

“Why Give?”

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Why should we give?

Why do we give money away

when we certainly could find ways to spend it on ourselves?

This is something I think about a lot,

not just on Pledge Sunday,

but I sure have been thinking about it an extra-lot this week,
and you probably have too!

In a few minutes, I'm going to invite our members and friends to make an official pledge toward the financial support of this church. Our custom in this congregation is to ask all our members and friends to take a responsible and open-hearted look at their personal finances every year, and then to make a pledge to support the church with a generous and joyful financial gift each month.

This is something we ask of everyone who joins this congregation and commits to being a part of the community for the long term.

If you are visiting for the first or the second time, or if you are still figuring out if this is a place you want to commit to, pledging is probably not for you right now.

I would ask you just to listen and think about what you hear.

Maybe down the road you'll want to make a financial commitment, to this church or maybe to another congregation.

That would be wonderful.

I wish you well on your journey,

and please know that there is no pressure on you today.

For those of us who have made a commitment to this congregation, I can't lie—on you there *is* some pressure!

We do ask you to pledge your financial support.

We ask this partly because this church depends on your gifts. But just as importantly, I ask this because I know generous giving—not just of our time but also of our money—regular, faithful, generous giving is a practice that transforms us into the people we long to be—people who can change the world with their love.

This is what I've found in my own experience. It's something the church has taught me. When I was growing up, I never thought much about giving money away. My family didn't go to church, and my parents never talked very much about their own giving. It just didn't come up. So, as a young person, I wasn't very generous financially. One of my friends used to donate hundreds of dollars to political campaigns she believed in. That astounded me. I was so impressed that she was willing to part with so much. But I didn't want to do that myself. I was afraid I wouldn't have enough left over for what I needed. At that time in my life, I thought I was being pretty magnanimous if I gave away fifty bucks in a year.

Then I started going to church. Actually, when I first started, the church paid *me* to show up. I was a paid singer in the choir at the First and Second Church in Boston. Eventually I became a member of the church, and that was really the first time I ever thought about how the church paid its bills. It was kind of a surprise to learn that there wasn't some magical Wizard of UUs to take care of all that. But, of course, there wasn't. There were just us people to make it happen or not. I loved my church and I wanted it to be healthy.

So I began to pledge, just as I'm asking you to do today.

And I still believe loving your church and wanting it to be healthy is such a good reason to give.

I don't need to sell you a pitch about our church.

I know you're here today because you love it too.

And well you should.

This church offers so much that no other place in this community can.

Where else could we bring our children for a spiritual education that encourages them to use their brains and their hearts and grow up into brave people who act on what they believe?

Where else could we come to deepen our own faith through this beautiful tradition that teaches love for all people and respect for the wisdom inside each of us?

And who else could speak out for justice as this church can?

A few weeks ago one of our neighbors stopped by and told us we should take down our rainbow flag because it was making trouble in the neighborhood.

Well, that is the kind of trouble I am very happy to make.

I am so proud of this church.

We have been a liberal religious presence in this community for over 100 years and, with your help,

I know we will keep on going for many years to come.

That is a big part of why I give to our church myself.

And yet, for me, wanting to support this congregation is not the *most* important reason I give.

When I got to seminary and started studying to become a minister, I started to hear about another reason for giving.

I met people who gave away money very deliberately as a spiritual practice, a way of cultivating generosity in themselves.

I started learning about tithing, and it totally fascinated me.

The idea of deliberately looking for places to give away your money, without even waiting for them to send you one of those little postage-paid return envelopes—that was a revelation!

Something inside of me said:
Pay attention! You need to do this!

Literally, the word “tithe” means a tenth.¹
And, traditionally, tithing means giving 10% of whatever you earn to your religious community.

Lots of Unitarian Universalists actually practice what we call “the liberal tithe,” which means giving 5% to your congregation and 5% to other organizations you want to support.

It’s a way of acknowledging that we all care about a *lot* of different issues in the world, and our home congregation is not necessarily going to be able to address them all.

The idea is still to set a goal of giving away a specific percentage of whatever you earn.

Now, there’s no law that says you have to do 10% or 5 and 5.

I’m actually working up to a full 5 and 5 split myself.

I give 5% to our church, always—for me, that’s a given—and two years ago I started working up to another 5% to outside organizations. I started with 2%. Last year I went up to 3%, this year I’ll be going up to 4%, and I am planning to get to 5% next year.

For me, stepping up gradually has made it a lot easier.

But regardless, whatever percentage you choose for yourself, however you work up to your goal, this is a special kind of giving.

The idea is, you give to the church, to the institution, but even as you give to the church, you understand that you’re giving to something which is much bigger than the church. Christians and Jews often call it *giving to God*.

The way I would say it is,
tithing is a way of giving back

¹ See <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=tithe>.

to that which is worthy of our deepest devotion—
a way of showing our love for that source of all things
which we can never fully know,
but which has created us along with everything else
and sustains us with every breath and every heartbeat,
that source whose nature we believe is love.
There are many ways of giving, of course,
but in this culture money is enormously important,
and the act of giving away money is very powerful.
But you can't write a check to God,
or to the cosmic whole of the universe, right?
And so the custom has arisen
of giving to our churches and our temples.
We give to our church because it's the closest we can get
to giving back to the very source of our lives.
We give to our church because the church is doing its best
to embody love here on earth.

We and all the people who came before us
have created this thing we call a church
as a way to give some kind of lasting form to our values and our hopes
and our experience of the sacredness of life—
to embody our wisdom and our seeking
in a form that will endure long after we are gone.
That's what every church is at its core.
That's what *our* church is.

Human beings have built it, and like all human things it's not perfect.
Sometimes the church makes mistakes
and falls short of the very best it can be.
But a church which is constantly trying to improve,
to be better than it is today,
to become a more faithful servant of love and justice in this world—
that kind of church is a worthy object of our giving.
That's the kind of church I think we are.
That is part of why I tithe to this church.

But even more than that, I tithe because I need to, for myself.
The reading I shared with you by Steve De Groot
has been enormously important in my life.
You remember his words:

I tithe because...I am a person who has something to give.
I am a person who has received abundantly from life.
I am a person whose presence matters in the world.
I am a person whose life has meaning
because I am connected to and care about many things
larger than myself alone.
By tithing, I remember who I am.²

I agree with him 100%, and for myself I would go even farther.
In my own experience,
tithing helps to shape us into the people we need and long to be.
The act of tithing—committing to give of what we have,
consistently, faithfully—
transforms us into people with generous hearts,
people who do not fear to open their hands and share with others,
people who literally put their money where their mouth is
to change this world.
By tithing, we become who we long to be.

If you've never tithed before, you might think it sounds pretty scary.
I used to be afraid there wouldn't be enough left for me.
If that is the reality of your finances,
then you should take care of yourself first—of course you should.
But, for many of us, it's more a fear than a reality
Let me tell you about the one thing
that has helped me more than anything else
to get over my fears about giving the way I knew I wanted to.
It's nothing fancy.

² Steve De Groot, quoted in Rebecca Parker, "Spiritual Practice for Our Time," in Scott W. Alexander, ed., *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life* (Boston: Skinner House, 1999), pp. 194–95.

It's not a deep piece of spiritual wisdom.
It's just really practical:
I started to budget.

All my adult life, I had never had a personal budget.
I've always been a saver, which I think is good,
but I'd always saved because I was afraid of not having enough.
I used to give a few dollars here and there,
but I always felt the money I gave away
was being taken out of the money I might need to live.
While I was in seminary, I started tithing 5% to the churches I served,
but it was kind of scary because I was making so little
and had so many expenses with school.
I don't regret the giving I did at that time.
But it wasn't very sustainable.

So, finally, when my husband and I came here,
we put together a household budget
listing out all our income and expenses,
and for the first time I could see the proof right in front of my eyes,
glowing on my computer monitor:
I really could tithe to my church
and have enough left over for myself too.
For the first time I understood the wise words of one of my teachers:
a budget is a *spiritual document*.
It shows what we value, far more than our words do.
When we make decisions about how we're going to spend our money,
those are spiritual decisions.
When our budget is in line with our values,
once again we are putting our money where our mouth is.

For a money worrier like me,
budgeting has been an incredible tool of empowerment.
Now we have this budget with money already set aside for giving,
a budget that we know gives us enough to live on
and a little extra just for fun.

So, now, when I am moved to give, I know I can!
I do have money to give,
and it's money I've already set apart to give away.
In my mind it's not even mine any more, and I really don't miss it.
I just feel really great that I am able to give.
I find this is tremendously empowering,
and I urge you to give it a try too if you haven't already.

By the way, as you probably know, our church has a budget too,
and you might feel good to know
that the church is practicing a form of tithing too.
Our proposed budget for the year is just about \$250,000.00.
About 10% of that amount is going to go toward
our social justice work beyond our walls.
Some of this comes in the form of direct cash contributions,
which we take during our monthly social justice collections.
The rest comes in the form of staff time and overhead, which
we also need to do the kind of social justice ministry we envision.
Our Finance Committee has done a really good job
drafting a healthy budget to support all of our ministries.
Now we turn to you to help turn our hopes into reality.

And this year we do have high hopes.
Many of you know that for some years now,
our church has been relying on a very generous bequest
from a lady named Bernice Spaeth to help balance our budget.
The Spaeth Fund, as we call it, was intended to be used
primarily for social justice ministry.
Like most churches,
we've seen our expenses increase a lot in the last few years,
and we have been drawing on the principal of the Spaeth Fund
so that we can continue to offer the kind of programming we want to
and also pay our staff fairly.

We know this is not ideal, not by a long shot,
and we've been working really hard

to wean ourselves off of using this money.
This year, if our pledge campaign is successful,
your Finance Committee will have the honor of presenting to you
a budget that is completely balanced,
without dipping into the Spaeth Fund principal.
With your help, we can restore this fund to its original purpose
so that it can help us expand our social justice ministry
even more in the future.
Is that not what we hope and dream for?

Again I ask you:
Why should we give?
Why should we give money away
when we could find ways to spend it on ourselves?
We give because the truth about us is this:
we are people with something to give.
We are people who have received abundantly
from the source of all life.
We are people whose presence matters in the world.
We give because giving reminds us of this truth.
We give because giving makes of us
people of power:
people who are on fire with love for this world,
for this life we are given;
people who give freely of ourselves, again and again,
in the name of all we hold dear;
in the name of justice, and blessed peace, and transforming love.

So may it be.
Amen.