

Reflections on Generosity

If pressed to define the purpose of our Church, what would you say? First Universalist Church means many things to many people, but we believe that the purpose of our Church is to develop spiritually mature members: people who challenge themselves to create better lives for themselves, their families and their fellow citizens.

The First Universalist Pledge Team is committed to fostering stewardship within our Church community. To us, “stewardship” means acknowledging that we have a shared responsibility toward the Earth — including our lives, our possessions and the communities of which we are a part — and that we are called to express our gratitude by being generous with these blessings.

Secular organizations solicit financial support from members and friends.... But we believe religious organizations have a stronger authority — indeed, a moral authority — **to challenge people to lead generous lives.**

Indeed, the Pledge Team hopes to transform our Church into a congregation of generous people. We recognize that *personal* transformation occurs gradually as one considers new ideas and begins to incorporate them into one’s life; *institutional* transformation follows a similar process. There has been significant personal and institutional transformation occurring within our Church during the past few years (e.g., inward engagement through Community and Practice Circles and outward engagement through the “House that Love Built” project). **Embracing generosity is the next step in this ongoing transformation.**

We believe that there are many others like us in our Church. They need to be asked to make a substantial financial commitment to the Church. If they are not asked clearly, then they will continue in their present situation. The exact amount of 5% is not the key thing here, instead, it is **the engagement with the question of the role of generosity in our lives.** Sometimes people need to be pushed a bit, and we believe that we should push them on this — not in an aggressive way, but instead, in an invitational way. . .

Generosity flows from feelings of abundance & gratitude, while stinginess flows from feelings of scarcity & fear. May we envision the world as a place of abundance.

First Universalist Pledge Team, Fall 2013.



As we learn in reading these pages, none of the people in our church's past thought small. As we move into the future, inspired by the stories preserved here, and by our own connections as a community, I dream that all of us will be equally bold in the present, here and now.

Schroeder, Justin (2009) Back-cover statement in *First Universalist Church of Minneapolis: The First 150 Years*, Minneapolis, MN: FUC.



Now let's consider spiritual maturity [the courage to act on our principles]. . . .The late William Sloane Coffin said that courage is the first virtue, from which all other virtues emanate. Progressive churches seize on this concept. They believe that if congregants achieve spiritual maturity, all things become possible. All things! Therein lies the true power of a community of faith. . . .In congregational life today, I wonder if we encourage people to spend their courage; or to find it in themselves, if they feel courage is lacking.

Durall, Michael (2009) *The Almost Church Revitalized: Envisioning the Future of Unitarian Universalism*, Boulder, CO: Common Wealth Consulting Group.



I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave — that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm. And therefore, this courage allows us, as the old men said, to make ourselves useful. It allows us to be generous, which is another way of saying exactly the same thing.

Robinson, M. (2004) *Gilead*, pp. 245–246, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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When practiced consistently and intentionally, . . . giving can become a spiritual discipline and, even more, a sacred art. When we practice giving regularly and understand that our motivation has some connection outside of ourselves, we have the opportunity to radically transform our lives, the life of another person, even the lives of entire communities. This is at the core of my faith. . . We must give of our time, talent, and treasure in the service of a vision. And we must come together to reflect on that giving. Tell stories. Learn from each other, and keep going. That’s how we build movements and sustain communities.

Cathy Rion (2012) *On Tithing, Money and Faith*, blog post of 11 September 2012 at <http://www.resourcegeneration.org/blog/2012/09/11/on-tithing-money-and-faith>.

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The church exists to question cultural norms, to help us want the right things and to hunger and thirst for justice, to make us uncomfortable with the gap between our professed ideals and our actions. It exists to claim us, to shake us, to demand of us, and to make us new people — brothers and sisters of one another, lovers of the world, workers on behalf of the Kingdom of Equals, and the kind of people that others are so drawn to that they can’t help but ask, “Wow, how did you get trained to be such an amazing human being?”

“My church is training me,” we would respond. “It is a lot of inner work, a lot of thinking and reflecting and talking with people about how to be, and it’s expensive. I give my church a lot of my time and my money. But it really is working a miracle in my life, which feels amazingly freer, richer, more meaningful, and hopeful than it did before I devoted myself to religious community and practice.”

Rev. Victoria Weinstein



[We must] recognize and accept that we do not own anything, and that this world and everything in it is on loan. Our congregations, homes, rivers, mountains, cities. . .intimate relationships, and even our bodies are not ours to keep but must be returned at the end. We are only the trustees of everything that is entrusted to our care. This is the beginning of wisdom. . .to acknowledge that we do not truly own anything and that we did not make ourselves out of nothing.

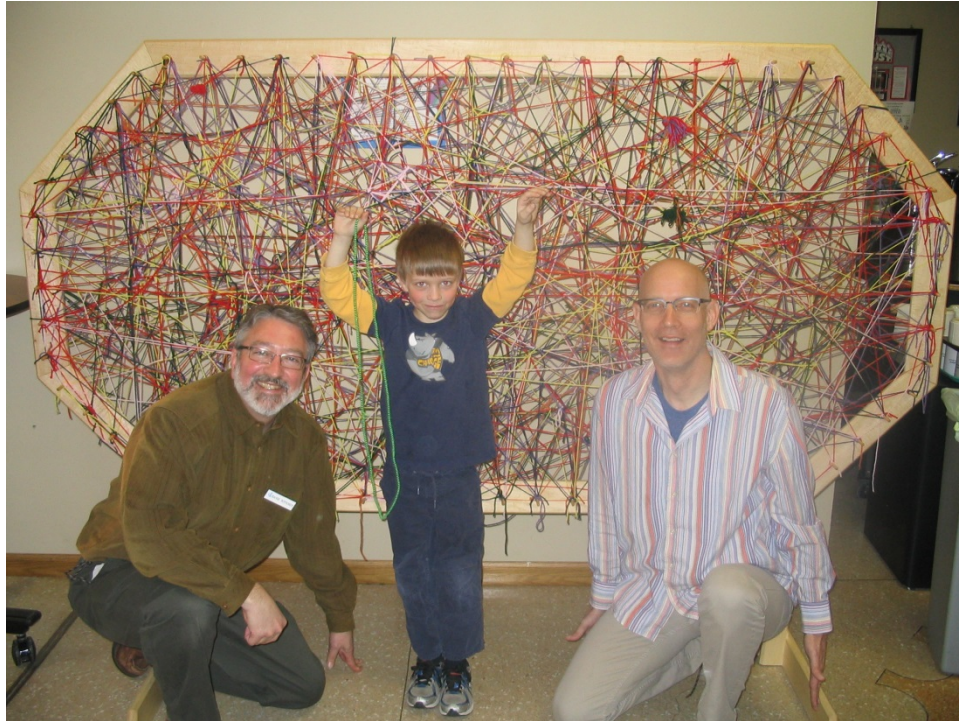
With this understanding, then, the church becomes a place where we practice giving as a way to embody the reality that none of it is ours anyway. . .that we don't get to take any of it with. . .that being alive is a blessing, that walking on this earth is a blessing and a gift, and that our response, the only response, really, is one of gratitude, of praise, of joyfully giving back, of being generous.

Rev. Burton Carley



Let's start this conversation by going back out to the field, specifically, to the edge of the field. . .This is essentially a commandment to leave the edges of your field un-harvested. . .Whatever your "field" is, it's not just for you alone. . .Tithing, or giving away 10% of your income, is a way to acknowledge that none of it is ours, and that we are utterly dependent on other people and things. Giving, then, recognizes this spiritual reality. . .Giving as a spiritual practice is an invitation to see what you have, what you've been given, and to give back. To give is to live. To withhold — to withhold love, affection, gifts — that is spiritual death, that is to perish. . .

Rev. Justin Schroeder (excerpts from "The Edges of the Field" sermon during 2013 Pledge Drive opening worship service).



This church encourages us to connect personally and emotionally with each other as is symbolized by these threads crossing and connecting. I look at the web and I try to see the thread I added, the path it takes, and the many paths it crosses. I think of each thread crossing another as being a connection between members of this congregation. The closest most meaningful connections and friendships I've made in the Twin Cities since joining First Universalist Church, I've made at this church. I am so grateful to know that I am a part of this Web of Connection.

I have been supported by this church, as have you. We, as the pledge team, would like to ask you to financially support the church that supports you spiritually, emotionally and even socially. The church is here for us always. Now it is time for us to be here for the church. It is time to do our ritual of giving. Please pledge now if you haven't yet, and then come and add your thread to the Web of Connection. Then step back, and think about and look at the connections you've made.

Jaeger, R. (2013) 2013 Pledge Ritual Closing Celebration, First Universalist Church, 24 February 2013.



The beauty of our Church community is that we are all invited to help shape our shared vision, and we are all in this together — by working together we can achieve more, both personally and globally, than by working alone. We are a community working together to grow: both inwardly, by becoming more spiritually mature, and outwardly, by becoming powerful creators of a bold, progressive future in which all can experience the Universalist spirit of love and hope.

First Universalist Pledge Team Web of Connection Pledge Ritual, February 2013.



An important question about stewardship is: Should generosity be one of the core values of religious people? Phrased less delicately: Is it possible to lead miserly lives (or conversely, lives of great indulgence) while giving little to the church or to any other charitable organization — yet attending worship services and considering oneself to be a person of faith?

Durall, M. (1999) *Creating Congregations of Generous People*, Alban Institute.