

Visioning Our Future

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*You are the green of elm leaves in summer.
New you are crisp as filo dough.
Old you are soft as well worn leather.
I will rub my hands with honey
and run through the marble lobbies of banks.
I will dance for you strung like a jester
with bells of coins tinkling.*

These words open Marge Piercy's Charm to Attract Wild Money. One Sunday last year I heard the Rev. Bill Hamilton-Holway, who serves as Co-Minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, refer to her as a contemporary prophet. He used those words by way of simple introduction, but they stayed with me. Piercy is worthy of the title prophet because she raises difficult issues for us in ways that we can hear. She lives in our society while maintaining enough personal distance and poetic license to critique it well.

To speak of money these days is to invite the more traditional and expected sort of soothsaying. One imagines a wise and venerable seer delivering pronouncements of doom liberally sprinkled with tirades on plummeting stock prices, and uncertain trade. We are living in a time of economic uncertainty, where the power of every dollar grows more precious and unsure.

But can you imagine if the diviners of the day could actually use Piercy's charm in our churches, gathering flocks of feral dollars to them in ever increasing hoards? Could we stretch out our hands and finish the utterances of her charm, envisioning the power resonant in its words? Could we say:

*Come to me, come to me, come!
I will not keep you in a dark
trust fund. I will not chain you
to labor at a mortgage or harness
you to clanking stock issues
but I will let you wander free
as an alley cat through the city.*

*I will turn you out of your cage
to sing arias in the treetops.
I am not mean but foolishly kind,
You would speedily rejoin others
of your specie. Come, O green
and murmuring swarm, build
your wasp nest in my empty purse.*

Personally, I am drawn to the movement and the motion woven through the lyricism of Piercy's call. I can envision those bills – the crisp and the worn – dancing delightedly toward this promise of energy, of use, of 'work that is real.' For while lightheartedness calls to me – particularly in terms of money which has practically become a dirty word in most churches – I believe down in my deepest core that how we use our money will shape the world that is to come.

As Rev. Dan Hotchkiss writes in his article, Money and the Spirit, "Money plays a central role in virtually all important ethical decisions. The way we earn and spend and give away our money shapes in large part the memories we leave behind. Money may not be sacred, but when we approach the sacred in our lifetime, money almost always is nearby. The most exquisite acts of charity and the most heinous acts of cruelty have this in common: Money is the most frequent medium through which the act is done."

In short, money equals power. I wish this were not the case. I wish that something so corruptible, so abuseable, so hoardable at its core did not hold such sway over the world as we know it. This is why I am greatly concerned by our reticence to speak about financial issues in our houses of worship. I know that as Unitarian Universalists we focus on our freedom to give as we see fit. When canvass rolls around every year, we celebrate our ability to discern our level of giving for ourselves. No one will rise to threaten us with eternal punishment based on our checkbooks, or spiritual corruption proportionate to our spending.

When we talk about money, we talk about stewardship and responsibility, or the frightening cycle of extreme privilege, rampant poverty and the quest for economic justice. But there is a piece that is missing. That piece includes the difficult conversation about how to utilize our resources in times when most people are feeling more than comfortably stretched. It also includes visioning how we can make our money work to promote the things that we value most highly. If we can reclaim money in terms of the spiritual discipline of good stewardship, and use our resources to educate our surrounding communities and respond to the needs of the world, we might find a healthy balance to the tension, the pain, the fear, and the sorrow that often dominate our inner feelings about our finances.

As Rev. Dan Hotchkiss notes in his article, "Generosity, as good as it is, stands in tension with our other obligations – to care for our families, to take responsibility for ourselves, to deal fairly with others in the marketplace. No doubt most of us could and should be more generous than we are. At the same time, though, we could invest more of our money in constructive business ventures, provide more adequately for our retirement, and care better for our dependants – which may or may not involve providing more money for them. A spiritually mature person balances competing values, not for the sake of compromise but to 'hold fast to what is good' even when ends refuse to meet."

~pause~

Holding fast to what is good takes more than faith, and more than a sustaining community that supports us when we falter. That holding requires practice, and patience with the rhythms of change and the cycles of life. Christopher and I spend a lot of time talking about how redistributing whatever wealth comes our way moves us through the

world. Our conversations range from supporting independent booksellers, to purchasing products that tax our environment a bit less, to committed giving, to saving for retirement. And woven through all of that are our pledge to further Unitarian Universalist values and the knowledge that we are not yet living up to our highest ideals.

As we heard in this morning's reading, "Money is a spiritual challenge. It arouses great depths of passion in us and requires the best of us in moral reasoning and courage. Money is a medium of power through which we act and are acted upon. A spiritual life that does not concern itself with money can have little effect on our daily lives, especially in a culture as saturated by financial forces as ours."

What I value in Hotchkiss' reminder that money is a spiritual challenge is the invitation to add how we engage with the complicated act of spending to our journeys as spiritual people. Christopher and I became very clear during our time in seminary and in the beginnings of our relationship that tithing was a spiritual discipline that mattered deeply to us. I am not talking about the kind of tithing that feels forced, or that is laid upon you like an imperfect fit. I am talking about a personal decision that we would like to commit ten percent of our fiscal resources to bettering the world. For us that means pledging five percent of our earnings to the church, and five percent to agencies and organizations that are promoting and furthering the kind of society we would like our children's children's children to experience.

Now I also have stand in this pulpit and remind you that I am still talking about a spiritual journey. We have made a commitment to live as much of our adult lives by that promise as we can... and we are not yet there today. Between our 4.5% pledge to this congregation, and our 0.5% level of giving to the UUA and to Starr King School for the Ministry, we have reached our goal in this past year to dedicate 5% of our resources to supporting Unitarian Universalism. We still have work to do to meet our commitment to redistributing the other 5% in our personal spending promise. I would guess that we are currently less than half way there. But this too is a journey worth taking. Why am I sharing such a detailed description with you about our giving? Mainly because I think it is important that we be able to be public about how we are supporting the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton and how we are using our resources overall.

We have a cultural aversion to talking about money and a tendency to keep it hidden at all costs. My preference is to be visible. To have our funding be present to the point that it no longer causes such consternation and anxiety. We now bring our offering forward as a congregation on Sunday mornings, to serve as a visual acknowledgment of all that has been given, and we will engage in The Practice of Giving in just a moment, bringing our pledge cards forward as well.

I sat in a congregation once where the most highly attended service after Christmas and Easter was Celebration Sunday – their kick-off for canvass. Is that hard to imagine? It certainly was for me at the time. Yet there was so much joy on that day, and pride in the work that their community was doing as a whole.

That is one of my very best wishes for us a community: that we can share in our love of this congregation, continue to build our church family, be proud of the work that we have done, and build excitement for where we are going. Your committed lay leaders have

been spending time over the last months visioning our future as a congregation – in effect, sowing seeds for long range planning and for birthing the church of our dreams.

You have told us that you would like to see this church provide a more influential voice in city governance, and speak forcefully on social justice concerns. You have indicated your commitment to education and to the young people of Stockton, CA. When asked you have shared your longing for more cultural events, spiritual retreats, an expanded RE program, and for overall outreach and growth in this community. These are all powerful and worthwhile goals. Now we find ourselves in the process of bringing those goals into being.

It is the time in our church year when we remind you that your financial commitment to this congregation is vital to our ability to further the voice of liberal religion that has now graced our city for more than one hundred years. It is the time to remember that each new endeavor, every worthwhile addition to our presence and work, requires an increase in funding to achieve. I am asking you this morning to consider stretching. I am asking you to approach your pledge card with an open heart and challenge yourself to give until it feels good. Take pride in all that you do for this church, regardless of the amount you have to give. Canvass is not about creating even deeper worries and anxieties about money. It is about making a commitment to the values and goals that we share as a church family.

The journey does not end here. Even as we celebrate the successful outpouring of our love and goodwill for this church, we are preparing for the work that is to come. It will take your time, your passion, and your energy to bring about the changes that you most long to see. It will take the raising of your voices to ensure that liberal religious values are represented in the greater community.

So I would invite you to join with me for a while. Consider the green of elm leaves in summer, the crisp filo dough, the soft and well-worn leather. Imagine the flurry of dollars released to new and greater cause, gusting in great whirlwinds and leaving remarkable change in their wake.

May we approach this journey together with joy.
Amen, Ashe, and Blessed Be.

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