

“The Root of The Root Of All . . . Civilization”
By Howell Lind, Senior Interim Minister
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READING

The Reverend Clinton Lee Scott played a major role in the revitalization of the Universalist denomination during the 1930s, '40s and 50s and also in the process leading to the Universalist's merger with the American Unitarian Association in 1961.

Known for his wit and wisdom as well as his outspoken liberalism, this morning's reading comes from his 1946 volume of *Parish Parables*.

“And it came to pass that the time of the year was upon them when the call went forth from the Great Temple for pledges of support for another twelve months. And one there was who rebuked the solicitor gruffly, saying, ‘Get thee hence, and return not. Verily, the Great Temple seeketh money from everlasting to everlasting.’

The solicitor accepted the rebuff, and said unto him quietly, “My son, when he was a child, was very costly. He was forever hungry, and was fed; he was forever wearing out or outgrowing his raiments and was clothed anew. As he increased in stature of manhood, ever more money had I need to spend upon him. And it came to pass that the Angel of Death smote him, and he died. And lo! Now he costest me not a cent!”

And he who had rebuked the solicitor was filled with compassion and understanding, and he said, ‘Verily, verily, thou hast opened mine eyes. For now I see that only a dead Temple needeth no money: a live Temple needeth evermore!’

And he offered up his greater pledge and returneth into his own house a wiser man in the ways of the Great Temple and of the world.”

MESSAGE

This is Stewardship Sunday which marks the beginning of the church's annual every member canvass. Members and friends will be asked to make a pledge commitment that will fund the congregation's programs and efforts in the coming 2007-2008 church year. So, as you might expect, this morning I am going to have something to say about money – about what it means to give responsibly and generously to one's church as well as offering my own theology of stewardship.

But first I want to say a bit about what it means to be a religious community.

Mary Parker Follett was the first management consultant in the United States. In the early 1900's one of Follett's clients was a window shade company. This family-owned business went along, year after year, producing a particular type of window shade. Mary Parker Follett, however, persuaded the owners that they were more than a window shade company – they were really in the business of light control. This realization expanded the owners' imagination and vision of what they had to offer to the public and their business opportunities grew enormously.

For the past 100 years since then, organizational, business, and church consultants have asked the groups that they consult with to first figure out just what business they are in and, more importantly, to look at how they perceive doing that business.

For the past thirty years I have been one of those church consultants, helping congregations to wrestle with just what business they were engaged in.

If we seek to be vibrant and vital congregations that will prosper and succeed in the coming years, how do we perceive what our business is all about? Often, it is all too easy to assume that the forms and activities which made sense twenty years ago or ten years ago or even two years ago are all that is required today to call ourselves a religious community.

I would maintain that the primary business of the gathered religious community is to provide the encouragement, the stimulation and the support for individuals to develop and maintain a wholeness to life – a personal integration of one's faith with the dailiness of living each day.

Now this effort suggests the rather specific activity of deciding just what we value most and what we believe to be ultimate; it means coming to some conclusions about our basic values that help us to make sense out of the

many diverse demands, attractions, interests, and experiences that we are engaged in.

It also suggests that we, on a day-to-day basis, live out those key beliefs and all of their implications. This, however, is not a process that we engage in a vacuum. This is – more often than not – a process that we cannot successfully engage in alone.

Where we wrestle with the “weightiness” of everyday living is here – here, in the gathered religious community – here, in a shared searching and religious seeking with others who help us enlarge our individual visions.

Helping individuals develop and maintain the whole picture of one’s self and one’s life is the business that we need to be about as a congregation of folks who wish to “congregate” – to be together with each other in religious community.

This business of promoting wholeness focuses on our sense of identity and what we, as a congregation, view as important and value most highly. We need to not only understand why we have congregated together – what we value most that binds us together as a church – but we also need to be able to articulate it – first to ourselves as the gathered religious community and then to the world around us.

Not only do we need to know what we stand for and be able to share that message, we also need to live out of our beliefs in everyday life. And there is a cost and a price attached to that process.

– This is the place where I share a few thoughts about money and a congregation’s needs. But, first some background . . . and a little confession.

I’ve entitled my message for this morning “The Root Of The Root Of All . . . Civilization.” I lifted the title from a special insert section of my DISCOVER magazine of several years back. The special section focused on the science of money. I immediately liked the title and knew that I had to use it for my message today in that it helps me to make some important connections between the gathered religious community and money.

The DISCOVER article related how archaeologists discovered that people utilized money as early as 4,000 Before the Common Era – more than a thousand years earlier than had originally been thought. The evidence suggests that the use of money arose in the ancient cities of Mesopotamia.

Scholars believe that it was this single fact – the use of money – that profoundly and permanently changed civilization.

Small clay tokens, dating to 3,000 B.C.E. and discovered near Susa, Iran, are marked to indicate the value of each token: one jar of oil, one sheep, one garment, one measure of metal, one measure of honey, and so on. It is conjectured that these tokens served first as counters and perhaps later as promissory notes.

Mesopotamians regularly employed just five token types, representing different amounts of three main goods: human labor, grain and livestock like goats and sheep. But in the cities they began churning out at least sixteen types of tokens with dozens of subcategories to represent everything from sheep's milk, barley, wool, mats, beds, to rope, perfume, and bread. The use of money evolved as a way to uncompllicated the existing barter economy.

Thomas Wyrick, an economist at Southwest Missouri State University, believes that, faced with this new profusion of goods and services, no one would have had an easy time bartering, even for something as simple as a pair of sandals. In Wyrick's words: "If there were a thousand different goods being traded up and down the street, people could set the price in a thousand different ways, because in a barter economy each good is priced in terms of all other goods. So one pair of sandals equals ten dates, equals one quart of wheat, equals two quarts of bitumen, and so on. Which is the best price? It's so complex that people don't know if they are getting a good deal. People needed some standard way of stating value."

It doesn't quite state it this way, but the article goes one to reassert what many of us already suspected: money makes the world go around – even the ancient world. Money shaped human society, greasing the wheels of Mesopotamian commerce, spurring the development of mathematics, fostering sea trade, and helping to build lucrative cottage industries. There is no question that the invention and use of money helped folks communicate better, exchange goods, and place value on what was important to them and their world.

6,000 year later, we use this ([holding up \\$20 bill](#)) to ascribe value – to see if something has worth to us – is worth the cost. We all do it. We do it all the time. In every arena of life, we are constantly weighing the cost and the value. Let me provide an example.

(Holding up a snow shovel) Can you all see this? Do you know what it is? Do you know what it is for? Yeah, that's what I think.

When my oldest daughter, Lisa, lived in Vermont, I would drive up a couple of times a month to visit her, often staying to have dinner with her and her friends. One time as I was beginning to leave and go back home, it started snowing fairly heavily and I, being a thoughtful kind of father, went into the back of my truck and held out a similar type shovel and handed it to my daughter.

She took it but she looked at me and said, "What's this? What's it for?"

Now, this is a young woman who graduated with honors – cum lauda – from a very prestigious college and she didn't know that this was a snow shovel!

Very briefly I found myself mentally weighing the value of my having spent close to a small fortune on her college education versus what other things I might have done with that same amount of money . . . very briefly.

The point was that, in a fatherly, protective, thinking-ahead kind of way, I was giving her a "tool" to keep in her car's trunk if ever she needed it in order to get out of a tough snow situation.

There is truly no difference between this (holding up both the \$20 and shovel) – they are both "tools" to be used when appropriate and needed. If my daughter came out on a day when the Brattleboro City snowplows had pushed all the snow against her little Honda Civic and the snow had hardened, then this (holding up the shovel) would help her dig her car out.

(Holding up the \$20) If I want my particular religious community to stand for the values that I prize: social responsibility, courageous justice-making, enlightened liberal religious education, an accepting and caring group of people, a community of faith for other seekers of meaning and significance like me, then this (holding up \$20) becomes the tool to make sure that those values exist and are preserved.

There is no difference between these two – they are the tools to do the things that need to be done.

The singular foundation of my theology of money is that money plays a role in articulating what one values in and of human living. This is not a complicated notion at all – and I use the term "theology" intentionally because I want to

stress that the deeply-held values which guide our actions, give substance or give emptiness to our religious health. We keep score of our values by the way we spend what money we have.

. . . An American journalist in China during World War II was watching a Maryknoll Sister cleaning the gangrenous sores of a wounded soldier and said to the Sister, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars!" Without pausing or looking up from her ministrations, the Sister replied, "Neither would I!"

A theology of money is not a speculative theology – it is a behavioristic theology. One of the most responsible ways to behave is to put one's money where one's heart lies. I believe it was Ralph Waldo Emerson that once remarked that "your actions speak so loudly that I cannot hear what you are saying."

Money is a tool – a way of placing value – a way of placing priorities to and for one's life. It is one of the finest measures of religious authenticity available to us.

To make a responsible financial commitment to one's religious community means taking seriously the reasons for which that particular religious community exists – it is a valuing of the business that we are in.

A substantial amount of Unitarian Universalists have real difficulty in recognizing that their religious community exists for them as the articulation of their religious values and is much much more than just a place to come on Sundays.

A number of years ago I came across this letter from a fellow Unitarian Universalist to the editor of his church newsletter. I liked it and think it is worth sharing.

"I work for the Internal Revenue Service. I am the one that nobody likes. I inspect income tax returns. Some guy reported an income under \$32,000 and yet claimed on his return that he gave \$3,600 to his church. It looked off the norm to me, so I asked him about his 'contributions.'

Well, he had me. 'Sure,' he said, 'I have my cancelled checks right here.' I went through his cancelled checks and I knew he was on the level, so I apologized for bothering him.

As we shook hands at the door, he said, 'I'd like to invite you to come to my church sometime.' 'Thanks,' I told him, 'but I already belong to a church.' The man replied, 'Excuse me, but that possibility had not occurred to me.' The undersigned writer wondered, 'Now, what do you suppose he meant by that?'"

. . . Over the years I have seen the statistical data on church giving and each year the same fact surfaces that Unitarian Universalists have one of the highest household incomes when compared to other denominations and yet we are among the lowest in financial giving to our Unitarian Universalist congregations.

I have probably heard most of the reasons for that statistic – like Unitarian Universalists support other worthy causes or that we are not motivated to buy real estate in heaven or fire insurance from hell.

I do think, however, that many Unitarian Universalists must secretly harbor belief in some traditional theological concepts like miracles, because somehow we just assume that our congregation's annual operating expenses and costs will be miraculously paid for without our having to be responsible to what is important to us.

As independent-minded, thoughtful individuals, we seem to forget how important an institution such as this one is that nourishes young minds in religious education, serves the less fortunate, calls into question moral indifference, refreshes human spirits in modern music and worship, reconciles science and religion, promotes social witness, revives the liberal religious option, and attempts to make sense of nagging questions of meaning and ethics. Perhaps we forget – or take for granted – this wonderful building and its grounds or the management necessary for a church of this size or the scope of the church's programs that meet the needs of its members or of a shared ministry of laity and clergy that serves in myriad ways.

The reasons for giving responsibly and even generously to this congregation's annual operating costs should arise out of health and a sense of sharing – a sense of commitment to something going on here that adds to the measure of one's life and to the world around us.

Many years ago, Gordon Crosby told a story that has stayed with me. It is a story about giving that displays a spirit which takes seriously the gift of giving

of gifts, of sharing the right things – correct priorities of time, energy, and dollars for institutions which nurture hope in desperate times. Gordon Crosby’s story is this: I was a minister of a small congregation in a railroad town just outside of Lynchburg, Virginia. My deacon sent for me one day and said that he wanted my help. “We have in our congregation a widow with six children. I have looked at the records and discovered that she is putting into the treasury of the church each month \$40 – a tithe of her income. Of course, she is unable to do this. We want you to go and talk with her and let her know that she needs to feel no obligation whatsoever and free her of this responsibility.”

Gordon said, “I am not wise now and I was less wise then. I went and told her of the concerns of the deacons. I told her as graciously and as supportively as possible as I knew how, that she was relieved of the responsibility of giving that much of her income to the church. As I talked with her, the tears came into her eyes, “I want to tell you,” she said to me, “that you are taking away the last thing that gives my life dignity and meaning.”

. . . This religious community – this Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockford – may not be the last thing that gives each of you meaning – in some instances, far from it. But this particular congregation does try – and largely succeeds – in doing the right things. I cannot outline for you all the reasons that this particular church should become part of your responsible stewardship of the gifts given to you. Only you can answer that.

But, if this congregation exists because it provides a reason for all of us being here in community, one with another, sharing a spiritual and religious journey that gives meaning and significance to our lives, providing the programs that articulate your values and standing for the religious principles that are important to each of us – then I would venture that it may not be that difficult to uncover the reason for your own individual and responsible stewardship.

Philosopher Jacob Needleman, in his book Money and the Meaning of Life makes the point that, in our culture, money has become the most important thing in our lives. It determines whom we perceive ourselves and others to be, it permeates all of our relationships – it literally costs us our lives.

And yet, money also presents us with an opportunity to discover what value we place on it and the impact that it has in our search for meaning. There is a connection between giving money to support what we value and the gaining of meaning for our lives.

Let me reiterate what I said earlier. Money needs to be seen as a tool – a means to promote the values that one holds. How one spends one’s money displays what one values – what one values is a reflection of one’s deepest beliefs.

Many people see money as “the root of the root of all civilization” – I do not.

Instead, for me, “the root of the root of all civilization” has to be one’s core values – the gathered community’s foundational beliefs – what we base our living days upon and value most is what “civilizes” us.

If my assumption is correct, then the business we are in as a church – a liberal religious community of folks trying to make a positive difference in the world – trying to better match our experiences with our understandings – trying to make sense and significance to our earthly journeys – trying to share something of our values with a world that so desperately needs to hear of our faith stance and of what is of value to us as religious liberals.

. . . Today the stewardship canvass to fund the needs of this congregation for the coming year begins. If you questioned it before, do not divorce yourself from the truth that “this church is OUR church.” It is our responsibility to help make it all that it can become. In such an effort, it is important – even vital – that we all participate in the decision-making process before us. This is an opportunity to share our individual reflections on what is going well and what our hopes and dreams for the future of our shared religious community are.

. . . And, at the onset of this canvass effort, I need to share both the good news and the bad news for all of us.

The good news is that we already have the money to do everything we need and want to do in the coming year . . . and then some!

The bad news is that it is still out there in your pockets and checkbooks.

Howell K. Lind
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