

The Grace of Great Things

February 26, 2006

By Rev. Martha Niebanck
First Parish in Brookline

We are a community of truth. “Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.” Today, because we are community of truth, we will begin a series of conversations about money.

I begin with Parker Palmer’s notion of a community of truth gathered around the “grace of great things:”

“The image of a community of truth embraces an essential fact: the reality we belong to, the reality we long to know, extends far beyond human beings interacting with one another. In the community of truth, we interact with non-human forms of being that are as important and powerful as the human and sometimes even more so. This is a community held together not only by our personal powers of thought and feeling but also by the power of the ‘grace of great things.’ ...

By great things, I mean the subjects around which the circle of seekers has always gathered: the genes and ecosystems of biology, the symbols and referents of philosophy and theology, the archetypes of betrayal and forgiveness and loving and loss that are the stuff of literature, I mean the artifacts and lineages of anthropology, the materials of engineering with their limits and potentials, the logic of systems in management, the shapes and colors of music and art, the novelties and patterns of history, the elusive idea of justice....

Great things such as these are the vital nexus of community...It is in the act of gathering around them and trying to understand them—as the first humans must have gathered around fire—that we become who we are as knowers, teachers, and learners (of truth). When we are at our best, it is because the grace of great things has evoked from us the virtues that give a community of truth its finest form.” (*The Courage to Teach*)

In the days ahead we will be asked to make a financial pledge to this “community of truth.” In preparation for this season I have been learning about church finances. Here’s one thing I learned about patterns of church

giving. John Williams writes: “My research project discovered that if lay people gave to their churches as much as pastors do, on a percentage basis, churches would have no money problems.”

He recommends that pastors would encourage giving in congregations if they were to share the amount of their pledge. I can tell you that I give 2 1/2% of my income, but I think Williams misses the point about what might motivate generosity in the pews. I am not convinced that simply following the model of a generous person is enough. I believe that discovering the inspiration for another’s generosity is required.

I think that ministers give relatively more of their income because we are given the gift of living closer to the congregation’s dreams while at the same time having to live in the mundane world of boilers that quit, roofs that leak, and leaders that burn out. Ministers make the mysterious connection between spirit and matter everyday. This motion of transubstantiation is at the heart of money.

Rev. Kit Howell shares his understanding of how mission, spirit, and money fit together: “In early hunting and gathering societies, money was a divine language of sorts, a metaphor for the divine ability to value something. Salt, cattle, fish, shells, jewelry, glass beads, feathers, gold, or even human skulls became designated as a way of representing divine value. These symbols were used ceremoniously to bestow prestige, settle psychic or material debts, to placate enemies and so on.”

The symbols of early economic exchange were god-stuff made manifest, a sort of divine glue that held the community together with its special communication. Given this understanding of power, priests and shamans controlled the symbols. They were responsible for the proper circulation of this divine power to give value in community, to order the social bonds. So perhaps we can understand why pastors contribute relatively more of their income to the church. Perhaps ministers are closer to understanding the symbol of money as symbol of divine power.

I tell a story about a colleague, Elizabeth Tarbox, that illustrates the place of ministers in the divine exchange of symbols, purpose, and grace. Tarbox came to ministry late in life and served two congregations in Massachusetts. I first met her when she was at Harvard Divinity School. She stood out in the class I taught on couple assessment. I found her to be playful and smart.

She was to become the much beloved minister of one of the first churches in Massachusetts to become a Welcoming Congregation.

First Parish in Middleboro flew the rainbow flag in the early days of the Unitarian Universalist dream for radical hospitality. This tiny poor church, with a leaky roof and an uncertain boiler put its money into a project that opened its doors to their marginalized neighbors—gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender persons. Elizabeth was right there in the middle of that transformation. She was fearless.

Five years ago I came to hear her preach her final sermon in the little stone chapel on Star Island. Elizabeth was ill with the cancer that would soon take her life. The benches and aisles were filled with a weeping men and women. She was pale and small looking, but her voice was strong as she instructed us in the art of living into dying. She was determined to keep on doing the work of teaching us how to live into our dreams.

Later that day Elizabeth and I talked as we waited on the porch for the boat that would take her away from this tiny island for the last time. I asked her how she managed to speak to a congregation of folks as she watched us all blowing our noses and sobbing. I wondered how she could hold all that emotional power without being carried away by its force.

She touched my hand and said, “I don’t cry because the tears that are being shed are not about *me*. I know that each person cries for their own life. I stand in the pulpit in order to return the people to the life alive in their dreams. I have no reason to cry. I still have work to do.”

Elizabeth Tarbox lived her ministry in such a way that a particular mission and spirit were made manifest. The mission and spirit of radical hospitality were made manifest also through Elizabeth’s congregation’s deep knowledge of the “grace of great things”—the knowledge of philosophy, psychology, theology, anthropology, political science, and economics. Mission and spirit gathered around the nexus of grounded, practical knowledge of people and money and generated value.

Elizabeth and her community lived well in two worlds—the world of spirit and the mundane world of the practical. This is how they manifested their dream. This is the work of the priestly class—that marriage of spirit and matter.

In the year 2006 in this place of liberal religious thought, we are all a *priesthood of believers*. Money hasn't become any less holy than it was in Biblical times when money was printed by priests who decided the value of all consumer goods. Money hasn't become any less holy than when priests bought and paid for goods with currency manufactured in the temple. Money hasn't become any less holy than valuation of goods for barter was established by the priesthood, when more money returned to the temple meant the more money available for valuing goods.

In the year 2006, each dollar can still transform a value into reality: Love of one's daughter can become a college education. The love of music can become a piano. Love of family can become a home-cooked meal. Money still has the symbolic power to speak the language of value, connection, to be divine social glue. Money is still god-stuff made manifest.

In the year 2006 money hasn't become any less holy than it was in the time when humans gathered around the fire. Jacob Needleman, philosopher and author of the book, "Money and the Meaning of Life," suggests that we need to develop a double consciousness around money. We need to be skillful on the material level. We need to learn how to budget, how to invest, and we need to know what things cost. Our spirits are not served by money blindness or ignorance. To be fully evolved human beings, we need to know the technical aspects of money management AND we need to be conscious of the spiritual aspects of money. We need to know, not only what things cost, but also, their value and our place in the process of valuation. Needleman defines spirituality as this intersection of matter and consciousness. All matter is engaged in an eternal give and take. This is the flux and flow of being itself. The getting and spending of our material lives gives us a chance to consciously experience the flow of life, the giving and receiving, the transformation of valuing into material reality. We don't have to go to an ashram, take up yoga, fast or meditate to become spiritual, we only need to observe our own feeling states when we give or receive money.

Many would assert that, in our culture, we take money too seriously. I arrive at the conclusion that we don't take it seriously enough. We need to talk more about money in this church. We need to talk, not just about what we value, but what it costs to make those spiritual aims a reality. Wealthy families, rich corporations, and mega churches are putting their money to work transforming this culture into a mirror of their values.

The Coors family has brought this country more than just a watery beer. The Coors dynasty has funded the political agenda that has removed wilderness protection, removed toxic waste regulations, opposed the immunizing children, and filled our prisons among other things. The Coors family understands the purpose of money—to make one's values manifest. (*Citizen Coors: A Grand Family Saga of Business, Politics, and Beer*, by Dan Baum)

The Mormon Church keeps the Boy Scouts of America in the black and shapes the theology that our boys are learning while they learn to make a fire. They understand the purpose of money—to make one's values manifest. They understand the purpose of religious community—to transform the symbol of money into a social order. The Mormons are living out their values and I admire their skill at doing so. They, like you and I, have the right and the obligation to do so. (*Time Magazine*, 5/1/00)

One doesn't have to be rich to serve the priestly function in community. In a congregation in a railroad town just outside of Lynchburg, Virginia, a church leader called the minister and asked for help. He told of a woman in the congregation—a widow with six children. The folks in charge of the annual pledge drive had noticed that this woman was contributing \$4.00 each week. \$4.00 was a tenth of her income.

The deacon told the minister that the group was planning to go to her and tell her that she should feel no obligation or financial responsibility to the church. The minister, who claims he is much wiser now than he was then, went to the woman on behalf of the leadership. With great sympathetic gestures, he told her of the church's concerns. He told her he wanted her to be relieved of the responsibility of giving.

As he talked to her tears came into her eyes. "I want to tell you," she said, "that you are taking away everything that gives my life dignity and meaning." She was the spiritual leader of her household, the priest who distributes the symbols of value. She had the spiritual discipline of managing money as a mode of relating to the divine.

With these powerful examples of purpose put to work in our minds I ask, "Do you know the purpose of money in your life? When you spend your money are you conscious of the values you promote with your generosity?"

Do these questions make you feel uncomfortable? Do you wish I would simply mind my own business, thank you very much?

My friend and colleague, Rev. Carl Scovel suggests that folks in our liberal churches get tense and irritable when asked for money. In a UU World article he suggests we get edgy, not because we are cheap, but because we hate noticing our condition. We hate waking up to the truth that our lives are out of balance, that we are incongruent, that we are out of control, that we are addicts in denial. We don't want to notice that money is a drug we use to manage our moods rather than to live out our values.

You are the priesthood of all believers. You literally make the money that fuels this economy and provides the social glue of values when you write a check, make a pledge, or put that powerful green paper laden with spiritual symbols in the collection plate. You are the intersection of matter and spirit.

You stand at the doorway between the past and the future and you determine what spirit will enter the next generation. Are you willing to wake up to your power? Are you willing to be moved by something beyond yourself to make the circle of dreaming and transformation complete?

May each of us know ourselves as a people with the authority to transform the dreams we dream into hope that embraces the lives of the next generation of dreamers. In a world without end, may it ever be so. Amen.