

"The Giving Paradox"©
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society, Madison, CT
The Rev. Jeanne Lloyd
September 17, 2017

Gathering Music *Sonata in A major, Andante grazioso, Mozart* Carol Wright

Sounding of the Gong

#Welcome

Jenny Lee, VP
Board of Trustees

Prelude *Sonata in D minor, Larghetto, Scarlatti*

Chalice Lighting & Bell

(The flaming chalice is the symbol of our free faith)

Opening Words

Rev. Lloyd

May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations,
And inspired to bring our gifts of love and service, to the altar of humanity.

May we know once again that we are not isolated beings but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community, and to each other.

#*Opening Hymn #16 *'Tis a Gift to Be Simple*

A Story for All

Nate Pawelek, Director of Religious Education

#Sing the Young People Out

Till we meet again (2x)
May peace go with you (2x)

Honoring Our Joys and Sorrows

And, now, if you woke this morning with a sorrow so heavy that you need the help of this community to carry it; or if, in the spirit of thankfulness, you woke with gratitude in your heart that simply must be shared, now is the time for you to speak.

Please come forward to the lectern as you are able. Or, we will bring a mic to you, as needed.

PAUSE

Let us reflect with reverence in our hearts for the joys and sorrows spoken and unspoken today.

Musical Meditation: *Arietta, opus 12, no. 1, Grieg*

Offertory Words

Let us offer with generosity what treasure we have to the service and stewardship of this congregation and to those whose lives suffer in these moments. Fifty percent of this month’s cash collection will go to the victims of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma. Let us give from the heart, knowing any one of us could face these same challenges. No one of us is immune. In those moments when we seek refuge, peace, and freedom from fear, we rely on others. Our generosity and stewardship of this world does indeed make a difference.

Offering & Offertory Music *Burlesca in D major, Krebs*

Sermon *The Giving Paradox*

Rev. Lloyd

This Sunday and next, I want to explore with you, this concept: *Each of us is a prisoner to our own way of thinking. Or, said another way, our capacity to know and be known is limited by our cultural assumptions.* These assumptions profoundly affect how we relate to the world, to each other and even to ourselves. The narrator of the book, Ishmael, says, “what prevents us from freeing ourselves [and others] is, first and foremost, [our] not realizing that we are prisoners of our own beliefs of the ‘story’ we have been telling ourselves throughout history. What keeps us imprisoned is that we’re ‘unable to [see] the bars of [our] cage.’”¹

One does not have to be marginalized or oppressed to be a victim of our own cultural assumptions and ways of processing them. Anyone of us can be seduced by particular models of thinking that interfere with our ability to truly understand larger perspectives. Part of what we claim as Unitarian Universalists is a larger world view, grounded in reason and intellect. Yet, in practice, too often we make this claim with unmerited confidence. We, too can miss the mark just as well as anyone else when our “truth” does not also hold other’s truths.

We are each shaped by many cultural assumptions. Among the most universal is the paradoxical one about scarcity and abundance. It profoundly affects how we perceive our lives, and thereby chart the course of our lives.

¹ <https://thesystemsthinker.com/ishmael-cultural-dialogue/> September 16, 2017.

Logic tells us that the more we give away, the more we lose. The paradox is that the more we give away, the more we receive. But, our society tends to forget that.

Instead, we habitually, use our highly tuned analytical and reflection skills counterproductively, always sorting for the negative. To be sure, such ingrained habits are probably deeply rooted in the survival skills of the most primitive part of our brain: it is always sorting and scanning for what is different, and then quickly judging whether this thing that is different is a threat. If thoughtlessly perceived as a threat, our primitive brain alerts us, warns us: *“watch out!”* We think that with difference comes risk and loss.

This way of viewing life is no way to live. Neither person nor community can thrive when living within the straightjackets of such thinking. Neither can learn when afraid of failure. Neither can grow without risk. And, without mistakes, there will be no learning. Sorting for the negative constricts our world view and handicaps our individual and collective ability to dream and escape the intellectual bars of our cage.

Sorting for the negative, as I call it, is also named by Steven Covey as the practice of scarcity thinking:

Covey says,

Most people are deeply [rooted in scarcity thinking]. They see life as having only so much, as though there were only one pie out there. [As though] if someone were to get a big piece of the pie, [that] would mean less for everybody else.

[This zero-sum scarcity mode of thinking] revolves around the idea that there simply isn't enough to go around. [An example would be when you think that] only one person can get a raise at work and no one else can.]

[This] is the **zero-sum paradigm of life**. [Such thinking makes it hard to share recognition, credit, power or even profit. It promotes greed. And, it makes it hard to be] genuinely happy for the success of other people.

[Such thinking prompts jealousy, sadness, and even anger. . .] : ***“[They got something special] and I didn’t.”***² (emphasis added)

² <https://www.thesimpledollar.com/from-the-scarcity-mindset-to-the-abundance-mindset/> September 16, 2017

This is a cultural way of thinking that is becoming more prevalent in our society, and is increasingly seen in nationalistic protest marches where hate and self-interest are promoted. It creates a breeding ground for isolationism, nationalistic agendas, and various forms of xenophobia that narrow our vision of humanity and the world. Such thinking rises and falls with the ages and when it rises, our society must inevitably ride out a storm that is often of its own making, in part because we have chosen to approach life’s challenges as losses instead of opportunities.

How do we counteract and fight this type of thinking? It is a question that has been answered time and time again in response to moments in history when people of courage have seen the consequence of such thinking and have chosen a different more magnanimous way to view others and events. It such times as these, religious prophets have called humanity to do that which is not intuitive and does not seem logical: that is to embrace the paradoxical challenge of giving and generosity. That is: to save not only ourselves.

So, too, last June the prophetic delegates of our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in New Orleans voted on the side of abundance. They voted that we, as a denomination, should challenge extreme inequity locally and globally, saying,

“Our Unitarian Universalist faith calls us to [challenge economic inequity] . . . and [to] advocate for those among us being harmed by [economic injustice]. We know that there is enough for everyone’s need but not enough for greed. We can create a global beloved community based on inclusive sharing of resources and universal sufficiency. We cannot ignore the harm caused by a system that gives control of wealth and resources to a very small percentage of people while many others, including those who carry out the work of the world, struggle to survive. Our sources, principles, and theologies of our faith compel us to act.”³

The entire Statement of Conscious on Economic Equity is several pages long and can be found on the UUA website. In short, it explicitly names various societal patterns and practices that we should study and address, in order that we may promote and create a **moral economic system**.

But, what it asks most of us is to let go of scarcity thinking, to let go of the idea of zero-sum gain, and to promote, despite the paradox, a belief in abundance thinking where equity can be achieved without loss in the intangible things that truly make life meaningful. It is a way of thinking that believes in possibility and hope, while

³ <http://www.uua.org/economic/escalatinginequality/escalating-inequality> September 16, 2017

acknowledging our shared responsibilities for parsing out the resources of this earth fairly.

Covey says, “The [a]bundance [way of thinking] . . . flows [from a] deep inner sense of personal worth and security. [Shared equitably] . . . there is . . . enough to spare for everybody. [Addressed equitably we can share prestige . . . recognition, . . . profits, . . . [and,] decision making. [Abundance thinking] opens [up] possibilities, options, alternatives, and creativity. . . . It focuses on the long term. It [understands] that just because you don’t . . . have something [now, doesn’t] . . . mean [that] you won’t . . . [ever] have it. . . . [Instead of someone else’s raise being a source of] . . . jealousy or [despair] – it becomes a source of genuine happiness for that person, because you know that person’s [good fortune] does not take anything [away from your own personal worth and dignity].”⁴

When resources are shared equitably, there is enough to go around. It is incumbent on humanity to figure out how to create a **moral economic system** that is equitable in its outcomes. As members of humanity, the task falls to us. By this Statement of Conscious – thus are we called to act.

In short, an abundance way of thinking is similar to what evolutionary biologist, Robert Wright⁵, calls non-zero-sumness, where an evolutionary process of increasing complexity, globalization and communication holds open the possibility that humanity will (admittedly, in fits and starts) ultimately evolve toward greater cooperation and collaboration among its peoples. It will do so, as it slowly but inevitably realizes that each person’s survival is dependent on the survival of humanity as a whole.

As evolutionary as such thinking may be, abundance thinking is not revolutionary. Thirteenth century, B.C.E., Hebrew law instructed the people to serve the poor as follows (Leviticus 19:9-10): “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; [but] you shall leave them for the poor and the alien.” In Luke, 6:38, Jesus taught the people, “For if you give, you will get! Your gift will return to you in full and overflowing measure, pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, and running over.”

⁴ <https://www.thesimpledollar.com/from-the-scarcity-mindset-to-the-abundance-mindset/> September 16, 2017

⁵ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nonzero:_The_Logic_of_Human_Destiny,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcZFly2mfyE&feature=youtu.be>,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4wFyRGilp4&feature=youtu.be>

Our ancient and contemporary prophets thereby argue against the zero-sum belief that the more one gives away, the poorer one becomes. Together they argue for the paradoxical belief that in sharing, cooperation and collaboration, our lives are personally enriched and communities strengthened, in ways named and unnamed that far outstrip the merits of an economic system that promotes individual wealth and power over the health of society and the world.

PAUSE

Some seek to save themselves, by themselves, for themselves. G*d⁶, if G*d exists, is not a binding G*d of community and harmony amongst all peoples, but, is instead an iGod, a god personally customized to suit the buyer's, or . . . follower's needs.

But, such a view of salvation and of G*d, is built on sand. It is not how salvation was originally defined in the Hebrew Bible. For the Hebrews, ". . . salvation is almost always understood as collective . . ., not personal . . .". G*d is in a covenantal relationship with the people of Israel, and they with G*d. They strive together toward their mutual fulfillment. G*d "hears the cries of the children of Israel and delivers them from bondage."⁷ In our faith, a Universal G*d would hear our collective cries, helps us see the intellectual bars of our cage, and, by our hands and voices and feet, deliver all of us from bondage.

Let me end with a story from the teachings of **Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai**⁸

Far on a distant ocean,

"A group of people were travelling in a boat. One of them took a drill and began to drill a hole beneath himself. [Alarmed,] his companions said to him: "Why are you doing this?" He replied: "What concern is it of yours? Am I not drilling under my own [seat]?"

⁶ Rev. Lloyd does not spell out the word, "G*d," because the term is loaded with many misconceptions and preconceptions. That which is the spirit of life and community, the spirit of love and death, the spirit of humanity, cannot be relegated to one three letter word. Rev. Lloyd invites others to reconsider the meanings of this word, and, to contemplate whether it is a noun or verb. Is G*d Love? The reader is invited to expand their vision and understanding . . .

⁷ <https://www.chosenpeople.com/site/salvation-as-interpreted-by-judaism/> September 16, 2017

⁸ Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, also know by the acronym "Rashbi," lived in the Holy Land in the 2nd century C.E. A disciple of Rabbi Akiva, Rashbi played a key role in the transmission of Torah, both as an important Talmudic sage and as author of the Zohar, the most fundamental work of Kabbalah. He was buried in Meron, Israel, west of Safed. http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/386812/jewish/The-Boat.htm September 16, 2017

They said to him: "But you will flood the boat for [all of us]!"
(Midrash Rabbah, Vayikra 4:6).

As a people of faith, seeking liberty for all people, it is our duty, our evolutionary responsibility and collaborative privilege to expand *our moral imagination*⁹ as a species to: first, see beyond the limits of our cultural assumptions, and then to abundantly and justly act on the supreme certainty that we are all in the same boat.

May it be so.

***Closing Hymn #317** *We Are Not Our Own*

***Closing Words**

We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Sung Benediction #402 *From you I receive, to you I give
Together we share, and from this we live.*



A Moment of Silence
Announcements

Jenny Lee
Board of Trustees

* Please stand as you are able and comfortable.
Latecomers may be seated.

⁹ Robert Wright.