

Money and the Meaning of my Life

March 15, 2015

Rev. Paul Beckel

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

Good morning and welcome to Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship. I'm Rev. Paul Beckel.

And I'm Rick Steele.... Who are *you*...? We can ask ourselves that question from the perspective of age, size, race, class, sexual orientation, national origin, profession, or religious affiliation.

Paul: Who *are* you...? We can ask ourselves that question from the perspective of personality type, or from the perspective of *what we value*—as seen through *how we spend our lives*.

Rick: As we light the chalice today *let us remember who we are* by saying together our covenant: *Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.*

GATHERING HYMN

We Gather Together #349

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

The Marvelous Loaves, by Michelle Richards

CHILDREN'S & ADULT CHOIR

What is my God? by Andrew Marshall

INVESTITURE and INVESTMENT

Paul: Investiture is a funny word meaning to put the vest on someone, give them the mantle of authority and responsibility, to initiate, install, or inaugurate. So today we're going to *invest* our canvassers—charge them to go out to find out what is on the minds and hearts of the people of BUF.

A similar word, investment, means to support or to back something up. So at the same time we invest these people, we are going to invest **IN** them, tell them that we have their back, that we will do what we need to do to ensure that they will succeed in their quest.

Rick: So will the canvassers please stand? Thank you for taking time to share your enthusiasm for BUF. Thank you for engaging with the many members and friends who seek to support this Fellowship with their presence, creativity, goodwill, and cash.

By showing up to engage in these canvass conversations, you make it possible for all of us to share our hopes and concerns, as we shape our future together.

Paul: So, canvassers, we ask you to do your best to embody the spirit of BUF as you engage in these rich conversations. We ask you to make your own financial commitment before going out to ask this of others. We ask you to show up on time for these conversations, to listen respectfully, and to pass along the hopes, concerns, and commitments that you receive from the members and friends of BUF. Will you do this?

Rick: And BUF members and friends, we ask you too—to do your best to embody the spirit of BUF: to respond promptly when you're contacted, to welcome your canvasser's visit, and to engage with them about your hopes and your commitments for this beloved community. Will you do this?

Rick: Thank you for your commitments to one another. And thank you for recognizing that, in doing this, we fulfill our covenant.

REFLECTIONS, part 1

It was the last hour of the last day of the church garage sale, and our volunteers and our garage sale hosts were eager to get rid of *everything*. Not to make more money—but just to avoid having to cart it all away. I came by to take a load of books to the library. Ted looked over as I picked up a big box and smiled, "Take all you want, they're free."

Someone else chimed in, "Great idea—let's make everything free." There was an immediate consensus among the half-dozen helpers and as I carried the next box past one of the lingering bargain-hunters I laughed, "Everything's free!"

The man quickly instructed his daughter to pick up a box of books (before they were all loaded into my car). Then he grabbed a few other things and, before he left, he gave us ten bucks!

There was a kind of joy just in saying to people, "Everything's free!" And there was a joy too in watching their reaction. The next person responded, "Oh!? Will you take a donation?"

My first reaction to this minor but surprising twist of fate—making money when we were trying to give things away—was, "this is cool, you open yourself to generosity and look what comes back!"

But then I quickly second-guessed myself. I thought "No, this is NOT a phenomenon of generosity... because we're trying to *get* something for ourselves here—a break from hauling all this stuff away. It's not really giving when you're looking for a payoff.

Then a few hours later I second-guessed my second-guess. I knew that we were really, completely, giving the stuff away. Yes, we stood to gain from giving it away. But those who were taking it were not in any way burdened by our benefit.

It left me puzzled: *Why can't* you gain something ...and still be giving? Somehow I think I'd been trained to believe that these things are incompatible.

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Whether by accident or by design, our experiences with money, advice we've been given about money, and our feelings and ideas about money have affected our spiritual journeys.

Ordinarily when we talk about money we talk about whether our choices, our efforts, and our brilliance have led to meeting our financial goals. We don't often talk about how much *luck* has

played a part in our meeting our financial goals (even though we acknowledge that another word for a great deal of money is a "fortune). Another thing we don't often talk about is our philosophical or spiritual goals related to money, even though I sense that most of us have some such goals tucked out of sight.

I certainly don't object to financial goals. But the risk we take in not examining our spiritual goals related to money is the risk of falling into the thoughtless pattern of simply seeking more for no particular reason.

So personally, my financial goals are oriented toward security, and fun. But also gratitude, and generosity. Because to the extent that I feel gratitude, and practice generosity—that is the extent to which I feel that my life's meaning is fulfilled, and fulfilling.

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A story tells what I mean by generous: A monk once traveled the land carrying nothing but her clothes and bowl in a small sack. Once she was given a precious ruby by a thankful student, which without concern she added to her sack.

Another day she passed a traveler sitting at the side of the road in distress. Asking about the other's well-being, she learned that the man was penniless, starving, and cold...and in need of help. The monk explained that she was in a state of owning nothing. But she reached into her bag to see if there was anything that might help. She found the ruby and gave it to the man, who was overjoyed, and thanking her, hurried off before she might change her mind.

Later the traveler caught up to the monk again, saying "Please, I have been trying to reach you for days. Please can you give me something?"

The monk said "I have given you all that I have, I have nothing else in my pack to offer you."

"No," said the man, "I don't want another ruby. I want that which allowed you to give me the ruby."

Is it possible for someone such as myself to live a fairly conventional lifestyle, with partner and kids, and be immune, unfazed by significant financial gain and loss? That would be generosity. I'm working on it.

Then my other goal: gratitude...

I struggle with conventional norms about gratitude, such as the idea that we should be grateful for the good things in our lives. I mean, if we're supposed to be grateful for the good things in our lives does that mean we're supposed to be ungrateful for the crummy things ... or ungrateful for the good things that we're missing?

Maybe I think too much, or maybe it's because I'm an over-privileged American, but gratitude for the good things in life doesn't always stick with me. So I think it's about time I aim higher, toward unconditional gratitude.

Whether I have what I want, or not. Whether I am comfortable or not. Whether I am satisfied or not. And there are times that I am able to cultivate unconditional gratitude—thanks for nothing. Genuine thanks, regardless of the results.

How does unconditional gratitude happen? I'm not sure. I guess that's why it's a spiritual goal.

What does it feel like? It's like that feeling you've all known: when you're feeling better after having been ill. Or like knowing that we could have more but knowing that we have enough. It's like, "everything's free!"

RESPONSIVE READING

"Give me the strength to be free." The thought of being free comes upon us sometimes with such power that under its impact we lose the meaning that the thought implies.

Often, "being free" means to be where we are not at the moment, to be relieved of a particular set of chores or responsibilities that are bearing heavily upon our minds, to be surrounded by a careless rapture with no reminders of costs of any kind, to be on the open road with nothing overhead but the blue sky and whole days in which to roam. For many, "being free" means movement, change, reordering.

To be free may not mean any of these things. It may not involve a single change in a single circumstance, or it may not extend beyond one's own gate, beyond the four walls in the midst of which all of our working hours and endless nights are spent.

It may mean no surcease from the old familiar routine and the perennial cares which have become our persistent lot.

"Give me the strength to be free." Often, to be free means the ability to deal with the realities of one's situation so as not to be overcome by them. It is the manifestation of a quality of being and living that results not only from understanding of one's situation but also from wisdom in dealing with it.

It takes no strength to give up, to accept shackles of circumstance so that they become shackles of soul, to shrug the shoulders in bland acquiescence.

This is easy. But do not congratulate yourself that you have solved anything. In simple language, you have sold out, surrendered, given up.

It takes strength to affirm the high prerogative of your spirit. And you will find that if you do, a host of invisible angels will wing to your defense, and the glory of the living God will envelop your surroundings because in you He has come into His own.

—Howard Thurman

REFLECTIONS, part 2

How did my religious upbringing influence my internal conflicts around money? Well, there were a lot of biblical messages. For example:

Jesus throwing the money changers out of the temple. Now in this case I disregarded simplistic interpretations like that Jesus was against commerce in general. But I did find meaning in another interpretation: that Jesus opposed commercial smarminess like taking advantage of people in the name of God.

Then there was the story of a rich man who was chastised for stockpiling his granaries for the future. Well, I understood this as a useful metaphor for excess. But I remembered too the other story where Joseph was hailed as a hero for planning ahead and stockpiling abundant harvests.

Another one that never really moved me is the admonition that one cannot serve two masters: God and wealth. This seemed like a false dichotomy to me, because making money, taking care of myself, and sharing the wealth...seemed to me one perfectly decent way to serve God.

And that story from the Acts of the Apostles in which a guy sells his land and then, having given only a *part* of the proceeds to the apostles, falls dead on the spot...then the same thing happens to his wife? A compelling drama, perhaps, but that just seemed like overkill.

So I never had trouble disregarding biblical bits that didn't make sense to me. What I had trouble with were the stories that did make sense, but I knew I could never live up to. The one I struggled with for the longest time was Jesus' statement—and I felt this one piercing ...as if it were spoken directly to me: that I must sell everything that I had, give the money to the poor, and follow him.

Now mind you this was not a problem for me because I was enmeshed in comforts and possessions. I was about 16 when I was seriously confronting this question and I owned next to nothing... less—it certainly seemed—than any of my friends. It was a time in my life when I relished going hitchhiking for a week or two with nothing but a can of beans. And sleeping in the ditch. I was not into comfort or possession. The trouble is, I took Jesus' word seriously... and I eventually decided that I would not, or could not, go all the way. And this realization hurt. It hurt to realize that I would never live up to this Christian ideal.

Back in my hitchhiking days I took a pretty carefree, "lilies of the field" approach to getting my daily needs met. You may remember Jesus' parable about how the lilies of the field and the birds of the air have no worries about where their next meal will come from, and yet look at how marvelously they are provided for.

But today, in contrast with Jesus' advice, I feel it would be irresponsible not to plan for where my next meal will come from when I have kids to provide for (though that's shifting too, now, as an empty-nester.) So it's a continuous *balance* to be kept: between sane normal rational preparing and protecting...versus the letting go of gratitude and generosity.

Finally, as far as biblical influences: I know it's true, but I can't help questioning Jesus' very relative statement about the difficulty for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. I can't help but ask, "How rich?"

Because I see lots of people around me who must be richer than I am, even if I do have more than 99.9% of all the people who have ever walked this earth. Why should *I* simplify my life?

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So that's the biblical stuff. On a more personal level, here are a few of the most intense images I carry about money and meaning (one for each of my decades)

In my first decade, the meanings of money came to me through living on a farm with a large garden, and livestock that provided for a lot of our needs. With this, and there being a lot of us kids, the understanding was that no money would be spent unless absolutely necessary. In a more positive sense, from this experience, self-sufficiency, resourcefulness, and appreciation for the bounties of nature became central to my self-concept.

In my second decade I spent a summer in a village in the Dominican Republic. Here I got a new perspective on nature and resourcefulness: because here too were very hard working people in a lush natural environment...and yet they had so few resources compared to me. This experience helped me to see that context (where we're born) and good fortune (luck) were much more relevant than I ever would have previously admitted.

In my third decade I entered the business world and observed the philosophy that you have to spend money in order to earn money. The company I worked for was determined to be known for its customer service, and we spared little expense in trying to make people happy. And it seemed to work.

In my fourth decade, I found myself making large monthly child support payments. In my soul, each of these payments represented much more than money. I won't go into the details right now but I mention this to note how easy it is for our relationship with money to become a projection of complex and seemingly unrelated areas in our lives. For example: when I signed that first child support check, my signature, which had once been rather jolly, became an angry scribble. This continued for 15 years. And though that entire episode is now 10 years behind me, to some degree, I fear, a bit of resentment still shows up in the way I sign my name, and sign checks in particular.

In my fifth decade, I learned about and became inspired by experiments taking place around the world in social enterprise, Benefit-corporations, and microfinance: all kinds of hybrid public private initiatives and alternatives to business as usual. The internet became huge during this time, and since no one was sure how to make money with it, an amazing variety of structures evolved in an attempt to monetize this bounty of information that had clear value...but which also seemed to want to be free.

In my congregations in Ohio and Wisconsin during this time we both relished and struggled with this in-between-ness: knowing we had something of enormous value, and wanting to give it all away...without losing our ability to create more, tomorrow.

And now in my sixth decade I can only guess what the big issues around money will be for me, for us, and for humanity writ large. My guess is that inequality, debt, and the emergence of virtual currency will be some of the major factors to shape us in the years ahead.

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I imagine each of us has similarly intense memories related to money, and values associated with these images, as well as hopes and regrets.

Who among us hasn't looked back upon a financial decision and wondered what our life would be like if we had just done one thing differently? But once we've come to know what our attitudes are and where they've come from, it's important that we move on and ask ourselves what money is going to mean for us today and tomorrow.

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Money is something for which we choose to trade our life energy.

In our desire to be carefree we can become careless. Or we can become paralyzed out of fear that we'll choose badly, or out of anger that some choices about our financial well-being are beyond our reach.

It's a delicate dance.

It's a delicate dance, and one we're still dancing.

Between greed ...and need

Between hope ... and resentment

Between fulfillment ... and emptiness.

It's a delicate dance at a party where the partner you seek may be masquerading as something completely different. So it may be best to hold each of our images of money in our lives—stories or advice or experiences ... hold them loosely, with unconditional gratitude. And simply ask: how will I spend myself today?

SILENCE 3:00

SENDING SONG

My life flows on in Endless Song

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