

Living Our Values

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delivered March 13, 2011

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

A month ago I told you that I didn't know what love really meant until the birth of my daughter. Before that, it was all about me – my hopes, my dreams, my satisfaction. I wouldn't enter into a relationship that didn't make me happy, and certainly wouldn't buy anything I thought I wouldn't enjoy.

All that changed when my daughter, Cypress, came into my life. I suddenly had a whole, tiny, vulnerable life in my hands whose life depended on her mother's and my care.

My perspective shifted completely. It stopped being about what I wanted and became about what she needed – to survive, to grow, and to thrive. When she needed more than I could give, I didn't say there wasn't enough money. I took a second job to ensure her well-being.

But one's money issues don't completely go away with the birth of a child. Money is a potent force in our world, our culture, and our lives. People work for it, steal it, hoard it, spend it, worry about it, fight over it. Money is often cited as a top issue by divorcing couples. Did you every wonder why it's such a big problem?

Most of us learn about money from their parents quite early in life. For example, my parents wanted to take good care of their children, but they had a fundamental disagreement about the meaning of money. They argued about it, sometimes very loudly. They grew up during the Great Depression, but their backgrounds gave them very different feelings about money.

My father was from Oklahoma's poverty-stricken dust bowl, and he thought you should save every penny you could get. On the other hand, my mother's parents were immigrant farmers from Finland who found their promised land in the rich soil and long growing seasons of the Pacific Northwest. The depression was a gravy train for them compared to what they'd left behind. Growing up amidst such feelings of abundance, my mother felt that the purpose

of money was to care for your family and children. Spending money made my father anxious and not spending money made my mother feel guilty.

These differences produced the argument that was a big part of my childhood. The result is that their conflict over money became a part of my personality. It's as though I've got two voices in my head, one telling me to spend money and the other telling me to save it. It's like the cartoon image of a child experiencing a moral crisis where there's a devil talking into one ear and an angel into the other.

But it's not clear-cut. I identify deeply with both of my parents, so deep down I feel as though both are right. So sometimes the saving voice is the angel and the spending voice the devil; and other times spending is good and stinginess is bad. This can get pretty confusing.

How did money get to be such a problem? I don't think it's just me – lots of people have issues with it. I think it has to do with the nature of money as an abstract form of value.

You see, in the beginning, there was no money. People just had stuff. Sometimes they had stuff that each other needed, and they traded for it. The relationship between stuff and the value of stuff was very clear this way. Everything you had you'd either made yourself or traded for something someone else had produced. This way, value was something literal, immediate, and the relationship between value and worth was always clear.

But with the introduction of money, the medium of exchange became abstract. Its value was no longer directly connected with anything specific. This freed money to become a universal system of value: it could be connected to anything; anything could have a price. Not only eggs and furniture, but also labor and even time itself could be convertible into money. Now, this is very convenient and efficient and we tend to take money's advantages for granted. But money's got some shortcomings, too.

Because it is abstract, money can embody value without any specific meaning. As an abstract form of power, money can become the object of many of our deepest hopes and fears. I realized how pervasive this was one time when I spent a couple of days in Las Vegas. It occurred to me that the casinos of Las

Vegas are an American equivalent of religious pilgrimage sites. Historically, pilgrimage sites were places where people brought their guilt, sicknesses and failures in the hope that they would be healed. In this religious context, the concept of God represented a type of universal power to which people hoped to gain access so they could be transformed or healed.

Well, in our culture, money is the universal power to which people turn. In Las Vegas, you can see thousands upon thousands of people bringing their fiscal brokenness to the holy place of redemption. Their hope is written all over them. They give huge sums of money to the gods of chance in the hope that they will be healed.

Money is a religious issue because religion is about our ultimate values. Ultimate values – religion is about meaning, power, and the way we choose to live our lives. The idea of God, for example, carries within it the human values of creativity, goodness and love as a supreme power. There are also forms of power that don't respect human values or life. Religions sometimes represent these forms of power as devils and demons. Money, too, can be demonic, because when you've got value without meaning, you've got a form of power that does not respect human life. Rather than having money work for us, we can end up as its slaves.

This can leave us confused about our values. Our economy depends on the belief that spending money on products and services will make us happy. Belief and spending – value and action. What does this sound like to you? What else do we do that unites value with action? Worship. When we worship we place ourselves in relation to our values and try to make those values real.

Have you ever stared at an ad for a car, a boat, a computer, or even a pair of shoes and let your mind wander in rapt admiration? I know I have. A child might stare at a toy, a candy bar or a video game. We dream about how good it would feel to own something. That's worship. It's really not all that different from what we might do on a Sunday morning, except that it's all internal, all self-centered, as we try to make ourselves feel better without regard for the well-being of others.

Our culture has become poor in values: we're confused about the meaning of some really valuable things: time and money. We've become alienated from both of them. In some ways, time is the most valuable thing we have; it is the stuff of which our lives are made. And yet we often spend long periods of time in meaningless activities in order to get money. And then what does that money mean to us? It often represents the answer to all our fears and desires. Like those worshipping at the shrines of Las Vegas, we pray that money will deliver us from fear, hunger, anxiety, and even death.

Money has a religious role in our culture. It represents salvation from personal unhappiness – an unhappiness that's often ironically focused on the meaninglessness of work. When people win huge lottery jackpots, the first thing most of them say is they'll quit their jobs. You almost never hear anybody say, "At last, I can give a lot of money to an important cause," or "Now I can do really meaningful work." People usually think of the good life as a permanent vacation with all desires satisfied. The tragedy of wealth is that people discover that a permanent vacation is at least as likely to deliver boredom as happiness.

It's incredibly satisfying to be able to give your money value by giving to something important, to a need that is great, that is beyond yourself. Real happiness requires that we soften our focus on our own needs to make room for valuing the well being of others. The amazing outpouring of charitable donations in response to the bombings, hurricanes, and earthquakes demonstrates our hunger for something more. Our encounter with those undeniably genuine needs cut through our usual cynicism and selfishness to release an outpouring of love, concern and compassion expressed in a purely abstract form: money.

One of the most compelling statements attributed to Jesus was, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." I think this points to a great truth, a version of which has more recently found expression in the phrase, "Follow the money!" You can learn a lot by finding out who gets the money, but you can learn even more when you find out who is giving the money. You learn about their values. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

What do you touch when you reach into your metaphorical pocket? If there's a lot of money in there, you might touch a feeling of confident generosity.

It's easy to skim a little off the top. If there's less, if you think you don't have enough, you reach the bottom of your pocket and you touch anxiety, fear, maybe panic. But what happens if you dig deeper and deeper? Way down, beneath the bottom of your pocket, you'll touch your heart.

When you touch your heart, how can you be sure you know what it really wants? It's actually pretty easy to find out. Your deepest values are the ones you spend your time and money on. I'm inviting you to study the theology of your budget. Take a long, hard look at how you spend your money. There's no confusion there. Those things are your values. How much do you spend on housing, food, medical, education? What about entertainment and dining out? That's exactly how important they are to you. Whatever you spend your money on is what's important. And no matter what you may imagine, whatever you don't spend your money on is not that important to you.

Values that do not lead to action are not beliefs; they are fantasies, and you can't run a church on fantasies. This is why there is an annual stewardship campaign, to give everyone the opportunity to turn their values into action through practicing the theology of the checkbook. Worship is a profound spiritual practice; it's what we do to make our values real. Pledging money can be an act of worship, building a community of shared values.

Stewardship can be a spiritual practice that helps you to lift up your values as you give of yourself to something greater. Giving can help you encounter your inner barriers of selfish resistance and experience the breakthrough of deep joy that only true generosity of the spirit can bring.

There's no shame in not contributing – it just means that your values are elsewhere. We certainly don't expect visitors to pledge – part of our mission is to be open and freely available to all. But I invite you all to think about how giving can be a spiritual practice that helps you to grow and also helps to make this community and the world a better place. If you don't give to this church, I urge you to choose a charity whose mission IS important to you and give as generously as you can. It's absolutely important for your mental and spiritual health that a certain amount of your money goes toward things that express your deepest

values. Your resources will be eaten up by the cares and challenges of daily life anyway if you don't.

Of course there are differences in people's ability to give – sometimes very large differences. But the amount isn't as important as the intent. The point is that if this community is important to you, you will give something. If it is very important to you, you'll give as much as you can. If you want it to be more important to you than it has been in the past, you will increase your pledge: your heart will follow your treasure.

There's an unfortunate tendency to apply a consumer satisfaction model to our relationship with the church. If we like it, we pledge; we withhold our resources if we aren't pleased. Or you might think of the church as a club you've joined and that you're required to pay the dues for what you get – again, the focus is on whether you are getting what you want.

If so, I invite you to shift your perspective and think of the church as your child. After all, it has no existence apart from its members and friends. This church is the product of our love, our hopes, and our vulnerabilities.

This church depends on us for its very life, and caring for the church can be as deeply rewarding as nurturing a child. We don't want our children to merely survive, we want them to thrive. We want music lessons, sports, opportunities for arts and community, and academic help if needed. I believe we feel the same way about our church. So don't just pledge to meet a budget. I invite you to pledge to help our church thrive, and so ask that you pledge – not to meet the bottom line – but as an act of worship, to make your values real and your dreams come true.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism has what the world needs today, that it has the ability to help save souls – not in some afterlife, but in this life – from isolation, meaninglessness and despair.

- If you believe that the flame of our principles of fairness, tolerance, compassion, and respect needs to burn brightly so that all can see,
- If you believe that we need to encourage our children to seek to grow in understanding, compassion, and integrity,

- If you believe that our ideal of world community with freedom and justice for all is absolutely important today,

You will pledge. If not, put your money and effort somewhere else.

You don't have to be a member to pledge, you just have to believe. If you believe in the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley's potential as a beloved community of faith and as a force for goodness in the world, I invite you to dig down in your pockets as deep as you can, dig down until you touch your heart and share the treasure you find there.