

What Emerges When We Choose to Bless the World

- a sermon reflection + readings compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

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Story for All Ages

"The Gift of the Gemstone"

~ a wisdom tale of unknown origin

A wise woman, a teacher, was passing through a forest. There, among the leaves, was something shiny. She wiped away the leaves and dirt and beheld a beautiful, large gem. "My, this is pretty," the wise woman said. She put the jewel in her pouch and continued on her way.

When the sun was high in the sky, she sat down under a tree to eat her simple lunch. She was barely settled, when she saw a figure approaching. It was a man and, to judge from his dress, a poor man. "Kind and gentle lady, do you have any food to share with a poor beggar?"

"I have plenty," she replied with a smile, digging into her small sack. She pulled out the gem that was on top, a loaf of bread and a piece of cheese. She offered the bread and cheese to the beggar. But the beggar's eyes had grown big at the sight of the lovely gem.

"Sweet lady, that is a magnificent jewel!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, do you like it? Here, take it, too." And she gave the man the gem, the bread, and the cheese. The beggar could not believe his luck! He wrapped the gem in his cloak and quickly scampered off. The wise woman arose and started off on her way again.

She was surprised a few minutes later to hear footsteps behind her. She turned and saw the beggar before her again.

The beggar held out the jewel. "Wise woman, may I give this back to you. I don't want it!" "What do you want?" she asked.

"I want whatever it is you have that allowed you to give it away."

Meditation

"Choose to Bless the World"

- by Rebecca Parker

Your gifts—whatever you discover them to be—can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind's power, the strength of the hands, the reaches of the heart, the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting—any of these can serve to feed the hungry, bind up wounds, welcome the stranger, praise what is sacred, do the work of justice, or offer love.

And any of these can draw down the prison door, hoard bread, abandon the poor, obscure what is holy, comply with injustice or withhold love.

You must answer this question: what will you do with your gifts?
Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude to search for the sources of power and grace, native wisdom, healing and liberation. More, the choice will draw you into community, the endeavor shared, the heritage passed on, the companionship of struggle, the importance of keeping faith, the life of ritual and praise, the comfort of human friendship, the company of earth, its chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world. Together—that is another possibility, waiting.

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will, a moving forward into the world with the intention to do good. It is an act of recognition, a confession of surprise, a grateful acknowledgment that, in the midst of a broken world, unspeakable beauty, grace, and mystery abide.

There is an embrace of kindness that encompasses all life, even yours.

And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil, there moves a holy disturbance, a benevolent rage, a revolutionary love, protesting, urging, insisting that that which is sacred will not be defiled.

Those who bless the world live their life as a gesture of thanks for this beauty and this rage.

Reading

“The Caterpillar and the Butterfly’

- excerpted from *The Soul of Money* by Lynne Twist

Our struggle around money, and all the tension, fears, and excesses that go with it, has a parallel in nature. Evolutionary biologist Elisabet Sahtouris says that the caterpillar, at a certain point in its life cycle, becomes a voracious, over-consumptive glutton consuming everything in sight and within reach. At this point in its evolution it can eat hundreds of times its own weight, and the more it consumes the more fat and sluggish it gets. At that same moment of developmental excess, inside the caterpillar the **imaginal cells** begin to stir. Imaginal cells are specialized cells, and in the minority, **but when they connect with each other** they become the genetic directors of the metamorphosis of the caterpillar. At some point in the caterpillar’s feeding-frenzy stage, the imaginal cells usher in the process in which the over-consumptive caterpillar becomes the “**nutritive soup**” out of which the imaginal cells create the miracle of the butterfly.

When I first heard this caterpillar-butterfly metaphor, I loved it because it gave me a way to see the world the way it is, even its state of voracious greed, as a kind of evolutionary phase. **It is such a fitting metaphor for our time.** When I look at the inspired, devoted, and brilliant people at work in so many ways to repair and nourish the world, in families, communities, and sustainable enterprises everywhere on Earth, I see the imaginal cells of our own transformation. That’s us, people like me and people like you...people creating new ways, seeing new possibilities.

Sermon Reflection

I have been a fan of [Rebecca Parker](#)'s writing and ministry since my earliest days as a Unitarian Universalist, and I have shared her words that were used as our meditation today multiple times in varying contexts here. But it is her imperative within this piece - "You must answer this question: What will you do with your gifts? *Choose to bless the world*" – that re-emerges in my consciousness when I reflect on what stewardship means in a community of faith. So...with our theme for the month being a prolonged reflection on what it means to be a people of emergence, I was led to variations of a question that merges the two: What emerges when I – when we – choose to bless the world? What is it that we bring forth with the blessing of our gifts? What are the possibilities we bring to light?

The word *steward* comes from the Old English words that also mean *guardian* and *keeper*; Wordnik.com defines stewardship as "the act of caring for or improving with time." So...the act of stewardship involves a commitment to care for, to attempt to improve, to guard and to keep – to keep in the sense of "to hold dear." In the context of a community of faith, stewardship is a spiritual practice in that it is all about the discernment and sharing of one's gifts, be they of time, talent, and/or treasure (aka money) beyond the scope of our individual concerns in order that we may better care for each other, our church, and our world.

Each and every year comes the time when we are called to consider our stewardship of this community of faith as our leaders have planned for and proposed a budget of expenditures for the upcoming year – proposed expenditures that arise from our collective mission and vision for this fellowship. And each and every year – for nine years now, the first five in my role here as your worship director and the past nearly four years as your minister, I have personally wrestled with my own inner conflict about stewardship, given the seeming self-serving reality of being both the crafter of inspiring messages about stewardship as well as being the single largest line item expenditure in the annual budget. It's an aspect of this line of work that has a cosmic joke-like quality to it. But the task has become easier for me over the years as I have deepened my understanding of what stewardship is and expanded my own practice in stewardship. I made the decision when I accepted this position that I could only do so if I were also allowed to be a pledging member of this congregation as well. So, a portion of my annual income goes back into the coffers of this community as part of my commitment as a member of this faith and this fellowship. In my heart, how could I speak with any integrity about the necessary practice and resulting blessing of stewardship if I was not a practitioner myself? We occupy the same boat.

In defense of this shared endeavor here, I will invoke again the wisdom of Rebecca Parker, this time from the book [The House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century](#):

In the decades ahead, religious communities will be critical contexts for personal and collective transformation. Good religious communities convert people to the way of life our society needs to move to: from believing that violence is redemptive to practicing justice and compassion; from going it alone to giving and receiving care from others; from isolating oneself in individualism to sharing work on behalf of the common good.

Much in our dominant culture can lull people into numbness, complacency, or compliance. Staying awake, becoming active rather than passive in the world, requires something more of us – something we cannot do alone. Religious communities can enable people to claim and deepen the values that the dominant culture is ignoring or denying. They can convert us from lifestyles that disregard the earth and are heedless of the environmental damage and danger we are courting, to lifestyles of reverence and gratitude that enable us to be less materialistic and more attentive to the goodness of life's intangibles. They can free us from consuming unsatisfying intellectual junk food and give us deep nourishment through the bread and wine of spiritual traditions, sacred texts, intellectual quests, meditation and prayer. Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

I hope to see communities like that everywhere, as a kind of demonstration that life is possible, a future is possible. ...There are many things that regulate us, rob us of our serenity, our peace, our time, ourselves. So, as a community that shows abundance of life, that is an example of the wholeness of life, would be an eloquent sign of the possibility of the future.

This is how churches, synagogues, sanghas, and mosques make a home for hope. Their sheltering walls offer us a way of living that finds joy and meaning in each other, in simple ways of being, in slowing down, and in giving time to the things that matter most. They enable us to create a good life together – a community of resistance, a covenant of joyful interdependence – that will support us through the radical changes needed in U.S. society as we embrace the calling to live peacefully and sustainably on this earth.

If you believe that this place is a home for hope, that this place makes a difference in people's lives, then we ask you to take an account of your gifts of time, talent, and treasure and commit or re-commit in the sharing of this ministry. Or as another wise-woman UU minister, Victoria Safford, articulated it in her award-winning stewardship sermon "Caution Church Ahead": "We ask that you weave here, together, some kind of sturdy, gorgeous web, because without that among you, the building doesn't stand. There's no sanctuary here that is not made of your flesh and bone and love and will. The building will not stand. The ministry will not stand. The staff fall down. The lights go out. Religious education shuts down, and the kids are on their own in the wild world. The thing won't work. So, yes, we ask you to fund it."

Yes – to fund it, to bless it with your gifts of time and talent, to live and breathe the flawed abundance that is this faith. Choose to bless the world...and keep leaning into the light and see what emerges.

Quote Garden – On Generosity, Giving, Stewardship...and the Necessity of Community

"We are each other's magnitude and bond."
~ Gwendolyn Brooks

"Nobody but nobody can make it our here alone." ~ *Maya Angelou*

"There is no better place to learn the art of loving than in community." ~ *bell hooks*

"I think that generosity has many levels. We have to think generously, speak generously, and act generously. Thinking well of others and speaking well of others is the basis for generous giving. It means that we relate to others as part of our 'gen' or 'kin' and treat them as family. Generosity cannot come from guilt or pity. It has to come from hearts that are fearless and free and are willing to share abundantly all that is given to us." ~ *Henry Nouwen*

"Stewardship is all about a way of life." ~ *Michael Durall*

"Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg writes in *Lovingkindness*: "The Buddha said that no true spiritual life is possible without a generous heart...Generosity allies itself with an inner feeling of abundance the feeling that we have enough to share. In *Love Dharma*, Geri Larkin states: "The Buddha taught, over and over, that generosity is the first door we walk through if we are serious about our spiritual work. Without generosity, enlightenment is flat-out impossible. We're too self-centered. Unless our relationships are bathed in generosity they don't have a chance. Rami Shapiro in *Hasidic Tales* observes: "Acts of generosity are essential to the spiritual life, reflecting as they do an awareness of the interconnectedness of all beings. Judaism sets a minimum standard for giving: ten percent of your earnings. But the Hasid, the compassionate disciple of God, goes beyond the letter of the law." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *Celebrating Life* notes: "Happiness is not made by what we own. It is what we share." ~ *Arthur G. Severance*

"We are each of us angels with only one wing, and we can only fly embracing each other."
~ *Luciano De Crescenzo*

"What then is sanctuary? The sanctuary is often something very small. Not a grandiose gesture, but a small gesture toward alleviating human suffering and preventing humiliation. The sanctuary is a human being. Sanctuary is a dream. And that is why you are here and that is why I am here. We are here because of one another. We are in truth each other's shelter." ~ *Elie Wiesel*

"May we be the church of come as you are but not stay as you have been."
~ *Dr. Takiyah Amin*