

# “The Generosity Path”

*Sermon by Rev. Sara LaWall, delivered to the Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship*

*January 24, 2016*

Before Michael and I got married, we met with our minister for the basic pre-wedding counseling session. I'll never forget when he asked us if we knew the three things married couples fight about most often. Can you guess what they are? That's right, Money, Sex, and . . . Driving!

I wonder what it would be for churches . . . money (for sure), and probably coffee and music. But not us of course, that is other churches.

The original title of this sermon was “Money Talk: On Giving, Generosity, and Making Magic.” But I changed because I got a little scared. I was worried some of you might think, “Oh no she's talking about money,” and decide not to come today. Money is one of those culturally taboo topics in our society, unless you're Donald Trump, but he has a host of other issues.

Oh money that wicked thing. Help me out here:

“The best things in life are \_\_\_\_\_?”

“Money is the root \_\_\_\_\_!”

“You can't take it \_\_\_\_\_.”

“It is better to give \_\_\_\_\_.”

I am not sure my six year old truly believes this one. And who can blame him? I love getting presents too, but I have also known the blessing and joy and magic of giving.

And that only comes with practice and a lot of inner reflection.

Money talk makes us uncomfortable, and yet it is a critical part of our day-to-day existence.

And for some reason talking about money in church seems even more uncouth. Why is that, when it too is central to our very existence?

Most of us were not taught about the meaning of money. Not merely the dollars and cents but the **meaning of money**. Perhaps we overheard our parents fight about money. Or we saw and felt money used as a weapon, representing power. Or perhaps our basic needs were met with material things appearing and we never really had to think about where they came from. These experiences shape us and can haunt us and harm us until we make the space to reexamine our relationship with money.

And that is what I want to invite us to do beginning today. I want to invite us to to imagine how we might talk about money and giving and generosity in connection with the church openly, freely, without the tension and fear and judgment we so often carry with us. That's too much to ask is it?

In just six short weeks, we'll officially launch our annual giving drive (our version of public radio's annual pledge drive) and we'll be talking about it more often and I am hoping we can do so with a greater sense of openness and ease and dare I say . . .FUN!

As you've heard our campaign theme this year is "Where the Magic Happens," which feels so perfect for where we are right now. I think of that theme and it makes me smile as I think about all of the magic this Fellowship inspires in me, in you, and in the world. And remember that where the magic happens is a big beautiful circle that is set a part from that small area of our life called, "The Comfort Zone."

All of this is possible when we consider that generosity is a path that continuously unfolds in front of us and looks different for all of us.

Generosity can certainly take the form of time, intelligence, caring, or simple presence, in addition to money. And let me reassure all of you that even as we talk about money, your gifts of time and talent are just as vital to the magic and success of this fellowship as your money. And they are deeply appreciated—we just don't get quite as hung up on those expressions of generosity to give as we do about the money.

I think our hang-ups around money and church have to do with our commitment to as Unitarian Universalists to the principles equity and fairness and justice. We daily see the divisions and struggle caused by the inequity, injustice, inequality—especially financially. And we rightly fear that those divisions, that classicism, and preferential treatment could creep into the life of this community where we have come to feel connected regardless of who we are or where we come from.

**But the invitation to walk the generosity path is to increasingly approach money from a place of inner freedom and abundance.**

In his book, *The Generosity Path*, Mark Ewert explores the gifts, challenges, and benefits of generosity. He notes the deeply spiritual component to generosity, a sense of it coming out of someplace deeply personal and connected with that which is larger than ourselves. He shares his own story of joining the Stewardship team of his church—All Souls UU Church in Washington D.C. and how that work allowed him to explore the underlying currents that connect charitable giving with a particular set of values and beliefs and developing a spiritual practice. In this work he found a place to center his practice of generosity.

We have a stewardship team too....recognize them.

We all want to be generous. We wouldn't be here in this community if we didn't want to give back to others in some way. The word generous means "freely giving more than what is necessary or expected." There is the freedom. It is not about the amount but about the gift itself, a gift that is significant and meaningful to you; based on your circumstances and abilities. A gift that should change your life in some way.

That is an exciting proposition to me because I believe as Unitarian Universalists we are in the business of changing lives. On some level we come here to create wholeness, healing and transformation in our own lives, in the lives of this community, and in the world and when we give we are saying **YES** to that vision, mission, and possibility. **YES** to being co-creators in that transformation.

Indeed giving can be a transformative spiritual practice, helping us all to be in touch with those things in life that matter most. And the practice of generosity has roots in many religious traditions. The Jewish tradition, with its deep connection to the ancestors that have come before us, reminds us that we find ourselves on this earth “living in houses which we did not build, drinking from wells which we did not dig, and eating from trees which we did not plant.”

Giving to this Fellowship is also about nurturing that legacy of our faith and this home for future generations; that they may drink from our wells, and fill the wells of others, enjoy the fruits of our labor, and plant trees for the future, receive the blessings of this space, and all who have built this beloved community and transform those blessings into actions for justice and compassion.

American-born Tibetan monk, Lama Surya Das shares this wisdom of giving from the Buddha:

“Giving brings **happiness** at every stage of its expression. We experience **joy** in forming the intention to be generous; we experience **joy** in the actual act of giving something; and we experience **joy** in remembering the fact we have given”

How often do we hear and talk about the joy of giving? Think back to a time when you gave a significant gift. I’d push you to think about a monetary gift because that is what we’re focused on today, but it could be anything really so long as it was a big one. What did it feel like to first conceive of the idea, the gift or the amount? Was it joyful? And then what did it feel like to actually give that gift?

And when you look back on it now, do you still experience the joy? I hope you do. But if not, ask yourself why. What was missing for you? Gratitude? Recognition? Sacredness? How might you make space to manifest those things missing pieces in your life today such that when you give you can count on the joy being present?

I’ll never forget when Michael and I were in trekking Cambodia with friends. We were in some small town likely looking for a place to eat lunch and the central square began to fill up with townspeople. They began to line the streets, their arm filled with flowers, and pouches of food and money. It caught our attention so we watched with some curiosity.

Then suddenly a parade of monks appeared in the bright, beautiful saffron robes and proceeded to walk around the courtyards receiving the gifts (or alms) of their community. These monks who took a vow of poverty were blessed by the gifts of this small village.

Now, my friends and Michael got very excited about this because it was a beautiful ceremony and ritual of giving where the people received the blessing as much as the monks did. It was very mutual in its exchange. And next thing I knew they were digging in their bags and pockets for any spare change or tokens they could give because they felt called to be part of this ritual.

I, however, hesitated for a moment. I wasn’t quite so gung ho at first because I had been the recorder of our finances for this trip and we were on a very tight budget. I was not sure we could give. But my husband gaped at me with this look of incredulity and turned and joined our friends in the line giving their gifts and smiling and bowing at each monk as he went by. The joy

in the moment was so palpable I could not resist and I found myself scrounging for cash and gifts to give to the monks.

And it was an indescribable feeling to be part of this community ritual—of this act of sacred giving even though this was not my faith tradition. When I think back on that moment I realized the power of that connection and joy coming out of this intentionally sacred act of giving. In the end, our budget did not suffer, and I found a whole different connection to my own spiritual capacity for generosity than I knew was possible. It also helped me begin to shift my own relationship with money as I started to examine and release some of the fear and shame and guilt I carried around with me connected to money.

And I hope this is what I have begun with this sermon today. To open up a conversation that allows us to release some of our collective fear, shame or guilt about money and instead to focus on the freedom, the joy and the magic of giving. I want us to tap into to giving as a sacred act, especially here, a sacred act deeply connected to our spiritual lives and values as a faith community. And that means all gifts are valued and celebrated—the \$20,000 gifts alongside the \$200 gifts. The gifts of service on committees, the board, in the classroom, the gifts of presence here on Sunday mornings and in one another's lives. All are needed, all are welcome and all are part of making the magic happen.

Money will never stop shaping our lives. But we can have the power to shape our relationship to it. So much of our financial life and life in general is pushed by the idea of a “Standard of Living.” And it grows and grows and increases and increases. So my question to you is this: In this sacred space, in this beloved community, ***what is your standard of being?*** And how does this place and how might his place increase our standard of being in the world?

Amen.

SILENCE

HYMN – 1024 Spirit Says Do

## BENEDICTION

May we hear the call of the spirit  
To dance, and sing, to do—and to give  
with freedom and joy  
To manifest the magic right here in this place

May we follow the generosity path  
With open hearts  
Holding out the chalice of our being  
Carrying with us the light of truth, the light of love,  
the light of transformation, the magic  
Even as we extinguish its flame in this sacred space

Go in peace.