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UUFTC, Sonora

Building a Culture of Generosity

You may remember our new member induction two weeks ago, in which I talked about three aspects of membership: active participation in our activities; financial participation; and spiritual development. Although I spoke in terms of expectations of membership, what I had to say applies equally to those friends who have a connection with us but have not yet signed the membership book. There are many ways to participate in the activities of the Fellowship, and we invite you to explore them. For example, this spring, Lloyd Kramer and I will lead another Adult Education class. There are three different potential programs: a video series on the Transcendentalists that includes a number of Unitarians, such as William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, and the Alcotts; a series on Unitarian and Universalist history, going back to early Christianity, through developments in Europe and America; and a series on how ecology and theology, i.e., how various religions look at the question of how we care for the earth. There are signup sheets for those on a table in the social hall. Please sign up and indicate your preferences in terms of both time and subject matter.

We focus on our spiritual development in many ways, including participating here on Sunday mornings, and attending classes such as the ones we are considering for the spring. Anyone with specific issues about their spiritual growth might consider contacting me to arrange a one-on-one conversation. I hold office hours on Saturday afternoons when I am in the area.

But today I want to talk with you about our third expectation of membership -- - financial participation. At our service right here in two weeks, we will hold our celebration Sunday in which we inaugurate our pledge campaign for this year. Today I want to talk about funding our vision for this Fellowship. We have a vision of what we want to be in this community. How do we go about funding it? In particular, I want to talk about creating a culture here of generosity; I want to talk about looking at our faith community with an attitude of abundance, not of scarcity. And this inevitably brings us around to the question of money – something we generally don't like to talk about.

How much money is enough? How much money should I have; how much do I have to earn? How much should I give away? How much should I keep? How much will I have left? Do I have more than you? Questions about money will never go away. There are reasons for this attention we give to money. Money is a measure of value. Money is a medium of exchange – Using money makes for the efficient exchange of goods and services. Money is a source of security. Money is a source of power. With money, we can do things that we couldn't do without it.

We often think of money as something private, as an individual possession that is our business alone. We think of money as something that defines who we are as individuals. But money is one of the most relational aspects of our lives. Because money is a medium of exchange, it connects us to one another. Money that you could never use wouldn't be money. If you can't exchange it for things of value, if you can't use it to engage in transactions with others, it's not money. Money represents our dependence on one another. Money is not so much the means of independence as it is

the means of our inter-dependence and our inter-connections. This is one of the reasons that talking about money is so difficult – why thinking about money makes us anxious – Money is relational; it is about relationship.

And there are valid reasons for our anxiety. In American culture, money defines human relationships more than in other societies. We have worked hard for our money; we often feel that we need to protect it. None of us wants to be poor in our old age. And this is a very individualistic culture; we know that when it comes to taking care of us, we are on our own. Whatever support systems exist are full of loopholes, and those support systems are being made weaker. We know that we may get little help with what may turn out to be huge medical bills. We want to be sure that we have enough to be able to take care of ourselves. The problem is that acquisitiveness can easily become an end in itself, and often does, for people in this culture. And we become so absorbed with holding on to what we have that we overlook the teachings of all the world's religions that we should share what we have with those less fortunate.

Well, I want to try to get past that anxiety; I want to talk openly here about money. And in doing so, I want to suggest two things: (1) that despite our fears and anxieties about money, it is possible to create a culture of abundance and generosity; (2) that our relationship with money can have a spiritual or religious dimension to it. In doing that, I want to refer an important book. It's called "Money and the Meaning of Life," and it was written by Jacob Needleman, who is a professor of philosophy at SF State. Our readings this morning were from Needleman's book. Needleman sees those moments that we have of insight, of clarity, of finding another self within ourselves, as the ultimate point of our human quest. And he argues that our obsession with money often stands in the way of that quest. But, he asks, can't we develop a different way of looking at money that would enable us to make it a part of our quest, a way, in his words, "that gives it a place in the life around us as a unifying influence?"

I believe that one way we can move beyond our anxiety about money, and at the same time become more generous of heart, is to rekindle – over and over again – our sense of gratitude. We could actually develop a spiritual discipline of gratitude. Let me give you a personal example. This past December and January, I experienced a scary condition. My heart rate suddenly became dramatically elevated, a condition known as an "atrial flutter." Rather than my usual resting rate of 60 beats per minute, my heart was at a relatively constant 140 beats per minute. I was very tired, and I found myself getting winded at even mild exercise. My cardiologist prescribed medications, but they did not bring my rate down. The Doc said, "Ok enough, let's get you in the hospital and get rid of that flutter." I went in on Friday, and went home again a couple of hours later. The procedure was to attach electrodes to my chest and back and to give the heart a shock to restart it at a normal rate. My heart immediately went back to a normal rhythm, and I felt so much better immediately.

Why am I telling you this? Because my deepest feelings after the procedure were of gratitude. I was grateful for the skillful and compassionate care I had been given. But mostly, I felt grateful to be alive and well again. I suspect that many of us have had similar experiences, in which we recover from a serious accident or injury and are made aware again of this precious gift of life. Isn't it a shame that it sometimes takes that kind of experience to re-awaken our sense of gratitude. Since then, I have tried to work on a practice of gratitude; a practice of remembering to be grateful. I give thanks that I am

alive, to remind myself that each day is a gift. I am trying to practice this discipline every morning – to give thanks for life, and health, for rest, for nourishment, for shelter. I give thanks for family and friends, for all those people who enrich my life. I give thanks that I grew up in middle class America, where I was able to get a good education, where I was always able to earn sufficient money to take care of myself and my family. Giving thanks restores my perspective on what is important in life. It helps to reduce my anxiety about those things, like money, that tend to create a false sense of what is important, and what is not.

And I believe that gratitude can truly help us to reduce our anxiety about money. When we feel gratitude, we realize that we are not the makers of our wealth. We are not the makers of our own existence. We are not the makers of the world. And, perhaps, we can relax a bit and enjoy the bounty that we have been given. We can put things into perspective and appreciate this precious life that we have been given.

And if we can reduce our anxieties about money, we can begin to attain some of the insight and understanding that Jacob Needleman is talking about. Perhaps we can begin to see money as a unifying influence in our life rather than as a problem. For one thing, with more of a sense of abundance, and a reduced sense of anxiety, we can begin to think more in terms of generosity. By generosity, I don't mean that we should give everything away, like the rich young man in the Bible, who asks Jesus what he has to do to get to the Kingdom of Heaven. No, not at all! But a sense of abundance and generosity enables us to decide rationally what to do with our money. Is buying that giant-screen TV for the Super Bowl the best use of my money? Do I need to be constantly buying the latest consumer goodie to keep up with my neighbors.

Well, you can see where this is going. How important to you is this community, a unique and precious, progressive religious community here in the Foothills? Does it make sense for me to support this community with a generous share of my money. Is it important to me that this community continue to exist and to flourish, and for me to be an active part of it? Is it important that we work to make this community a voice, a presence, and influence here in the Mother Lode. I think it's sufficiently important that I'm willing to devote my time to helping to make our vision a reality.

Well, it's impossible for any of us to make these choices without getting back into that dreaded subject of money, that thing that we don't like to talk about. First of all, I need to point out that we are entirely self-supporting. Whatever money we have to sustain this Fellowship comes from us. We have no denominational hierarchy, or diocese, or whatever, to help us financially or to cover some of our costs. We are it!!!

Last year, the year I started here, this Fellowship had an annual pledge income of around \$17,000. I think we can all see pretty clearly that \$17,000 isn't going to go very far in these times. So, we asked you to increase our overall pledging by 40 percent. And we all stepped up. We went way beyond a 40 percent increase; we increased our pledging by about 80 percent to around \$31,000. That was fabulous, and it doesn't even include another \$19,000 that was pledged last year to our building fund.

This year, your finance committee has determined that a necessary level of progress toward fulfilling our vision for the future calls for a total pledge for the coming year of about \$45,000. This would represent an increase of around 30 percent. Why the need? We have moved to this wonderful new space, which will cost us more for both rent and to acquire what we need to make the space workable. We have expanded our

program for children and youth, which we have wanted to do for some time. This will cost us more. Much as we love this new space, we know that our long-term vision calls for us to acquire a building that we can call our own. And we know that that will require a considerably larger budget. We will almost certainly have to borrow a substantial sum of money, and that will require monthly payments to service the debt.

Of most immediate concern, however, is that this Fellowship needs to build up its budget to the point where it will be able to call a full-time minister. Think about the numbers for a moment. Any minister you will call will have had to spend at least four years in seminary, after having gone to college. Chances are, he or she will have a fair amount to debt. Although ministers do not expect to make a lot of money through ministry, they are professionals, and any congregation should want to pay its minister a level commensurate with the standards of the local area.

I happen to be in a fortunate situation. I am retired from UC Berkeley, with excellent health benefits, I have a wife who works, and our kids are through college and able to support themselves (well, most of the time). I'm able to serve this congregation for low remuneration, and I am happy to do so. I love being your minister, and I feel that we are doing something important together. We are working to establish a permanent Unitarian Universalist presence in Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties. To me, this is work that is well worthdoing. And I'm happy to work with you for a while as we build this community. But, as I think you can see, this Fellowship needs to build its annual pledging level to where it can market rate for a minister and also take on the added cost of owning its own space.

Pledge campaigns like ours are often referred to with the term "stewardship." And this happens to be just the right word for what we are doing here with our earthly treasure. To refer to our giving as "Stewardship" is to reinforce the fact that we are merely keepers of the abundance of the world. We are its creators, and, in the end, we are not its controllers. We are its temporary keepers. Stewardship is about letting go of the illusion of control.

We are the stewards of the children who are such an important part of this fellowship. Kahlil Gibran's prophet said:

Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you., and though they are with you . . . they belong not to you.

The Rev. John Buchanan tells us that we should see the spiritual life as a life of stewardship. "The world is crying out for keepers and tenders of its wonderful, frail beauty," he wrote, "[We must be stewards of] this astonishing creation."

Stewardship is about giving thanks for our gifts, for tending them, for sharing them, and – eventually – for letting go of them. Stewardship is about gratitude; it is about relationship. When money flows through our hands, it represents the gift of life. It represents the gifts of hard work, and wise choices, and good luck. It represents the gifts of all the other lives that are connected to our lives. Money represents all the other lives that make one's life possible; it is a gift that passes through us. Life is a gift that passes through us. We are temporary keepers of all the gifts of existence. Let us be grateful keepers of our gifts. Let us be grateful givers of our gifts. Let us be grateful givers of ourselves. Above all, Let us be grateful.

May it be so! Blessed Be! And Amen!