

Risk and Commitment¹

Rev. Myke Johnson

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Opening Words

The early Universalists believed that God was an all embracing love. No one would go to hell, no one could be outside of the love of God. As Unitarian Universalists today, we hold many different beliefs about God, but we affirm the universal power and scope of love. Henri Nouwen writes:²

I can only fly freely
when I know there is a catcher to catch me.
If we are to take risks, to be free,
in the air, in life,
we have to know
that when we come down from it all,
we're going to be caught, we're going to be safe.
The great hero is the least visible.
Trust the catcher.

The catcher is love.

Lesson For All Ages

The Miracle of Church

(Pennies have been given to people in random amounts as they come into the sanctuary.)

Rev. Myke: Sometimes I think that a church is like a miracle!

A church is a group we choose—that means that families/people come to church not because they have to, but because they want to—because church is important to them for some reason. If we didn't think church was important it wouldn't exist at all!

Can you think of some of the reasons why church might be important? *(congregational answers)*

All of us have chosen to be a part of this church, and all of us actually create the church by our participation and by our gifts of money. Today is the first day of our stewardship campaign, so we want to talk a little about how money keeps our church alive.

Carolyn: So, not counting special projects like the new parking lot, it takes about \$300,000 dollars every year to create our church. If a penny equalled \$1000 that would mean we need 300 pennies to make it work. That 300 pennies includes money for the building and all of its expenses, like heating it up and plowing the snow. *(hold a snow shovel)*

Rev. Myke: It includes paying the staff of the church who organize the work of the church each week, like music and Religious Education and worship. *(point to the piano)*

Carolyn: It includes money for supplies and programs. *(a book)*

Rev. Myke: We also send some money to the UUA to help keep Unitarian Universalism strong—right now out of 300 pennies we send 7 pennies to our regional and national leaders, and we also share 6 pennies with other groups through our share the plate.

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² From *Raw Faith* by John Kirvan.

Carolyn: So where do those pennies come from? Remember, each penny equals a \$1000.

Rev. Myke: Here are 19 pennies—this is money from our Sunday collection. *(put in basket)*

Carolyn: Here are another 19 pennies--this is money that we get from fundraisers like the fair and the auction. *(put in basket)*

Rev. Myke: Here are another 19 pennies—I don't know why they are all 19, that's just how it turned out—19 pennies from renting the building to other people. *(put in basket)*

Carolyn: We get another 8 pennies from investment income, and 2 pennies from Religious Education fees for children and for adult classes.

Rev. Myke: That means we need 233 more pennies for our church each year—and we get those from the people in the church through pledges. Now, we have about 250 grownup members of the church—so that would be just about 1 penny from each grownup person—or \$1000 per year from each person and \$2000 a year from each couple.

Or it would be if we charged dues or something like that—we'd have to charge \$1000 per person. But we don't charge dues. Because not every family has the same amount of money in their lives. Some people have more and some people have less.

Carolyn: And one of our big values is that each person has inherent worth and dignity—each person is special. It doesn't matter whether you have lots of money or no money at all—you are special and you are a part of our community.

Rev. Myke: So what we do is ask people to figure out themselves how much they can give, based on how much money they have in their lives. And that is why church is a miracle. We ask people to give what they can, and we end up with those 233 pennies.

Carolyn: When you came in today, the ushers gave you some pennies. Maybe you got one, or more than one. Or maybe you didn't get a penny this time. But I want to ask everyone who has some of those pennies to put them in our stewardship baskets. I need some helpers to go around with these baskets and collect those pennies. *(they start collecting)*

Rev. Myke: Every person here is part of the miracle of church. We all make our church come alive, through our giving and through our participation. I invite you to think about how many pennies you can contribute, as we begin our stewardship campaign.

Prayer for Joys and Sorrows: Lovers Tossed By These Difficult Times by Rev. Mark Mosher DeWolfe³ (This prayer was spoken at an AIDS vigil in 1987 in Toronto, Ontario, just months before Rev. DeWolfe died at age 35, from illness related to HIV)

Reach inside yourself and touch that special place in your heart where love blooms and grows.

Know that it is love which brought you here today and love which keeps you alive.

Know that you are not alone, that the love which blooms inside you is shared by the loved ones who surround you, who, like you have known not only loss, not only fear, but also the joy of saying Yes to the beauty of life.

Know that the love which blooms inside you is stronger than fear, for people who love find strength

3 In Tom Owen-Towle, *The Gospel of Universalism: Hope, Courage, and the Love of God*, p 49

they didn't know they had. Know that the love inside you is stronger than illness, for people who love hang in when physical health is gone. And know that love is indeed stronger than death, for people who love are like stones tossed into a pool.

The circles of love radiate out and echo back long after the stone has come to rest on the bottom. So remember your love as a source of strength; remember who you are: lovers tossed by these difficult times.

Reading: The Only Ones Who Ever Win by Eileen B Karpeles⁴

Out of our separate lives we come,
to walk this path together for an hour or a day,
for a week or a month or a series of months and years.
For this space of time we travel together,
making much or little or nothing at all of the fact
that another walks beside us.

We can keep our eyes cast down
protecting ourselves from the pain we risk
whenever we allow another human being to touch us,
living safe little lives inside our sterile wrappings.

Or we can reach out,
risking a little or a lot or every coin we have,
because we believe that loving and being loved
is the only game in town.
The choice is ours.
Those who risk much lose much.
But they are also the only ones who ever win.

Sermon

When I began to think about my sermon for today, I was having trouble knowing what I wanted to say. So I took a little detour on the internet looking at jokes related to stewardship and church giving. Let me share just a few of those.

The minister of a tiny country church had been having trouble with stewardship and tithes and offerings. One Sunday he announced, "Now, before we receive the offering, I would like to request that the person who stole the eggs from Widow Jones's chicken coop please refrain from giving any money to the church. We certainly don't want money from a thieving sinner."
The offering plate was passed, and for the first time in months everybody gave.

A man died and went to heaven. He was met at the Pearly Gates by St. Peter who led him down the golden streets. They passed stately homes and beautiful mansions until they came to the end of the street where they stopped in front of a rundown cabin. The man asked St. Peter why he got a hut when there were so many mansions he could live in. St. Peter replied, "I did the best with the money you sent us."

⁴ <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/opening/184540.shtml>

Two men were marooned on an Island. One man paced back and forth worried and scared while the other man sat back and was sunning himself. The first man said to the second man, "aren't you afraid we are about to die." "No," said the second man, "I make \$100,000 a week and tithe faithfully to my church every week. My minister will find me."

One Sunday Reverend Jones announced to her congregation, 'My good people, I have here in my hands three sermons.....

A \$100 sermon that lasts five minutes

A \$50 sermon that lasts fifteen minutes

And a \$20 sermon that lasts a full hour.

Now, we'll take the offering and see which one I'll deliver.'

Now, for anyone who might be new to Unitarian Universalism, I should explain a few things about these jokes. UU's don't actually believe in calling anyone a thieving sinner –though some have been reconsidering that belief in the last few months. And we don't believe that the amount of your gifts to the church will determine your accommodations in heaven. As far as I know, no one in our church makes \$100,000 every week. Also, we don't require tithing, a practice that means to give 10 % of your income to the church--though some of us do choose to give a set percentage of our income to our church. Finally, our sermons on Sunday tend to last about 20 minutes, no matter the size of the collection.

But I think we all can relate to the challenge of raising money for an organization we care about. I should also mention, as we said earlier in the lesson for all ages, the collection on Sunday isn't actually the main source of income for our church. Our main source of income is the gifts given by our members and friends through pledging. A pledge is a statement of how much our members and friends plan to give to the church each month. This month, everyone is invited to make a pledge for the next fiscal year, so the church can create a budget for next year.

But this is not going to be a sermon to cajole you into giving more money to the church. Rather, I want to speak about community and gifts, and hopefully come around to risk and commitment too.

Parker Palmer tells us:

In the human world, abundance does not happen automatically. It is created when we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common store. Whether the "scarce resource" is money or love or power or words, the true law of life is that we generate more of whatever seems scarce by trusting its supply and passing it around. Authentic abundance does not lie in secured stockpiles of food or cash or influence or affection, but in belonging to a community where we can give those goods to others who need them – and receive them from others when we are in need.

Abundance is created when we choose community.

I am thinking about this understanding in contrast to the new Health Care Law put forward by Republicans in Congress. That new law basically says we are on our own. Pay for your own health care, get a tax credit. But the fundamental thing about health care is that we most need it when we can least afford it, when we are so sick that we lose our job, or when our child is sick and we need to take care of them. The new proposal doesn't make any sense.

The original premise of health insurance was grounded in a choice for community. If a large group of people paid into a fund while they were healthy, then anyone could access it if they were unfortunate enough to need it. Thereby the risk was spread around—the risk that all of us face, that we could become ill at any time without warning.

The new law increases scarcity—if you can't afford insurance then you have to do without health care. For example, if you lose your job because you get cancer, then you'll have to go without—meaning, literally, that you could die. That is the true result of the plan being proposed. But if instead we were to choose community—if everyone contributed to one fund, then everyone could have access to health care, there would be abundance.

We are living in the midst of a great societal struggle about the values by which our country will operate. One way to express it is as a struggle between the value of community, and the value of individualism. Another way to express it might be an ethic of generosity vs. an ethic of private property. It is not a simple struggle, because both sides include something of value. But, in the midst of a wholesale attack on the value of community, I think we need to speak up now more than ever about why community is essential for our humanity.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, writes about how the economy doesn't have to be based on competition and accumulation of property—early indigenous communities in America had an economy based on gifting and receiving. She writes: “The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity.”⁵ How did that work? It began with a sense of wonder at the gifts that the earth provides—the wild strawberries in a field, the water in the aquifer or stream, the deer that the hunter could bring back to the community. The people received these gifts with gratitude and humility.

Gifts then had to be passed along and shared. Kimmerer writes, “Gifts from the earth or from each other establish a particular relationship, an obligation of sorts to give, to receive, and to reciprocate.”⁶ “A gift *is* something for nothing, except that certain obligations are attached.” The fundamental nature of gifts is that “they move, and their value increases with their passage.”⁷

Lewis Hyde studied gift economies and found that in a gift economy “objects... will remain plentiful because they are treated as gifts.’ A gift relationship with nature is a 'formal give-and-take that acknowledges our participation in, and dependence upon, natural increase. We tend to respond to nature as a part of ourselves, not a stranger or alien available for exploitation.”⁸ Kimmerer writes:

For the greater part of human history, and in places in the world today, common resources were the rule. But some invented a different story, a social construct in which everything is a commodity to be bought and sold. The market economy story has spread like wildfire, with uneven results for human well-being and devastation for the natural world. But it is just a story we have told ourselves and we are free to tell another, to reclaim the old one.

5 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, (Milkweed, 2013) p. 28.

6 Ibid., p. 25.

7 Ibid., p. 27.

8 Ibid., p. 30.

One of these stories sustains the living systems on which we depend. One of these stories opens the way to living in gratitude and amazement at the richness and generosity of the world. One of these stories asks us to bestow our gifts in kind, to celebrate our kinship with the world. We can choose. If all the world is a commodity, how poor we grow. When all the world is a gift in motion, how wealthy we become.⁹

Abundance is created when we choose community. Charles Eisenstein also writes about the gift economy in his book, *Sacred Economy*.¹⁰ He starts by talking about the sacredness of gifts. He defines the sacred as that which is unique, and also relational.¹¹ In original societies, items were made by hand, and each item had a unique character that also reflected the person who made it. When a person gave someone else a particular pot, for example, the recipient would always recognize that pot and it would link them to the giver. In that way, there was a sacredness attached to the gift of the pot.

In our society, most things are mass produced, and don't have that quality of uniqueness. However, even with such items, if I receive an item as a gift, it may become unique by its connection to the person who gave the gift. It then has a value that is deeper than its physical form—we might say that it has become sacred.

Eisenstein talks about how money originated in the gift economy. The earliest money was usually something of no particular practical worth—such as cowry shells or beads. If I gave someone a gift, they might respond by giving me some shells in return; it was a way of expressing appreciation for the gift. It was a symbol of the generosity of the giver and the sense of obligation in the receiver. Later, if someone gave me a gift, I might pass on those shells, to symbolize their generosity. And so the shells enabled the gifting to occur in a wider circle than just between two people.

Unlike buying something, where the transaction is closed, a gift is open-ended. Gifts create a circle of social obligation and connection. The first money was a representation of that circle.

A gift-giving circle can work as an economy in a family, or in a small community such as a tribe. Eisenstein says money becomes necessary when the range of our gifts must extend beyond the people we know personally. Ideally, money could have facilitated a wider and wider circle of generosity and connection. But unfortunately, money became separated from the gift economy, and became an agent of competition, scarcity and polarization. In our own times, money became disconnected even from actual goods and services; financial speculation on Wall Street was able to ruin the actual economy, even as it divorced itself from anything as substantial as production and consumption.

What Eisenstein emphasizes is that the giving of gifts is what fulfills us as human beings and gives us joy. In fact, the purpose of our being is the “development and full expression of our gifts.”¹² Each of us is sacred. Using Eisenstein's definition, we are each unique, and we are related to each other. What we can offer to the world is something that no one else can offer. It is only when we make that offering that we become happy and fulfilled. He hopes for a future economy which “will call forth the gifts of each of us; it will emphasize cooperation over competition; it will encourage circulation over hoarding,

9 Ibid., p. 31.

10 Charles Eisenstein, *Sacred Economy: Money, Gift, and Society in the Age of Transition*, (North Atlantic Books), excerpted in “Living in the gift,” *Ode Magazine*, Sept 2011, p. 45-49.

11 “Living in the gift,” p. 46.

12 “Living in the gift,” p. 49.

and it will be cyclical, not linear.”¹³

It sounds so beautiful, but I can't help wondering, What keeps us from embracing this gift economy? How did we get stuck in a greed-based economy? I can't really answer that question, but it is interesting to me that scientists have wondered about the opposite question in their study of evolution. Having formed a theory based on natural selection, and the survival of the fittest, Charles Darwin wondered how altruism could have developed—the act of helping someone else, even with a personal cost. It would seem that selfless individuals would be more likely to die before they could reproduce, thus not passing on that trait to their offspring. But altruism does exist, all throughout the world of nature.

Scientist E. O. Wilson, whose career was made by the study of ants, suggests that cooperation is a trait that better enables the survival of a group. He summarized some recent research this way: “Selfishness beats altruism within groups. Altruistic groups beat selfish groups.” He says, “I see human nature as hung in the balance between these two extremes. If our behavior was driven entirely by group selection, then we'd be robotic cooperators, like ants. But, if individual-level selection was the only thing that mattered, then we'd be entirely selfish. What makes us human is that our history has been shaped by both forces.”¹⁴

Perhaps our current crisis as a culture is that the balance tipped too far in the direction of individual selfishness. In our culture we are more and more encouraged to be greedy, and to look out for ourselves. We are seeing some of the disastrous results of that mentality in the dismantling of multiple facets of the common good—education, health care, the arts, the environment.

Are there ways even in our commodity world that we can support the value of giving and receiving, the value of generosity, the value of community? This is where we come back to the miracle of a congregation.

A congregation offers a chance to take a risk for a gift economy even while we are embedded in the midst of the market economy. A congregation is not about buying and selling. What we receive in church isn't quantifiable, and it can't be stored up in a bank, or fill a closet. What we receive is part of a flow. Similarly, what is given to our church is given as a gift—whether that be financial giving, or the giving of time and energy, the giving of compassion and kindness. There are no guarantees that giving something will produce a certain return. It is a chance to risk sharing what is valuable to us, and seeing where the flow will come back.

This is what our stewardship campaign is really all about—a chance to practice a gift economy. A chance to reflect on the gifts we receive, and to reciprocate, to give back. When the gifts are flowing freely back and forth, our church becomes a place of abundance. When we choose community through choosing to belong to our congregation, we can also experience a sense of personal abundance.

But what do we risk when we commit ourselves to our church community? What do we risk when we choose generosity and giving? I guess we take the risk of not receiving anything back, or someone taking advantage of us. Scientists have also explored that risk, as part of an area of research called game theory.

13 Ibid.

14 Quoted in “Kin and Kind,” by Jonah Lehrer, *The New Yorker*, March 5, 2012, p. 42.

They have done many series of experiments, originating in one called “the prisoner's dilemma.” In this experiment, scientists pondered the situation of two prisoners who were being questioned about a burglary. They were held in two separate rooms, and each was offered a plea deal if they testified against the other. Would they keep silent, honor their loyalty to their partner? Or would they choose to save their own skin by betraying the other. The basic question explores the risks and benefits of selfishness versus generosity to the other. The thing is—if they both were generous—if neither talked—they might both benefit. But if one betrays the other, that person will get off with a lighter sentence, and the other will face a harsher penalty. So how do they choose?

Scientists have done multiple variations on similar set-ups with volunteer subjects. They've tried to determine what choices create the best outcomes. The best outcome is when all subjects are generous. But it also can pay to be selfish. Selfish individuals can come out ahead. The risk, if we are generous, is that the other will take advantage of us. But the potential benefit of generosity is that everyone will become more generous.

We face these risks in our world too. In a market economy, the rules say that everyone should selfishly watch out for their own interests and profit. If we take the risk to be generous, other people might selfishly use our generosity for their own benefit. But if we take the risk to be generous, the potential is also there for enhancing our mutual benefit, for creating a more generous and connected society.

So, we might ask, what kind of world do we hope to live in? Can we risk acting as if the world is communal and generous, and thereby making it more so? To choose community is to choose abundance.

Remembering the words of our reading, we can risk “a little or a lot or every coin we have, because we believe that loving and being loved is the only game in town. The choice is ours. Those who risk much lose much. But they are also the only ones who ever win.”

Closing Words (From Rebecca Parker)

There is a love holding us. There is a love holding all that we love.
There is a love holding all. Let us rest in this love.

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.