

BRIAN FERGUSON - 9/6/09
Topic Description Worship Service on
“Spiritual Growth and Community”

Now I am going to ask you to use your imagination perhaps even to stretch the bounds of your belief. I am going to ask you to imagine me as a little boy. Specifically I want you to imagine me as an eight year old boy back on February 15th, 1971. This was a special day in Britain, so special that I, my older brother, and two neighborhood friends went shopping. Now shopping was not really a major pastime for boys in Scotland but we were shopping for something special. We went shopping for money.

On that particular day Britain switched from its old system of currency to a decimal money system. The old currency was an obscure system with 12 pennies making a shilling. I suppose this must have been developed by some King with twelve fingers. I understand systems of tens but systems of twelve. For further confusion twenty shillings made a pound - probably developed by a member of royalty who used their fingers **and toes** to count. The new system of coins was straightforward - one hundred pence makes up a pound, everything counted in tens, the use of fingers was enough – no toes or extra fingers required.

So off my friends and I went to get each of the new coins. The shop assistants were confused by the new coinage and highly bemused at these eager youngsters out early on a rainy Monday morning. Mr. Jackson, the owner of the local candy shop, showed us mercy by finally giving us whatever coins each of us needed to complete our collection. I suspect he knew that the novelty of this new money for us would soon wear off and our money would soon return to him in exchange for that more valuable and lasting currency for young boys – candy. So this is one of my earliest memories of money.

Many psychologists say a person’s earliest memory of money can be formative to their attitude towards money for the rest of their life. Take a moment now to think of your earliest memory of money. Was it your first allowance, earned through chores or just given to stop you pestering your parents? Was it the feeling of weighty coins in little hands, little hands which had just removed the coins from your parent’s pocket? Or was

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it fighting with a sibling over whose money was it? Or is your earliest memory what money allowed you to buy?

As the story I just told showed my first memory was gathering money for its own sake and how something as fundamental as a system of money can change. I also experienced directly the fickleness of money as we quickly became bored with the new money, soon taking for granted what we had valued greatly for its novelty only days earlier. The lesson of the fickleness of money is probably something many of us can relate to in the aftermath of our present economic crisis. Loss of jobs or the threat of job loss makes our source of income seem in jeopardy. Our homes once a source of stability and security for many of us are losing monetary value but not their importance as homes to us. Those of us retired or close to retirement see our retirement savings dwindle and worry about our future. Yes, the fickleness of money is something many of us have very direct knowledge of, painfully so.

Yet money does seem to have become something of a God in our society. Even in the present difficult economic times there is a focus on money that permeates our society in so many ways it seems to create value and purpose for many people. James Luther Adams, the 20th century Unitarian theologian, maintained that all people have a religion whether they realize it or not. He says **"The question concerning faith is not, shall I be a person of faith? The proper question is, rather, which faith is mine? For whether a person craves prestige, wealth, security, or amusement; whether he lives for country, for science, for God or for plunder, he shows that he has faith, he shows that he puts confidence in something. Find out what he gives his deepest loyalty to and you've found his religion."**¹ In listening to these words today, it appears to me that for many in our society money does define meaning and value for many therefore fulfills many of the roles of religion. Money is the price we pay for things but I do not believe it determines what is valuable to us.

I toured the Ellis Island immigration station in New York a few years ago. I was particularly moved by how few possessions many immigrants came to the United States

BRIAN FERGUSON - 9/6/09
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with and even more profound was the items they chose to bring. An embroidered family quilt, family photographs, letters from friends or family, and religious scripture often the Torah or Christian Bible. These were not items of great monetary value but were probably priceless and irreplaceable to the owners. If you were to move somewhere and could take one small suitcase, what would you take? What is valuable and irreplaceable to you?

I know what is most valuable in my own life has nothing to do with the price I paid for them assuming they even had a price. The love of friends and family, the old photographs I have, a book of special importance, that great piece of music that brings me to tears, or that life-changing experience that happened in my religious community. Those items are dealing in a currency that is far more important than money. They are dealing in the eternal values of finding what makes our life meaningful and worth living. They are dealing in the emotional world and personal history that is unique to each one of us. Money only buys goods others are willing to sell. We are the ones determine what has lasting value in our own lives.

Human beings are both meaning seekers and meaning makers. We seek meaning as we try to discover purpose in our lives and we are meaning makers as we try to understand our experiences. Many religions use Scripture and Religious tradition to give meaning to human life. For Unitarian Universalists, Scripture and Tradition are **not** the most important sources for interpreting meaning in our lives. I believe most Unitarian Universalists attempt to find meaning by reflecting on our own lived experience using reason. Much as I hope to do in this sermon. In fact, one could say our **TRADITION** is using reason and human experience to find meaning in our life.

Over the last four hundred years the great advances in Science has given many explanations for aspects of life that had previously been assigned to be the work of God. There has been an increasing secularization of life and in our Liberal religious tradition a reevaluation of the role, if any, of God in our lives. We want religion to be more than a belief in the unbelievable. A religion to be valuable needs to be believable,

BRIAN FERGUSON - 9/6/09
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it would be nice if it was true but for us to be authentically religious our beliefs must be believable. I think Spiritual Growth is the exploration of what we believe to be valuable and meaningful in our lives. One major motivation for doing this exploration is to respond to the many anxieties we have about modern life. We may have anxiety about our finite lifespan and the unpredictability of death. We may have anxiety about the seeming emptiness and lack of purpose in our life. We may have anxiety about our own perceived inadequacies and personal struggles. We may have anxiety about our seeming lack of control we have in our lives. Anxiety is part of the human condition and when we recognize this then many of us turn to religion to explore these concerns.

Our anxieties can threaten to overwhelm us. They can also be the motivation for us to seek Spiritual transformation – new knowledge, changed conditions, and personal crisis are often the stimulus for us to change. Personal struggle and upheaval tend to precede religious and personal breakthroughs. While changes are often forced upon us in life I wonder if our struggles around anxieties help prepare us for changes in our life. President Eisenhower said **“plans are useless but planning is indispensable.”** I believe plans can help clarify our thinking about the future and prepare for possible events even if the reality turns out to be something different.

I know my six year old daughter has already been making plans about my death but only in that wonderfully matter of fact and honest way young children can. Last week she said **“Daddy, can I ask you a question about when you and mummy die?”** Oh, oh, I thought here comes one of those big talks, but I’m training to be a minister I can handle talking about death even my own. I told myself this is an opportunity for **Spiritual Growth**. I said to my daughter Isla **“Of course you can always talk to me about this.”** I was slightly faking my apparent ease with the subject. Isla asked earnestly **“Can I have your car?”** I’m sure she really will miss me when I am gone perhaps she will think of me as she drives around in **her** car.

One of the reasons I find this story amusing is because death is a taboo subject for many of us therefore we struggle to talk openly and honestly about it. The Unitarian

BRIAN FERGUSON - 9/6/09
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Universalist minister Forest Church describes religion as **“the human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.”**² I think it is fair to say we all have thought about our own death at one time or another. Most of us have experienced the death of someone close to us and will probably experience this again. At times of serious illness or death of someone close to us many people turn to religion to find meaning and comfort. I think religious communities are one of the places where death and terminal illness can and should be talked about in a meaningful way.

While many religions focus on what happens after death that is not generally the approach of Unitarian Universalism. We really do not know what will happen when we die therefore **“we should focus on living a full life that was worth dying for.”**³ Unitarian Universalists look for honest meaning and value in our lives lived now, not preparing for the unknowable circumstances after our death.

Our religious community helps spiritual growth by holding the vast complexity of our individual human experiences up as a valuable source of truth and meaning. As a community we represent a vast collection of lived experiences and wisdom which can help us grow our soul in response to life’s trials, tribulations, and uncertainties. We can provide comfort and empathy by sharing our similar experiences with others as others can provide similar comfort to us. To see our own tears reflected in another’s eyes is the most sacred of intimacies. Our religious community can care for us when we are vulnerable, confused, or distraught about our lives. And as importantly our religious community can share in our joys and triumphs which can also be the result of changes in our lives. These are all aspects of our oh-so-fragile human condition.

Of course being in a community of any kind there is a tension between our individualism and our participation in a community. Our emphasis on the democratic process does not mean everyone can get their own way, what we attempt to do is strive for all voices to be recognized and heard respectfully – those agreeing, those disagreeing, and those which are both. Our religious communities have to reach a consensus on actions and beliefs that we can all live with – not necessarily agree with but all of us can live with.

BRIAN FERGUSON - 9/6/09
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And this is a process that can be slow and seemingly overly-complicated as we strive to hear all concerned voices on an issue and find a path forward we can accept. There can be those seemingly endless meetings where the I.Q. of the meeting seems to drop as we go late into the night. I read that to calculate the intelligence of a meeting you take the I.Q. of the person with the lowest I.Q. in the meeting - then subtract five for every other person in the meeting. I don't think there is a lower limit to the I.Q. of a meeting.

While meetings can be painful and unproductive they are not the only type. Every so often you have that really great meeting where you may enter with low expectations or with a clear opinion of what you think should happen and then some creative spark happens where people build on each other's ideas and the energy and spirit just permeates the meeting. That act of synergy where a group of well-intentioned and respectful people come up with ideas that no individual on their own could come up with is community working at its best. I would say we can grow spiritually from such experiences both as individuals and as a community. There is interdependence between spiritual growth and community. A healthy community is not where one person coerces others to their will but each contributes to a result greater than the sum of the individuals. I believe this is what Marge Piercy suggests in the poem I read earlier when she said

**“it starts when you care to act,
it starts when you do it again after they said no,
it starts when you say We and know who you mean,
and each day you mean one more.”⁴**

Here in this synergistic group work is the most obvious example of where our Spiritual Growth intersects with community. A healthy religious community has a radical and ever-expanding concept of what is meant by WE. While prizing our differences as individuals there is a strong sense of what we stand for as a community. What would

BRIAN FERGUSON - 9/6/09
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you say are the common values of this San Marcos Fellowship and how do we represent them to the wider community of which we are part?

Practices for spiritual growth whether individual or communal should not isolate us from the world but help us engage more fully in life with greater understanding and greater enthusiasm. Our religious community can be the guardians of our spiritual and mental well-being as we struggle with the anxieties and celebrate the joys of our life. The society we live in is always tempting us with shining new coins that we are so tempted to grasp for, convinced that the shiny new coins have greater value than the tarnished old coins. But coins old or new are only a tool to help exchange goods. To get lasting meaning in our lives I invite us to consider as individuals and community what are the ultimate values that drive us, which brings us guiltless joy, inspires us to change, and comfort us in sorrow? The answer I suspect does not lie in the materials of copper, silver, or gold but in the sacred currency of ideals, vision, and inspiration. May we all find the ideals, vision and inspiration to give us the hope and the comfort we seek.

¹ Parke, David *The Epic of Unitarianism* (Skinner House, Boston, 1985) p.149

² Church, Forest. *Love and Death UUWorld Vol XXII No.2* (Boston, Ma: UUA, 2008) p.18-20

³ Church, Forest. *Love and Death UUWorld Vol XXII No.2* (Boston, Ma: UUA, 2008) p.18-20

⁴ Piercy, Marge. *Excerpt from The Low Road in Spiritual Literacy* by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat (New York, NY: Touchstone Books, 1996) p.475