

Stewardship Sermon Award
2010

Poor and Rich, Rich and Poor



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The Reverend Vail Weller Lead Minister, Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo

Rev. Vail Weller serves as the Lead Minister at Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo, CA, a congregation which inspires her through its generosity. She previously served congregations in Michigan and West Virginia. Vail was raised a Unitarian Universalist at the UU Church of the North Hills in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Vail is a graduate of Pacific School of Religion. During the time she was at PSR, she joined an interfaith delegation to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. Within the Pacific Central District, she has served on the UU Minister's Association Executive Committee and was co-coordinator of the Bay Area President's Roundtable, an effort to increase the visibility of Unitarian Universalism. She serves on the Board of Directors of the UU Partner Church Council.

Vail and her partner Bob Hardy have a son, Zinn (9) and a daughter Denison (3) and can be found at the local farmer's market, at the ocean, on their bikes, tending the garden or feeding their chickens when they are not at church.

“Poor and Rich, Rich and Poor”

The journey was a long one.

We started on an airplane, a 16-hour trip crossing the international date line. A van for an hour, then another hour's plane ride. A pedi-cab trip, and a four hour van ride. Then another hour's drive up a windy mountain road, turning off the road onto a rocky, bumpy, muddy path for the last 2 kilometers. All of this to connect with the eyes of the very real Unitarian Universalists living in one rural village in the Philippines. All of this to connect with my own humanity. All of this to suddenly understand the trouble with our economy and how to end world poverty.

Two months ago (this past January) a group of 7 from my congregation traveled to the Philippines to meet Unitarian Universalists there, with the special purpose of meeting the members of our partner church, in Ulay/ Cabighuan, on the island of Negros. We spent three days in our partner church village and I feel we really got to know the people there. On the second day, the families stood and told us about the members of their families, and with openness, they shared about the joys and struggles that they face.

This is a place where there is no electricity, no running water, no passable road, no grocery store, no school. The homes are simple structures with bamboo, people sleep on the floor on little mats. Chickens walk around loose. A few lone water buffaloes dot the hillside. Dogs run around underfoot.

The clothes that the people wear are washed at a well, one kilometer away. They eat what they grow, and they sell their crops as well.

When the harvest comes in, they must carry it on their backs to the market, walking down the boulder-covered road in their flip-flops. If they cannot transport the crop themselves, they must pay someone who charges them almost all of their profit.

Health care does not exist in this village. People who are ill have to heal themselves or simply suffer. Basic ailments which we easily treat, might mean the end of a person's ability to farm, there. Before our trip, I didn't fully understand how Unitarian Universalism in the Philippines could have faith healers; but now I do – with no health care, it's natural that a person's faith would expand to include healing.

Children who can afford to go to school must walk a long way, and if the delicate balance of the family changes they will be needed to farm and will have to stop school. Those who do get an education and go on to college must leave the village to earn money to send back.

Laborers who have a specific skill often leave the village to go earn money elsewhere (often working under horrible conditions for months at a time) so that they can send money home. This means that they are separated from their family for months at a time.

It is a drastic cycle of poverty. But don't let these facts give you the impression that life is hopeless and desperate. The people in Cabighuan welcomed us so warmly. They were so excited that we were there. They came very long distances to be with us, some of them walking through the mud for hours. They had planted flowers all along the walkway to the church. They had a banner emblazoned with each of

our names hung across the building. They had ribbons and flowers draped across the doorway to the chapel. They cut down coconuts so that we could drink the milk.

In Cabighuan, the families invited us into worship. They sang for us. They smiled at us with their whole being! They were all so open and loving. They gave up three days of their farming – no little matter – so that they could get to know us, and so that our partner church relationship could be strengthened.

The Unitarian Universalist church in Ulay/ Cabighuan is central to the lives of these families. Their UU faith is not hypothetical, nor is it taken for granted.

In this overwhelmingly Catholic culture, in this place where all they do centers around working, from dawn to dusk, to feed themselves and their families...imagine what the message of Unitarian Universalism means to people. Their faith says to them that god loves them. That they are whole, and holy, and beloved. They are reminded that they are free to decide what is true for them. That through their choices, they can make the world a better place. That their lives matter. Again, that god loves them.

And the institution of the church is life-saving to them. It is the church which is bringing clothing, food, religious education, support for their parenting and health concerns.

It is the UU Church of the Philippines that is doing the community organizing with these folks, which is all about empowering them in the most practical ways. The villagers will be educated about what the local governments can do to improve the quality of their lives, and they will decide for themselves what their priorities are. I want you to understand very clearly that it is the UU church which is making this possible.

When Rev. Rebecca Sienes from the UU Church of the Philippines visited our congregation a few weeks ago, she told the story of her father and his founding of Unitarian Universalism in the Philippines. She told of how her father reached out to the-then “Universalist Church in America” and said, “We need your help. Please send Universalist missionaries.” And when she told the story here, that line got a laugh. When his letter was received in Boston, it might as well have gotten a laugh, too. “We don’t do that kind of thing,” they responded.

Rebecca’s father was confused by that response. Rebecca is still confused by that response. And having been there myself, I am now confused, too. Spreading Unitarian Universalism in the Philippines is about healing lives. It is about getting water and food and health care and roads to people, empowering women, and strengthening families. And it is about giving people their first-ever taste of hopeful, loving theology. Suddenly, I felt shame when I realized that the response, “We don’t do that,” pointed at just how much we take our faith for granted. It is not a luxury, I realized. It is the breath of life for those in Cabighuan. If only it could be so for us, here. If only we could see how much we have to offer them. If only we were willing.

Well, our trip ended and we landed back in the United States, and my family was reunited. We got in the car (which we own) which carried me, my husband, my two children and my father easily. We drove to our home (which we own)...a home, which though small by some standards (previously mine!), allows us to live in what would most definitely be called luxury by many people. We talked about what we were most in the mood to eat, and we went about getting it. We watched the Inauguration of our new President, Barack Obama, which had happened earlier that day – but we were able to “Tivo” the inauguration to watch it at our leisure. We unpacked our suitcases and made

piles for the laundry, which would be done by machine, not by hand. The weather outside was chilly, but we had the heater and a glowing fire to keep us warm. We have one another, we have good health. We have everything we could possibly ever need...and then some.

That night, I had a restful sleep in a wonderful bed, and I slept until my body felt like waking up. After a healthy breakfast and my favorite tea, I caught up on the headlines.

All of the talk was about the economy, the stock market, the uncertain future. “We are in a recession”, “This is the new Depression”, “Things are falling apart”...the headlines read. I had the strangest sensation of being a part of two stories, each one very different from the other.

I had just returned from a place where people live full and fulfilling lives without any of the comforts we take for granted. And the word here is that things are falling apart. But we have plumbing, I thought to myself. We have a place to live. We have clothing, food, education. We have work that pays us a great deal of money, compared to what most people in the world live on.

Now I’m not suggesting that the current global crisis is not a crisis. Many of us have lost assets, some have lost jobs, and there are very real side-effects. We will have to adjust our lives. I am suggesting that we have an opportunity, right now, at this critical juncture, to make a change in the way we understand our assets. Let’s get clear about what they are, and what they could do.

As fate would have it, on my way to meet with the Partner Church committee to plan for our service two weeks ago, I heard an interview with Peter Singer on the radio. He was talking about his new book, entitled *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*.¹

According to the World Bank, you are in extreme poverty if:

1. You are short of food for all or part of the year, often eating only one meal per day, sometimes having to choose between stilling your child’s hunger or your own, and sometimes being able to do neither.
2. You can’t save money. If a family member falls ill and you need money to see a doctor, or if the crop fails and you have nothing to eat, you have to borrow from a local moneylender and he will charge you so much interest as the debt continues to mount and you may never be free of it.
3. You can’t afford to send your children to school, or if they do start school, you have to take them out again if the harvest is poor.
4. You live in an unstable house, made with mud or thatch that you need to rebuild every two or three years, or after severe weather.
5. You have no nearby source of safe drinking water. You have to carry your water a long way, and even then, it can make you ill unless you boil it.²

As he went through the list, I made “check-marks” in my head. In our village, we heard stories of kidney disease, arthritis and cataracts, none of which are being treated. We heard time and time again of children stopping their education due to the family’s inability to pay the school expenses, and so that the children can care for the livestock. We heard of the local lenders charging 6% per month. We saw what the villagers ate, and learned that the water source is 1 kilometer away. The families living in our partner church village meet every one of these criteria. It is a place of extreme poverty. And now, extreme

¹ Singer, Peter. *The Life You Can Save* (New York: Random House, 2009).

² Singer 5-6.

poverty has a face – many faces... and a name – many names...for me. And I brought something home: a new appreciation for what's most important.

When we had the privilege of hearing the personal stories of the families in Cabighuan, the president of the congregation (and father of ten, who walks with his family 10 kilometers to church), Bonifacio Viliejo, began his sharing by saying, "We may be poor in many ways, but we are rich in children." What they have is EACH OTHER.

In his book, Peter Singer points out the ways in which global poverty "works" – what creates it, what sustains it, and what might actually reverse it. He educates the reader even-handedly, taking up a variety of philosophical and practical arguments against helping the truly poor, before making his case that we must. I learned so much from this book: I highly, highly commend it to you. I even might go so far to suggest that it is a moral and ethical imperative to read this book and wrestle with the implications.

What Singer ends up proposing is a stretch, but it is not his suggestion that we sell everything we own and go work with the poor. (Someone once did suggest that, I seem to recall...) What Singer does suggest is that we have an ethical responsibility to use some of our wealth to save the lives of those who won't be saved otherwise.

He says that if we agree that the toddler in the pond deserves to be saved³, then we must be willing to sully our clothing to save that child's life. He proposes that our willingness to continue to buy ourselves luxury goods – and make no mistake about it, most of what we are buying for ourselves are luxury goods – then we are choosing to do that instead of saving the one life that we could save. It is my unfortunate responsibility to point out to you what you deep down already know: there is a cost for being a part of this culture with its taken-for-granted standard of living.

So here is where the rubber hits the road. We Unitarian Universalists talk about, and I think we do truly believe in, the inherent worth and dignity of each person, as well as the interdependence of all life.

We are also, statistically speaking now, extremely well educated and wealthy.

One study that I read shows that among 25 major religions, Unitarian Universalists are the most highly educated group, earn the highest SAT scores, and rank second in median annual household income.⁴

³ A reference to an ethical dilemma that was presented as the conversation with the children. You are dressed in your brand new basketball shoes on the way to a game, or in your dance outfit on your way to a recital, or in your finery for Easter morning at church, when you pass a pond and see a toddler flailing about in the water, unable to stand, or swim. You look around for a parent or babysitter, but there's no one there. It would be physically safe for you to rescue the child, but you would ruin your clothes and be late for, or miss, your special event. What would you do? This story comes from Singer's book and is a common teaching story used in ethics courses in universities.

⁴ Socioeconomic Rankings of Religious Groups in 2001, by Ariela Keysar and Barry A. Kosmin. Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, Trinity College. See also: Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans, Who, What, Why, Where by Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar (Paramount Market Publishing, Inc., 2006).

This is not to say that this represents all of us, but just as we seek to welcome all, we need to also be honest about how we could actually transform the world if we so chose.

In *Becoming Enlightened*, the Dalai Lama said, “I cannot help but observe that we often are content with merely wishing and praying for the happiness of others, whereas for our own purposes we do everything we can for our betterment, not just wishing!”

Peter Singer lays it on the line when he writes:

We live in a world in which 27,000 children die from avoidable causes every day. That’s more than one thousand every hour....We can do something about these things. That crucial fact ought to affect the choices we make. To buy good stereo equipment...is to put more value on [this enhancement] to my life than on whether others live or die. Can it be ethical to live that way? Doesn’t it make a mockery of any claim to believe in the equal value of human life?⁵

Our economy is in a tailspin because capitalism went to its logical end-point. If people are able to find any way to make more profit, they will do so, even if it seems “too good to be true”, even if it’s unproven and dangerous, just because they can. If one has no measure for how much is “enough”, it will be almost as though there is no such thing as “enough”. It is easy for us to point fingers at “those executives” at AIG or BearStearn...but I must ask each of us to answer this question: have you figured out for yourself how much is enough? What are your physical needs for food, shelter and clothing? And what do you choose to do with all of your resources beyond that?

Since my return from the Philippines I have been really living into those questions. I hope to make some major changes in my life and I hope that some of you might be inspired to join me.

I’m calling my plan “The Year of Giving Generously”. (It might at times feel like the Year of Living Dangerously, but I feel this plan’s time has come.) The program has a number of tenets, each one is a part of creating a new relationship with compassion, service, and money. Each involves stretching to do more. It means that I will tithe, giving 10% of my income away. It means I will use my life energy to help others, and I will be supporting the institution I most cherish with more dedication and zeal, and to a degree that will require sacrifice.

I invite you to make the commitment to do the following tangible things.

- Read the book “The Life You Can Save”, because it is filled with education about global poverty and directs us towards the best ways to actually, tangibly help.
- Commit to expanding your horizons over this next year. Step out of your comfort zone in a very real way. Once you do, these issues will no longer be hypothetical to you. Join in a pilgrimage trip to the Philippines. Join the interfaith group going to Leon, Mexico this summer. Join the service trip to rebuild homes in New Orleans next spring. If you absolutely cannot go on a trip, then join the group for study and support.
- Commit to give 5% of your income to directly combat extreme poverty. Research is available to guide your choices so that you can be assured that your money will go where it actually will make a difference.

⁵ Singer 149.

- And we all know that charity begins at home. Commit to dedicating a portion of your life energy by volunteering within this congregation. (Our annual pledge campaign asks you to not only commit to a financial pledge but also to commit to a pledge of service.)
- And finally, commit 5% of your income to your church...a congregation which nourishes spiritual lives, provides invaluable religious education, and demonstrates Unitarian Universalist principles through social action locally, nationally, and internationally.

“The Year of Giving Generously” asks a lot – it is a commitment to give 10% of our income away. This will mean choices, and indeed, sacrifices. But I believe it will help us to use our privilege in ways that will make a real difference. It will help our hearts and souls to grow in love. And it will help us to remember what is most important, and that we are indeed all connected.

I predict, no, I promise, that “The Year of Giving Generously” will reconnect us with our own humanity. It will strengthen our Unitarian Universalist faith. It will help us to deeply understand the economy and it will help us to do our part to end world poverty.

May it be so.

POSTSCRIPT – Rev. Vail Weller – March, 2010

A few months after I presented this sermon, I was invited to join the Board of Directors of the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council. The trip that I took to visit my partner church in the Philippines was made possible by the Partner Church Council, and I will be forever thankful for my introduction to our faith and my new friends in the Philippines. I am thrilled to now find myself serving on the board of the UUPCC.

UUPCC believes that international engagement is a moral and spiritual principle that enhances Unitarian Universalist congregational life. Global partnerships can be a first step to building world community. Through shared experience, partners become increasingly aware of the interdependency of all people.

Partnerships provide individuals, small groups and full congregations a way to connect with the larger fellowship of our faith. Our models are not based on charity—we value building relationships between UUs that benefit all in both small and large ways—improving cultural understanding, supporting communities and helping to develop individual, religious, educational and economic opportunities.

We have partnerships in Eastern Europe, India, the Philippines, and Africa, as well as emerging partnerships in Hong Kong and Indonesia. In these places, we are making a real difference in people’s lives. And lives of people in my congregation have changed as a result of these connections, as well. Partnership is most definitely mutually beneficial.

An annual membership in the Partner Church Council will bring you into direct contact with the stories of Unitarian Universalists around the globe, and will give you concrete opportunities to make a huge difference in the lives of Unitarian Universalists living in extreme poverty.

Please consider joining us by visiting <http://www.uupcc.org/membership.html>