

First Unitarian Church

September 27, 2015

You want it. You want it bad. Sometimes so much it hurts. You can taste it. You feel like you would do anything to get it. Go further than they'd suspect. Twist your soul and crush what's in your way. Then you get it. And something happens. You become the object of your desire...¹

There ends the reading. That was from a perfume ad in a Macy's window.

Twist your soul? Crush what's in your way? And then *you* become the object of your desire? What does that even mean? Does it mean you're finally satisfied with yourself? You feel good about yourself? And this perfume is supposed to help with that?

If only, right? If only.

We have a new committee this year, called the Radical Generosity Team. This week someone asked if their name was related to the book *Radical Acceptance*, by Tara Brach. It's a book about self-acceptance.

The names are not related, but one thing I do know as a minister is how many people struggle with self acceptance. A lot of people struggle with feeling good enough, with feeling worthy. It keeps them from believing they can be happy. It is like unpleasant background music. They tune it out, but when the other noise in their lives dies down, there it is... still playing... Ugh.

Even people that others would never suspect struggle with this. Successful people often live with a surprising amount of self-doubt. Sometimes when people pursue great achievements, they do so partly because they hope it will cure their feelings of unworthiness.

The Radical Generosity Team was not named after that book, but maybe they should have been! Because how we regard ourselves and whether we have a feeling of abundance and generosity, or of scarcity and grasping, are definitely connected.

[pause]

This is the time of year when we ask you to consider making a financial pledge to the church, and the Radical Generosity team is tasked with designing the campaign. That's who they are. And thank goodness, because when ministers do it on their own, it can get pretty dicey. None of us goes into the ministry for the love of fundraising. We don't even get any formal training on it. And so, sometimes you'll see a situation like the one that happened in England, where three priests went around showing off their knickers—that's underwear in the UK, people—to inspire people to give. The knickers were *under their vestments* and were described as "comedy style." I'm not sure what visual that is supposed to bring to mind, but I want you to stop trying to picture it immediately.

Your ministers have too much dignity for that. We'd make the intern do it.

Luckily, luckily, we don't have to. Because the Radical Generosity team is on the job. For the next few weeks, you'll hear leadership moments—like the one you just heard from Michael, a long time member reflecting on his spiritual growth. We'll also hear from a retired couple considering ways to leave a lasting legacy in the world; a man who immigrated to the US and—together with his family—found a spiritual home at First Unitarian; and finally from two college students who grew up in this congregation.

You'll be offered a pledge packet, and I hope you'll take a look at it. It has been prepared by volunteers— people like you.

Our church is member supported, which means that well over 90% of our funding comes through your contributions. The rest helps but it's small potatoes in comparison: a bit from our small but steadily growing endowment, and income from renting out church spaces, mostly. There is no national body giving us money. We're it.

A really fun part of the campaign is the party today. No money is being collected. We hope you'll pick up a packet of info—anyone who does gets free tickets for the ice cream Sunday bar. But you don't have to turn anything in. And even if you did, a pledge is not a check. It's just a statement about how much money you plan to give the church in the coming year. So stay for the party, and enjoy live jazz in the courtyard while you're there.

Later, at home, take your time looking through the packet. It's different from other kinds of appeals you might get. You are here. This is your church. It's personal. But it's also more than that. It's a way of being and doing more together, than any of us could on our own.

Now the Radical Generosity team isn't just a group of volunteers who ask for pledges and throw parties. They are also charged with nurturing and shining a light on the general spirit of generosity in our church: not just in terms of giving to the church, but also in how we express a spirit of generosity to each other—like this summer, when a small group came together and provided daily visits to a member with no family nearby who'd been hit by a car on his bicycle and ended up facing a long recovery.

They also nurture and shine a light on the church as an institution being generous to its members and to the wider community. So you can expect to hear cool things from them throughout the year, not just during this fall campaign.

I'm going to talk a little more often about money and generosity throughout the year, too. If that makes you bristle, you're not alone. One member of the team quipped that talking about money is like talking about sex. But you know we haven't shied away from that around here either! And why would we? Money, and sex, are two

things, like family, and love, and forgiveness, and the soul, that we live with and think about all throughout our lives.

And because of the larger culture in which we live, *money* is tied up with whether we believe and behave as though we are the authors of our own meaningful lives, or whether we look like we are controlled by something beyond ourselves.

I think if we take a look around, it is fair to ask, do we possess money? Or does it possess us?

What do we own? Do we really own it?

Anyone who has experienced a long period of unemployment, or the sudden loss of our health, or a bad house fire, anyone who has just had a streak of bad luck knows that the things we think are ours, that we wish were truly ours, can disappear. Making it seem as though we were holding nothing more solid than a handful of water the whole time.

To whom do they *really* belong? These material things. These bodies. To the universe. We are mere custodians. We can't take them with us, as they say.

We are custodians of money, too. Like canyon walls and gravity and wind that direct the flow of a stream, as custodians of our money, we can shape the direction it flows, too. But as a wise person once said, if you don't tell your money where to go, it will go away. As though it evaporated.

And if you aren't intentional about its flow in your life, you will find yourself caught up in the flow instead of directing it.

Maybe you can't truly possess it, but you can become possessed by it.

You know this has happened when, no matter how much you have, you always want more. Maybe you always feel broke. When you work more than you want to, more than you can really sustain with your health, just to keep up with a certain lifestyle, or with the bills.

Actually our whole country behaves as though it were possessed. When did the American people come to be called consumers more often than citizens? It makes us sound like zombies. And meanwhile, money keeps flowing in one direction—toward the people who already have ridiculous amounts of it.

Because these things have moral and spiritual repercussions, a group of volunteers in our church also created an economic reform group a few years ago. If that kind of systemic change interests you, and you'd like to have some influence on it in New Mexico, you might be interested in the public banking symposium they are hosting in this sanctuary on Saturday November 7th at 8:30am.

There is an old Sufi story about the importance of cultivating generosity which asks the question, why does the beggar man beg? A beggar sits on the main street all day

crying, "Baksheesh! Baksheesh! Who will give me baksheesh?" Baksheesh is a small amount of money, like alms, given to someone in need.

Some people walk right by without looking at him, some give him a few coins, and some give him more than baksheesh—dropping in the equivalent of \$20 bills or more. But no matter what they give, even if they don't give him anything, he praises them and asks that Allah bless them. Then, at the end of the day, he gets up, goes over to a prayer fountain, and tosses everything in. He leaves without the money, going home to his comfortable middle class house.

I've heard contemporary stories that sound kind of like this one. Stories in which we are warned that someone who appears to be in need may be trying to dupe us. They are going to use your money for drugs. Or they could get a job but are too lazy. The people who say *that* must have really horrible jobs. Whenever I hear that I want to say, "What are you, like, Donald Trump's stylist? You think standing in the sun for eight hours on a busy street on an 18" median looks relaxing?"

The moral of those stories is that giving is risky because the receiver probably has a nefarious hidden goal.

Is this Sufi story like that? Why does the beggar in the Sufi story beg if he doesn't really need the money? The last line of the story answers, "He begs for me and thee."ⁱⁱ The point being, of course, that sharing is a spiritual practice that has value in and of itself.

The Buddha also understood this. He taught that by giving to others, we are liberated from attachment and from the illusion of separateness. Generosity is an expression of unconditional caring. Here's a dollar. Not, here's a dollar as long as you don't use it to self medicate for your pain. Never mind that you can't afford a real prescription and treatment.

In the Jewish scriptures, teachings on generosity abound. It is a basic and sacred duty. In Proverbs, it is written: "Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered."

In the Christian scriptures, Jesus is so generous that it's downright threatening to today's status quo. People gloss over the part of the gospels in which it is written, "if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" And "Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys."

The Pope makes some people nervous when he says that humanity should be served by wealth, and not ruled by it. He gets accused of being a Marxist for comments like that, but it is really such a radical idea to say that money should serve people, and not the other way around? By the way, it's not just cute that he drives a fiat. Fiat is a

word that appears in Latin translations of the New Testament, and means “let it be done.”

How would your spending habits and attitude toward earning or receiving money change, if you saw money as something that exists to serve humanity, and as an opportunity to practice unconditional kindness and nonattachment? As a sign of inner abundance? How does your sense of self worth and meaning grow, when you practice radical generosity?

As this holiday season approaches, I challenge you to make a change. It could be a small one. Something that works for you. Here’s one idea.

Maybe you’ve been giving just a few dollars here and there to First Unitarian. Kind of like tipping God. Add it up in your mind, grab one of those pledge packets, and write it down on a pledge form. If it doesn’t add up to reflect the value of spirituality and of this place in your life, erase it and write in another number that you can live with.

It may still be modest. That’s okay. The important thing is that it’s intentional. That’s the change.

As custodians of the things we seem to possess, let us look for ways to align them, to align their energy and their power, not with the whims of an era or a culture, but with our essential selves, and let them be in service to something higher.

May all that we do, the meditations of our hearts, the words of our lips, and the stewardship of our energies and resources, be of service to love.

With that closing thought, my friends, let us party. Wojciech will play some music as you make your way out. Blessings to you on this day.

ⁱ Advertisement for perfume, in Macy’s Window. Qtd. in Wayne Muller’s Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest. Bantam: New York, 1999. (129)

ⁱⁱ <http://dharmawisdom.org/teachings/articles/gift-generosity#sthash.4Y60YhGf.dpuf>