

From This We Live

Rev. Mark Hayes

March 20, 2005

In case you haven't figured it out yet, today is the kickoff of our annual canvass, or pledge campaign. This is my yearly opportunity to talk to you about money, about commitment, about the importance of sharing our resources so as to strengthen this Fellowship and to strengthen the voice of our liberal religion. As we sang at the opening of the service, "From you I receive, to you I give. Together we share, and from this we live."

I would like to begin this portion of the service with an excerpt from Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography and Other Writings*, in which he describes an encounter with the famous evangelist George Whitefield. Franklin writes:

I happened soon after to attend one of his sermons, in the course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a collection, and I silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold.

As he proceeded I began to soften and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that and determined me to give the silver; and he finished so admirably that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector's dish, gold and all.

I share this with you so that I might request that, once you've reached the state of mind that Franklin finally arrived at, please let me know, and I can stop talking, and we can get on with lunch and making our pledges.

In describing this service for the newsletter, I promised to consider four "G"s that provide a foundation for our life together in community. So let me take a few moments to do that. The first "G" is Getting. That is, what do I get out of being a part of this Fellowship? What is the value I get in return for supporting this place? Over the past several weeks, we've heard several of our members and friends talk about that, as Wayne did this morning.

Much of what we get from our participation and involvement here is intangible, sometimes subtle, requiring some introspection and reflection to articulate. It might be a sense of community, an occasional insight or inspiration, a feeling of joy arising from collective efforts to influence the world in a positive way. In the canvass brochure, I encouraged you to ask yourself such questions as: "What role does the Fellowship play in my life? In the community and in the

world?”, “What would be missing from my life if I weren’t part of this religious community?”, and “What would be missing from the world if Unitarian Universalism and this Fellowship didn’t exist?”

Reflecting on questions like these fosters in me the second “G”, namely Gratitude. I am deeply grateful for the existence of a liberal religious alternative like Unitarian Universalism. I am deeply grateful for this Fellowship that holds a very special place in my life. And as the sense of gratitude wells up in me, it seems to seek some way to express itself, which immediately leads to the third “G”, generosity.

Being the recipient of the generosity of the world and of other people, especially those I encounter in my life here in this community, I feel compelled to meet generosity with generosity. And that leads me directly to the fourth “G”, Giving.

There is an obvious connection between the spirit of generosity and our habits of giving. In fact giving is the visible manifestation of that quality of generosity that we carry in our hearts. I’d like to share with you the following words from the Rev. Barbara Hamilton-Holway that capture that spirit and that connection between generosity and giving:

Generous people who love easily, who give the benefit of the doubt, who willingly offer their gifts and their time and their affection, are joyful. They are a joy to be around.

To withhold, to hoard, to grasp, to guard and keep, to hold on tight – each of these is a living death. Letting go is relief. Letting go is expansive.

Giving is freeing. Giving is powerful. Not only is it true that as you give, you will be replenished, not only is it true that what you give returns to you, giving truly brings you back to life.

Giving, more generously than you imagined you could, gets the old heart beating. Giving makes you feel vital and connected. Giving opens you to love of living. You are a person who has something to give. Live abundantly and delight in giving.

And so we finally come full circle. By giving more, we get more. Not only in the literal, material sense of better facilities, and stronger professional leadership, and more variety of programming. We also receive the psychological, emotional and spiritual rewards inherent in a life of generosity and giving.

Before I put the hard sell on you, I’d like to invite you into a state of reflection and contemplation. You might want to close your eyes if that will help

you focus. I'll share, for your reflection, some observations about generosity and giving from a number of sources, and pose a couple of questions for you to ponder.

Wealth is a state of mind. It is actually true that giving generously to others makes us feel more wealthy. It also makes us feel more connected with the life around us. –*Don Felt*

The older I get, the more I realize that the primary religious quality is generosity: giving liberally of our time, talents, and resources to those communities that bring us abundant life. –*Tom Owen-Towle*

When we give we feel the depths of our powers – to create, to heal, to love. These are spiritual powers which, when exercised, enlarge our souls. When we give, and when our gift is received . . . both giver and receiver are blessed. –*Marilyn Sewell*

Many times a day I realize how much my own outer and inner life is built upon the labors of other people, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received and am still receiving. –*Albert Schweitzer*

What has been freely, generously given to you?

When have you felt good about giving generously?

I hope that this opportunity for reflection has laid a good foundation for the process of discerning what level of financial support you are able and willing to pledge to this Fellowship. For those of you who are guests and visitors – it may seem that I'm not really talking to you this morning. But in a larger sense I am. If you are exploring, seeking a religious home, I think it's important for you to understand that we are a self-supporting community, which depends, for its very existence, on the generosity of its members and friends. And if you are part of some other religious community, I hope you will consider all I've said here this morning in determining how you wish to support that community.

To those who are still deciding how much to pledge to UUFCC for the coming year, I remind you that the decision is yours and yours alone. You need not share publicly the size of your pledge nor your rationale for it. As your

spiritual leader, I feel an obligation to set a good example, and so I do make it a practice to share some of my thought processes and tell you what Cathy and I choose to give.

Our general rule of thumb over the years has been to contribute right around five percent of our gross income to our church, and about five percent to other charitable causes. This year that would have meant little or no increase in our current pledge of \$4800. However, two months ago I advocated, and voted, for the decision to increase the level of our Religious Education staffing by seeking a full-time Director of Lifespan RE. Inherent in that decision was an expectation of more generous pledging by members and friends. And so, Cathy and I are pledging what amounts to about six percent of our total income by increasing to \$5400 for the coming year.

Our willingness to do that reflects our faith that you, too, will step forward with pledges that reflect the generosity you're capable of. But one thing I want to make very clear. If you're feeling bad that you simply can't afford to give ten, or five, or even one thousand dollars, please know that whatever you *can* afford is valued and appreciated just as much as that larger gift. On the other hand, as Michael Durrall writes, "Charitable giving should make some difference in how we as religious people experience life from day to day. . . If you take spare change or a dollar or two from your pocket or purse for the weekly collection and never notice the difference, your giving has too little meaning either for you or for your church."

I don't know about you, but I'm getting hungry. And so I'll leave you with one last story: It happened one time after a pastor had made an appeal in church for a great and worthy cause, that a certain woman, a member of the church, came to him and handed him a check for \$50, asking at the same time if her gift was satisfactory. The pastor immediately replied, "If it represents you."

There was a moment of soul-searching thought and she asked to have the check returned to her. She left with it and a day or two later she returned, handing the pastor a check for \$5000 and again asked the same question, "Is my gift satisfactory?" The pastor gave the same answer as before, "If it represents you." After a few moments of hesitation she took back the check and left.

Later in the week she came 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.

Please think about what kind of gift will represent you. And then be happy giving it.