

Stewardship Sermon Award  
2011

Fire of Commitment



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## Stewardship Sermon Award 2011



**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 as the Vice President of the Board of Directors of the UU Partner Church Council.

Vail's family includes partner Bob Hardy, son, Zinn (10) and daughter Denison (4).

## Personal Testimonial: Church Member Christina Conklin “On the Value of Generosity”

I haven't always been a particularly generous person. I wouldn't give my sister the bigger piece of cake or my husband the apology he deserved. I don't think I looked or seemed much different on the outside – I still did lots of volunteer work and had friends and gave to charities – but on the inside I knew I felt a little bit cold, a little bit hard, and sometimes pretty darn shut down. Mostly I think I withheld because I didn't feel there would be enough for me if I gave very much away. It made me sad.

I knew I wanted to cultivate greater generosity and openness as part of my values, and when I first heard our minister refer to “generosity as a spiritual practice”, I was curious about that idea and started to explore it. The minister would talk about “giving until it feels good”; I wasn't sure what that even meant, but I was interested in finding out if such a thing existed.

So I stretched my giving for a few years and eventually set the goal of tithing to charity, as my grandmother had done. It was really scary, but my mantra became “90% of enough is still enough”. 90% of enough is still enough – that still seems really logical to me and calms me down when I get anxious.

It took a while to get there, years when I had to swallow hard and write much bigger numbers than I thought I wanted to on the annual pledge card; for several years that meant doubling our pledge, year on year, which was not easy to do, I assure you. I viewed it as an experiment, to see how it would feel and what impact it might have on my life. But in that terrifying, check-writing moment, all I was saying to myself was, “I'm going to be OK. There's more than enough for everyone. Breathe.”

And what I found was that I started to feel better. The little cold hard place in me began to heal. My sense of trust in an abundant world grew, and I really began to believe the things I had been telling myself. There is enough for everyone.

Then, about a year ago, I heard someone on the radio talk about a promise she made to herself, that whenever she got a generous impulse, she would follow it. And whenever she was asked for a donation, she would always give the first number that popped into her head, even if it seemed too big. What a wild idea, I thought. I think I'll try it!

Now, when our monthly special collection plate comes around that number is often 200. I'm always surprised, and my first instinct is to talk myself down to something more sensible. But what I've learned is that that number is the edge of my comfort zone, my growing edge -- the exact place where I want to live my life. So I write the check, and I feel exhilarated every time.

This has been the most transformative practice of all, the one that has taken me from not really being sure if I were living out my values, to really knowing in my heart that I am. Now I get to walk through life saying yes, sharing more of what I have with others. Now we are tithing – 5% to this church and 5% to a host of other groups – and I feel more open and fulfilled than I ever have before. It feels really good.

I know, too, that the more we talk about this and support each other in the spiritual practice of generosity, the easier and more joyful it becomes. I am so excited to see how creative we can get and how much good we can do with these wonderful envelopes we've been given!<sup>1</sup>

## Sermon "The Fire of Commitment"

The Buddha said, "Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared." Thinking back to the magic envelopes, I am wondering to myself who felt happier...those of us who received an envelope with the magic money inside, or the people who gave the money away, to be shared widely? The poet Maya Angelou has said, "I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver."

I keep hearing about recent studies that have shown that money CAN buy happiness, but not in the way you'd think. Researchers have found that people report being happier if they spend their money on others rather than on themselves.<sup>2</sup>

An Austrian millionaire was in the news this month for giving away all of his fortune. Why? "For a long time I believed that more wealth and luxury automatically meant more happiness," he said. "I come from a very poor family where the rules were to work more to achieve more material things, and I applied this for many years," said Mr. Rabeder. But over time, he had another, conflicting feeling. "More and more I heard the words [rising up inside me]: 'Stop what you are doing now – all this luxury and consumerism – and start your real life'," he said. "I had the feeling I was working as a slave for things that I did not wish for or need. I have the feeling that there are lot of people doing the same thing."

Since selling his belongings, Mr. Rabeder said he felt "free, the opposite of heavy". "My idea is to have nothing left. Absolutely nothing," he told *The Daily Telegraph*. (All of his money will go to fund micro-credit for the poor in Latin America.) But he said he did not judge those who chose to keep their wealth. "I do not have the right to give any other person advice. I was just listening to the voice of my heart and soul." <sup>3</sup>

Over the last few months, I have been thinking a lot about money and stewardship and even tithing. A number of us within the congregation have been talking about it. A number of you have shared your stories with me.

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<sup>1</sup> At this Sunday service, envelopes were given out to every person present with some amount of cash inside (ranging from \$5 to \$250. A total of \$5000 was donated for this purpose.) The only requirement for the spending of the money was that it had to bless the world in some way, and they had to loop back to us and let us know what they did with the money.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth W. Dunn, Lara B. Aknin, and Michael I. Norton, *Science Magazine* 2008.

<sup>3</sup> "Millionaire gives away fortune that made him miserable" by Henry Samuel, in *Telegraph UK*, February 8, 2010.

Arleen Henricksen gave me permission to share with you about an encounter I had with her. Arleen was a member of the church, a person of quite modest means, who lived on a very fixed income as a retired teacher. Arleen told me she felt grateful for having been raised poor, because she learned to live frugally and came to understand the value of people helping people. AND, she was always a person very rich in spirit! She was always very giving.

She gave a significant sum of money to an acquaintance a few years ago, and did not understand the money to be a loan, but a gift to help this friend out in a time of need. Fifteen years later, the friend sent her a check paying back the money, along with a letter of gratitude. Well, Arleen called me and said she wanted to meet with me. We sat down together and she told me the story of having given the money to her friend, and its unexpected repayment.

Then she said, “I don’t need that money. I want to give it to the church, which is so important to me in so many ways.” And she handed me a check for \$1000. I was simply bowled over by her generosity. “I don’t need that money. I want to give it. Giving relates to happiness,” she said.

Arleen died just a few weeks ago. One of the last checks she wrote was to the church’s new building fund, for another \$1000. She wanted to support the future in a meaningful way. Right up to the end, Arleen was a model of generosity. And she was a truly happy person – which had nothing to do with what was in her bank account. She understood what matters most.

Listen. Money is simply energy and nothing more. Money can be stuffed in the mattress, or kept in an offshore bank account, to provide a sense of security, or to move us just a bit closer to that ever-elusive sense of “enough”. Money can also be used to do great good in the world.

I believe that this church changes lives for the better **and that we’re only getting started**. We need to be a congregation of stewards, who understand that the church needs our strong support in order to fulfill our shared mission of transforming ourselves and the world. As stewards, we are caretakers of this institution for a future we will never see, just as our founders had the vision to build and strengthen a congregation that we now benefit from.

The magic envelopes are a cute gimmick, sure. (Great! They give away money at that church! How cool!) But there is a really deep point that we are making by doing that today, on the day we ask for your pledges for the coming year.

When you give money to this congregation, that money is used to bless the world in a variety of ways. It is money that goes far and wide beyond these walls. Think about it: over the past few weeks, you’ve been hearing about how various members within the church have been personally transformed through their association with this congregation.

We know that our religious education program enriches the children *beyond measure*. We know that the comfort our lay chaplains provide *mean the world to those who are cared for*. We know that the music ministry of this church *heals hearts and opens spirits*. We know that community members showing up month after month to do community-organizing with the local interfaith group, or to host the temporarily-homeless families, are making a *true difference in real lives*.

And there are so many things we'll *never see*: the teenager who decides **not** to commit suicide because they had access to our Our Whole Lives program, affirming them as they questioned their sexuality. We'll not know for years about the young children currently attending our church who will be called to enter the UU ministry, affecting thousands of other lives in the future. And there are **many** of us who have changed the very course of our lives because of something we have learned here, or felt here, or touched here, or because God, or our own deeper knowing, has spoken to us here. If you feel that your life has been enriched because you are a part of this congregation, raise your hand.

How can we ascribe monetary value to the place of the church in our lives? Quite frankly, I'm not sure that we should. That way of thinking connects us solidly with the consumer culture in which we live. ("Let's see...what did I get from this? Well then, I'll give that...") A church is not a buffet that we approach in order to pick out what we're most in the mood for. In fact, some of the things we **most need** are things we wouldn't ordinarily seek out to do. That doesn't mean we shouldn't be challenged to grow. I think that's what church is for!

Our mission states it clearly. This religious community exists to support the transformation of each one of us, and the transformation of society. We need a place where we can celebrate life, come together to mourn and marry and march and to learn spiritual practices which will help us to live our values every day of the week.

And we need a place which will challenge us to recognize our own privilege and invite us to be counted among those who are willing to change our lives for the sake of others. This will motivate us to see our interconnectedness with all of life, and will lead us to heal the environment, racism, classism, able-ism, and homophobia. It will lead us to become more and more generous and more moved to help. As I said, we are just getting started. There is so much more work to do.

On the one hand, Unitarian Universalists are statistically the highest income-earning faith group. On the other hand, we are statistically the faith group that gives least to our own churches. **Why is that??** If we gave of our resources at the level that the Baptists, Mormons, Episcopalians, or Jews do, we would be able to serve the community in amazing ways.

Think of the soup kitchen we could run each Sunday, serving hundreds of hungry neighbors. Think of the houses we could build in New Orleans, and the green technology we could help to retrofit our entire area with. Think of the co-housing communities we could build, the Unitarian Universalist preschool we could run, the progressive retreat center we could build, the spiritual direction institute we could create. All of these are actual and real possibilities. There are so many things that we could do. The sky's really the limit.

A few of you may be wondering about the invitation that we make to you to give 5% of your income to the church, worrying that there are surely those who can't afford to give at such a level. Studies show it is low-income working families that are the most generous group in America, giving away about 4.5 percent of their income on average. This compares to about 2.5 percent among the middle class, and 3 percent among high-income families.

I think that we need to be challenged to reexamine our biases, and recognize that our religious community is just as worthy of support as is the neighborhood Jewish temple, the Baptist church, or the Moslem mosque. Historically, Unitarians just haven't been asked to give at the level that those others have. That is changing, as all around our movement, people are recognizing the power of the church in their lives, as well as making the connection between generosity and spiritual wholeness. Our culture is broken, and one of the reasons why is because we are told it's all about getting more. Getting more isn't the key to wholeness. But giving more, just may be.

Tithing is a term understood by Christians, which is an expectation of giving 10% of one's income to the church. After that tithe, the literature states, you are then free to give as the spirit moves to special invitations...but that the 10% to the church comes first. That 10% is used to support the programming and ministry that is offered not only to us, but to others who are not even like us in any way.

The pledge is meant to support the overall ministry of the church, not to support the sliver of the budget that is most important to us personally. This is what stewardship is: building the foundation for a future we will never see.

An important principle of Islam is that everything belongs to God, and that wealth is therefore held by human beings in trust. Zakah – stewardship - is one of the 5 pillars of Islam, and means both "purification" and "growth." Possessions are purified by setting aside a proportion to give. Like the pruning of plants, it is understood that this cutting back balances and encourages new growth.

Others of you may be thinking, "I give to a lot of causes, I can't give that much to the church!" It is true that we Unitarian Universalists are a very civically-minded group. We all care about causes outside of the church. But I highly doubt that you are giving 5% of your income to causes outside the church.

When you think about it, 5% is really quite a minimal percentage out of 100% – and I really believe that for most of the people here, the church means more than that in our daily lives. (You may spend more on Starbucks than you do your church. While I do believe in the magical powers of caffeine, I wouldn't call it life-transforming.) I have learned that sacrificing for the sake of supporting the church at a responsible level feels really good, actually. Giving up something like regular meals out, or a vacation, can enrich us more than we think.

Last year, my husband lost his job. He didn't love his work, but it did provide our family with income that we use to cover our basic expenses. When he lost his job, we went into survival mode. I called the church and froze my pledge, because I wasn't sure what was going to happen. But as the months went by, and my partner began to create for himself a new direction, a much more healthy and life-affirming path is opening before him. He has been using this time to put his life in alignment with his overall values, a project that I support whole-heartedly.

He and I talked a few months ago about our pledge. Our lives had never been richer, we realized. We had reprioritized our spending because we were forced to. And we wanted our church to be represented as one of our priorities. We decided that we would see what would happen if we tried to meet our original pledge amount, even though it was a stretch pledge for us to make on **both** of our incomes.

And so the last few months, we have been making large payments to the church to make up our pledged amount. And I feel great about this. When I look at my bank account and my checkbook, I feel as though my priorities are obvious.

I wanted to share this story, and have asked others to share theirs, because I wanted you to be encouraged to try it. As I mentioned earlier, if everyone were to give at a 5% level, we would have no budget crunch at all, ever. And that is a good reason to do it. But it's the private and personal transformation that I want to encourage in you. It is simply a matter of deciding that giving to the church comes first, along with one's rent payment or electric bill. It gets paid along with the other necessities of life, because that's what it is.

Think back to a moment ago when some of you raised your hands. When money is given to the church, it is given to the greater good; to enrich your lives. We end our Sunday services here, and you go out there and do service yourselves – you live your principles far and wide. And the church touches so many beyond our walls, via our website, and the weddings we perform, and through community coalitions and our partner church. And the children. What about the children. If you have been to one youth service here, you might have thought, "What amazing young people!" If you have been to more than one youth service, your thinking must have changed to, "We raise amazing young people here!" which is the truth.

Week upon week, we make a difference in countless lives. Deep differences that are profound...life-changing...and life-affirming. And the challenge before us is, are we willing to prioritize the church in our giving? Because if we did that, each of us giving 5% of our income, we would be happier people – statistics prove it! And we would be able to bring more love and more light and more justice to the world.

I hope that the fire of commitment will be growing in you this morning, and that you'll be inspired to do something truly generous. **And please hear this: whatever your gift to the church is, we celebrate and appreciate it.**

As the magic envelope donors would tell you, and as others have shared here this morning: giving can be a gift to the giver. It expands and widens and nurtures the soul. "Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared."