that we are growing closer, and that our band of travelers grows every day.

Our culture is fascinated with money. We all know the degree to which money is the real religion of America. Yet someone recently asked me, “Isn’t the first rule of stewardship: Never talk about money?” I was not surprised to hear someone say this, as it’s been the practice in churches for a long time: Don’t talk with people about money – you’ll only make them uncomfortable. Yet I disagree. I think we are longing to talk about money, even in our discomfort.

In church we grapple with life’s most profound matters: justice, death, the nature of humanity, even the existence or non-existence of God. Yet the subject of money rarely comes up. In many churches it is easier to talk about sex than finances. Yes, we speak of poverty, of global economics, and perhaps share our concerns about paying for retirement.

But when do we speak of our deepest worries and fears, about the making and spending of our money?

Each of us has questions: In a culture that shapes us to be consumers before anything else, how do we make financial choices that are in line with our own values? How do we teach our children life’s meaning in a society that emphasizes appearances and accumulation? What is our responsibility to the poor? What if *I* become poor?

These are profoundly religious questions – of ethics, human worth and security. And church is the best place for these discussions, gathered with others who share our values. Our congregations can provide a place to examine our materialist culture, to speak truthfully about our questions and struggles, to perhaps even be vulnerable in these questions, and to comfort and encourage one another along the way. This is the first step of religious stewardship.

The next step of stewardship is one that all the great religions have taught through the ages. What if I told you that I know a fantastic spiritual practice – a teaching passed down through millennia, which is the best antidote to depression, cynicism and malaise? A practice that is transformative, that will connect you to all living things, and will offer you a freer heart and boundless joy. You would be begging me to teach you this practice.

And what if I told you this practice was tithing? That's right, the practice of giving a percentage of your material goods back to the religious community. What would you say then?

The world gives us the message that we must look out for our own interests; that life is a race won by the most competitive. The world says that there are limited resources, a finite amount of wealth, goods, and love, and that each of us is on our own as we try to grab what we can. In a world such as this, tithing is a subversive act.

I have tithed for nearly ten years, and it gives me a profound spiritual freedom and grace.

Tithing tells me that the income I earn – large or small – does not define who I am. Tithing teaches me, over and over, about my dependence upon others, and theirs upon me. Ultimately, it teaches me to place my trust in something other than money. To understand that my security does not lie in material things. Rather, my security lies in community.

The offering is an ancient religious rite, performed in nearly every human society. Whether it was their finest lamb, sheaves of wheat, or wine, people brought to the common altar a portion of their harvest to sustain the wider community. Even the poorest carried something to the table, participating in this reminder of human interdependence.

Our modern version of the offering is manifested each Sunday morning, when we pass baskets to support the church's mission. Each of us receives from that shared wealth, and our wider community is also strengthened. Our offerings are less tangible now – dollars and checks instead of grains and livestock. But it is the work of our hands, nonetheless. It is our hard work made into currency. And those hours of work have power – the power to provide, to grow, to shape our world. To build things that will outlast generations.

Now, I have a confession to make. I'm jealous of the Religious Right. I'm jealous of their strength. I'm jealous of their organizing power. I'm jealous of their ability to affect elections – from school boards to presidential campaigns. Anyone else jealous?

And you know, frankly, I'm jealous of their clarity of purpose. That clarity makes it possible for them to commit themselves wholeheartedly to the pursuit of their values in the world. They have a vision of our nation's future, and they give willingly, joyfully, gratefully of their time, energy and money to the fulfillment of that vision.

What motivates these religious people to give so deeply? They believe that their values are in danger in these times. They believe that their families are threatened, their worldview is under attack, and their god is defiled. And so, perceiving themselves under attack, they work diligently against that threat. They protect and educate their children, they build institutions to preserve and spread their values, they fund candidates, and they build camps and churches and youth centers and colleges.

I'm jealous.

Where do these mostly working class people find the resources for such a unified effort? Oh, my dear friends... they tithe. They give 10% of their income to their local churches, and then they give on top of that to affiliated organizations. They believe that God calls them to do so, and that giving in this way offers God glory.

The thing is, our God – the force of Love in the universe, the unnamable yet ever-present Divine Spirit of Life, the God of trees and rivers and bears, the God of the poor and dispossessed, the God of refugees and hungry children, the God of Thoreau and Emerson, Channing and Parker, Francis David and all the nameless martyrs of our faith – our God deserves glory too. Our children need protection, our values are under attack, and we must work diligently to defend them against threat.

Some people might say that the purpose of church is to improve ourselves, to teach us spiritual practices, but not to be involved in social matters. I would offer a challenge to those people, for religion holds a unique role in society. Communities of faith perform a singular function. They have what sociologists call an “alternative imagination,” an ability to posit a future different from, and better than, the present we know today.

Our religion describes a future in which every child is fed, and warm, and sleeps in a dry bed. In which all people are free from want and oppression and despair. And our faith calls us to work for that future.

The church at its best is the conscience of the people. As Oscar Romero, the martyred archbishop of El Salvador, once said, “[The church] has no intention of being the people’s opium. [...] The church wants to rouse men and women to the true meaning of being a people.”¹ As Mike Durall puts it, church asks us whether we live our lives any differently than our unchurched neighbors and friends.

We come together on Sunday mornings not just to heal our own souls, but also to offer healing outward in the world. Here we learn what it means to be a people, working together for the common good.

Now, lest you think churches lack any real power, let me share with you a simple fact. There was not one successful social movement in the United States that did not use religious people as its organizing base. Every successful social movement involved churches and synagogues. Think of the role of churches in the civil rights movement, or in the Sanctuary movement of the 1980’s. There have been other movements too: temperance, women’s suffrage, abolition.

There are examples from other countries, as well: Remember the involvement of the church in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and elsewhere, when priests, nuns and lay people risked everything in the struggle against military dictatorship. Or the simple Hungarian minister, Laszlo Tokes, whose refusal to keep silent ignited the Romanian Revolution against the dictator Ceausescu. In the Philippines, against Marcos. With the Solidarity movement in Poland – John Paul II was an outspoken supporter of that movement.

¹ Oscar Romero, sermon given January 15, 1978.

Think also of those times when churches have been silent in the face of evil. Most noteworthy were the churches in Germany during the Third Reich, who through a combination of fear, complicity, and their own anti-Semitism did not speak out against Nazi atrocities.

The religious right understands the power to be harnessed in congregations. They are brilliant in their organizing methods. They ask their people to live their faith with conviction.

Think now: Where is the voice of our faith needed, to counter injustice and prejudice? What does our Unitarian Universalist faith ask us to do, and be, in these times? How will we respond?

The great Unitarian theologian and ethicist James Luther Adams said often that in order for goodness to triumph, it must be institutionalized. If we are to make changes in the world, to create a just society, we must organize ourselves. We must lend our voices to the cause of mercy and peace. We must use all our resources – our energy, our time, and our money – to create that society.

So often we decry the power of the religious right, and wish our own message of love and freedom could be heard. And yet we have only begun to lift our voice in the world. Our times demand of us a new fidelity to our faith, and that fidelity requires us to live in new ways. It asks us to be bold, to be strong, and to grow in generosity. We, who statistically have so much more than the rest of the world, we are called to serve the good by living generously.

You have a mission – you are hoping to shine the light of our liberal faith here in this community. We need your voice here – there are so many who could find a home with you.

And so, as you consider your pledge to this congregation, let me ask you a question: What is the Spirit asking you to give of your resources to the ministry of love and justice? What percentage of your resources does Love ask you to share?

Let me ask you another question: What gift can you give that will be meaningful to you – that will give you strength and clarity in the months ahead? What gift would be exciting, and nourishing to your own spirit?

This is how we should give. The old proverb about the Lord loving a cheerful giver is often misunderstood. It doesn't mean that we should give an amount that is easy for us. It doesn't mean you should grin and bear it! It means that we should give a gift that gladdens our hearts; that gives us joy. It means when we give generously, with authenticity and integrity, the Divine moves in us. The Divine moves in us.

The question is whether we want to live our lives fearfully, trapped in the consumer mindset of our era – or do we want to live lives that are full and free, that give us a sense of purpose and wonder?

My friends, I believe it is our best hope, and a sign from the Land of ENOUGH, that you here, and our friends in congregations all over this nation, are engaged in these questions. This work of generosity outlasts the yearly fund drive, and calls us into a deeper communion with each other and with the world. It calls us to be larger, stronger, and braver than we ever imagined we could be.

Do not fear, though, for we are called together. We have one another. These are the ancient tasks of religious people: to trust the wonder of the universe, to use our lives to serve the good, and to be a blessed comfort to one another on the journey.

May it be so, my friends.

AMEN.