“REVISITING A NOT SO SECRET, SECRET”

Sunday, April 29, 2012
Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister
The Community Church of New York Unitarian Universalist

Readings

I begin with two readings about generosity and giving, as we are involved in our Annual Pledge campaign and soliciting gifts to support our Vision and Mission.

(1) Rev. Frank A. Hall, who has served the Unitarian Church in Westport since 1984, offered these thoughts in a sermon titled, “Be Bold”:

There are reasons why some folks lack a generous spirit – some are deep, psychological or spiritual reasons, some are simply crass reasons that could be changed with the stroke of a pen on a pledge card, and checks put into the plate each week or mailed each month.

Charles Dickens created the character known for his stinginess, but old Scrooge had a powerful encounter with the forces in him that were way down deep “where the spirit meets the bone”. And he changed, simply by becoming a generous man.

Generosity is generative… it generates a spiritual energy.

(April 15, 2007)

(2) How much to give? My colleague the Rev. Anita Farber-Robertson, whom I heard when she was serving as Interim Minister of First Parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts, observes:

The story is told of a pastor who made an appeal in church for a great and worthy cause. A certain woman, a member of the church, came to him, handed him a check for $50, and asked if her gift were satisfactory. The pastor looked at her and replied, “If it represents you.”

After a moment of soul-searching thought, she asked to have the check returned. A day or two later she returned and handed her pastor a check for $5000, again asking, “Is this satisfactory?”

Once again her pastor replied, “If it represents you.” The truth seemed to be driving deeply. After a few moments of hesitation, she took the check back and left.
Later in the week she returned, again with a check. This time it was for $50,000. As she placed it in the pastor’s hand she said, “After earnest, prayerful thought, I have come to the conclusion that this gift does represent me, and I am happy to give it.” (James Hewett, editor. *Illustrations Unlimited*)

“Not all of us have $50,000 dollars to give. But all of us have some gift that is enough of a stretch” that it will make us feel good… that will grace ourselves, this community, and all we do… a pledge that will represent you, deeply represent you…

Is it easy – such spiritual discipline?… Not always, but “it is worth it.”

**“REVISITING A NOT SO SECRET, SECRET”**

This past week had a delightful international flavor.

On Thursday, I attended the Freedom Day celebrations at the South African Consulate to the United Nations, and it is always an honor to be included. For the most part, there were UN diplomats, but also many in the South African community, as well as dedicated allies – some whose anti-apartheid resistance began 60 years ago this spring… 60 years ago here at Community Church.

One of the founders of the American Committee on Africa, with my predecessor, Dr. Donald Szantho Harrington, was Peter Weiss. He was telling me about some of his visits to the committee’s offices here at the church, where in the 1950s among others he met with Julius Nyerere of Tanganyika; Nyerere was then a teacher but later became the President of his country, newly named Tanzania in 1961.

Freedom Day, of course, celebrates the first free elections in post-apartheid South Africa on April 27 in 1994, and I was among election observers in Soweto that day.

Alice Walker, novelist and robust activist, once remarked, “The secret of joy is resistance… resistance to tyranny.”

Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, once commented, “Just to be is a blessing” and being in that gathering – those historic connections and the living transformation of that nation still underway – was a blessing.

Earlier that day, I had met with Rev. Steve Dick, who is the Executive Director of the International Council of Unitarian and Universalist Congregations. In early 2014, they shall have their next Assembly meeting here in New York. He was beginning on-site planning for the several hundred member delegate assembly that would include Unitarian and Universalist groups from the Philippines, India, Pakistan, Japan, England,
Europe, Nigeria, the Congo, Burundi, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Australia and many others.

Steve, American born, had studied at Manchester College at Oxford University and is affiliated with British Unitarians as a minister, as well as providing leadership to the International Council. Hearing about Manchester College, the historically Unitarian center for ministerial education in England, I had warm memories of visiting there one summer six years ago with family as part of a wonderfully educational vacation.

Following a map of Oxford, we found Manchester College and entered the front arch into a courtyard. Just inside the entrance was an office, and as we entered, I introduced myself to the receptionist. Standing nearby was another person, who said, “Hello, Bruce. How is your mother?”

Having described the history and prominence of Manchester College for the British Unitarians to my children, who were then young adults, I was more than a bit pleased that they now knew their father was welcomed on a first name basis... immediately upon arrival. The greeter was the Rev. Peter Hewis, Unitarian Chaplain at the college, who had been a sabbatical minister for six months in my home congregation in Tennessee when I was in college. Our paths had occasionally crossed over the past 30+ years, and he recalled my mother for she had been quite active.

All this is but prelude to the next blessing. The High Warden immediately appeared, offered us bottled water, and began an hour-long, detailed tour of the college, with an exquisite history of British Unitarianism and the role of Manchester College. The label on the bottle reads, “Sparkling Blenheim Natural Mineral Water drawn from the aquifer within Blenheim Park.” He explained that he had once been the Warden for Blenheim Palace – a role that seems to be some combination of greeter, hospitality host, manager of all facilities and landscape, and in charge of many, many things non-academic so that the studies could proceed with appropriate decorum and grace.

Not necessarily shy, he also informed us that he had received the award for the most outstanding High Warden at Oxford for several years running.

His honors for us were absolutely deserved. His hospitality, immediate connection, warmth, erudition and demeanor were stunningly inviting. Just to be in his presence was a blessing, and he and my colleague’s welcome reflected a shared dedication to liberal religious faith and a community that does truly cross the oceans and span the globe.

They and we, together..., we were stewards of something precious, life-changing and world changing, our free faith, and we all felt these bonds of shared responsibility... mutual stewards – strangers yet kindred souls... that day and to this day still.

Perhaps you glimpse part of my theme this morning: we are interconnected – and not just because of this shared faith.... Last week, I spoke about the Essence of
Unitarian Universalism, and how we are summoned, especially here at Community, with our inscription on the building, “Knowing not sect, class, nation or race welcoming each to the service of all.”

Each element of that statement is essential: Welcoming... Service... and inclusiveness of whom? Of all!

As I mentioned last week, the notion of “service” is a powerful supplement to our historic Unitarian individualism. And as I have observed on other occasions, we are beginning to free ourselves, as a faith tradition, from exclusive allegiance to an atomistic, Newtonian world-view... a view of ourselves as isolated, independent individuals – an important and powerful Western ideology for hundreds of years, yet, by itself is increasingly out-dated and out-moded for global and human well-being.

As Archbishop Tutu of South Africa, in whose home in Soweto I had the opportunity to visit, has said, “Unlike westerners, Africans have a synthesizing mind set, as opposed to the occidental analytical one. That doesn’t mean Africans are better or worse; it just says God is smart. Westerners have analysis. We have synthesis. Westerners have a very strong sense of individualism. We have a strong sense of community.”

Tutu goes on to speak about ubuntu, that sense of community, acknowledging that it has weaknesses when it encourages conformism and conservative values. Individual uniqueness offers balance. Yet, ubuntu’s strength is that it acknowledges that “we can be human only in... community.” (UUA Healthy Congregations, Workshop 5, Peter Steinke, p. 14)

We are not, cannot be self-sufficient. We discover who we are only in relationship to and through interaction with others. We are inextricably social beings. “Caring for others is essential to our personhood.”

We in our faith tradition have been recognizing these truths over the last couple of decades, as we speak about the interdependent web of existence. We are beginning to make that quantum leap from individualism to interdependence and to embrace the challenging, liberating spirit it invites.

Not surprisingly we here – with our new name in 1919 – Community – have been working on this for 90+ years.

This too is perhaps a not so secret, secret for liberal faith that we are embracing more powerfully these days, as core to our spiritual health, and this interconnectedness is but one piece of the larger theme:

We share a gift – the gift of Life – a miracle – a wonder – an obligation to honor this gift and to give something back.
This morning I turn as well to matters of maturity, gratitude, giving and receiving, Occupying, and living with satisfaction and challenge each day of our lives. And yes, as already mentioned, living with joy by resistance to tyranny whenever we can.

Several voices capture my attention.

From the sciences, Albert Einstein affirms, “A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life depend on the labors of other persons, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving.” (Steinke, 34)

Do you remember Oseola McCarty of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, who died in 1999? She had worked for nearly 80 years doing laundry for others, and along the way, she saved over $150,000. She gave it to Southern Mississippi University for scholarships, inspiring others to contribute an equal amount, following her example.

A book collected some of her observations. On self-esteem, she observes: "It seems pretty basic to me. If you want to feel proud of yourself, you've got to do things you can be proud of."

The psychologist Abraham Maslow described our lives this way: “When a person accepts a lifestyle that indicates they want to put more into life than they want to take out, they have reached adult maturity.” And I would add spiritual maturity – giving something back.

On the other hand, those for whom greed is master have surprisingly, in stunning ways, come under review by wider elements of our social network. The Occupy movement has rightly identified the vast disparity in income and wealth, as they would say, between the 99% and the 1%. The times they are a changin’. And how good it is that in our shelter for homeless men, we now offer the opportunity for a shower to some of the occupiers during the day.

When it comes to giving back, one of the things we know so well is the emotional load that often accompanies our attitudes toward money. For some, rightly, it is a matter of security.

For others, however, there is envy... wanting more, more, more. Many of us are familiar with comic George Carlin’s observations about “stuff”, and how human nature being what it is, and the affluence of this country being what it is, and the privileges we share as citizens of this wealthy and affluent country, many of us have quite a bit of stuff.

If you are like me, not all the items that you or I accumulate are honest-to-goodness treasures....
And speaking of treasure, there is that nagging traditional text from Christian scripture that I may try to avoid that nonetheless keeps coming back to me. It comes from those sayings attributed to Jesus that we know as the Sermon on the Mount. “Wherever your treasure is, there will be your heart also.” (Matthew 6:21)

I may try to avoid the text because it so utterly revealing.

It is behavioral. It is descriptive.

Do you want to know what is important to you? Look at yourself. Look at your life. Look at the stuff that you have accumulated and that you treasure, and then you shall know something about yourself, your soul, your heart. It’s a revealing exercise, especially to review your check book, and credit card bills, and charitable giving.

For me, and I think for many of you, I look around my home and see books and magazines, the written word, ideas, history, imagination. I look at my checkbook and see organizations that I support like this church, the NAACP, the Democratic Socialists, and the list goes on. I look at my time, and I see family, church and causes… some good things, and nothing too self-indulgent… well, unless some roses for Kay for our 40th anniversary outing walking around the Charles River early last March.

In addition to trying to be mindful about stuff, I try to increase my giving every year because… Why? Because it feels good. It’s a spiritual discipline.

I invite you again to remember… to remember that we are truly connected, interdependent, to give gratitude for our gifts and to share our riches… our best gifts… the best of which is the gift of compassion demonstrated in generous action of kindness and justice.

To remember… and I remind us again that for Islam, original sin – not as dominant a theme as it is in many “Christian” perversions of Jesus’ teaching – original sin is forgetfulness of our divinity and that of others and of our mutual interdependence and interconnection.

Interconnectedness, ubuntu (community), compassion and hospitality, doing the right thing and doing the thing that feels good – these can be the same thing!

A few weeks ago, more than twenty of us were at another of the series of monthly Saturday workshops we have had here since January – workshops to help each of us participating to grow our souls: to be more centered, less reactive, more open, more thoughtful, more caring and to spread that spirit as we seek to live out the meaning of creating the Beloved Community…. All these spiritual gifts are helpful in growing our souls daily, at home, at work, at play, and serving our Vision.

One segment of the workshop asked us to divide into groups and to look at how it goes here at Community. How do we play, how do we feed one another, how do we
value and recognize one another’s presence, and how do we support or comfort one another?

As it turned out, we had long, long lists of these many strengths: dozens of delights and activities!

This certainly wasn’t a surprise, but for me it was a joy to see how deeply engaged we were in simple questions that identified so many of the things we do to serve each other and to be in service to our ideals.

For me, in thinking about the important things, the treasures, the gifts we share and the strengths we have…, all this is a cause for gratitude to all here who give back, serve, and care.

Among my thanks, our thanks go to George Duckett and Theresa Bowman, co-chairs of our Pledge drive – and to their team. As George described for us a goodly number are increasing their pledges, which is a good, good thing especially amid the economic uncertainties that abound. Every gift is important, and the not-so-secret secret is that giving is good…. It honors our best self and makes a difference… and it’s a good thing to feel good about… whatever you are able to do given your circumstances…

All gifts are important, important for your spirit, soul, and putting something back…. All this we know, and it is not guilt-giving that drives us, like some traditions. And it is not fear-driven giving to avoid hell that calls us.

When you are called upon by another member, or respond to the letter that has been sent, please give until it feels good; give what represents you…. I can add that our giving guidelines suggest 2% to 3% to 5% of one’s income, which would empower us with spiritual abundance and strengthen our congregational life….

We can do that. We can!

Our free-thinking religious message and building a prophetic community are not free, and they only thrive by our passion and the commitment of all us… which you know….

For Kay and me, we treasure this Church for all it is –

- the welcoming spirit,
- freedom of belief,
- rational spirituality,
- the activism,
- the fellowship,
- the community,
- the education,
- the service,
the diversity,
the challenges to grow our souls: to contribute to a more just society, to put something back.

So, we give and give gladly, aiming for a generosity of spirit and to forgive everything that is not ideal.

Finally on this matter of money, just to be clear: I recall for you once again a Universalist statement from 1866 (shared by my colleague Rev. Richard Gilbert, “Roots Hold Me Close”, 3/4/01) The Universalist Committees of Correspondence knew that commitment to a liberating faith is embodied in dollars. They knew that financial support strengthens commitment and has an impact on the world. They did not bother with subtlety. In 1866, they wrote, "We are sure of your sympathy and your prayers, but we want also your money." (Russell Miller, The Larger Hope, p. 259)

So, I too invite your generosity… based on … well perhaps many, or just one of many things:

Knowing that together, what we give adds to what we can do and how we make a difference as a church…

Knowing that Life is a gift, and sharing, in ubuntu, in community is Life’s way…

And for some, yes, it is simple things… like duty, or knowing that good fortune obligates, or that stinginess reflects bitterness toward life, and generosity expresses gratitude…

Our Pledge Committee and I thank you!

Sixty years ago, those in our congregation began, among so many things, the joy of resisting tyranny and supporting the anti-apartheid movement. They planted seeds that took decades to flower, and how wonderfully they have grown!

I have no doubt that today we too plant seeds of love and justice, seeds of freedom-making and healthy faith, seeds of truth over truthiness… and these too will flower and be blessings now only dreamed.

Henri Amiel, a 19th century Swiss philosopher and poet, once advised, “Life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So, be swift to love, and make haste to be kind.”

And the not secret, secret invites us all: giving is good… good for our spirits and our spiritual health.

Is it easy – such a spiritual discipline? “Not always, but it is worth it.”