

Forward Abundant

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

March 12, 2017

Story for All Ages (written by the Rev. Anne Bancroft)

I was thinking it might make sense to figure out why we need money to begin with. So, let's go back a ways – quite a ways probably. I'll need some helpers.

Here we have a chicken guy – he raises chickens.

And here we have a bread baker – she bakes bread, of course.

And when the chicken guy wants bread, he goes to the baker. He gives her a chicken and she gives him bread, and everybody is happy!

It's great.

Except then, she becomes a vegetarian. And she doesn't need chickens anymore. She needs vegetables. The chicken guy still wants bread.

And there's a farmer down the road who has vegetables . . . so that's great, but he doesn't need bread. So they can't trade.

BUT the farmer wants chicken, and the the chicken guy wants bread . . . so the chicken guy gives the farmer a chicken, takes the vegetables, and then gives some of those to the bread baker in exchange for bread.

Everybody is happy.

THEN, the chicken guy discovers the eggs. (I didn't say he was a brilliant chicken guy) So now things are becoming more complicated.

And someone decides that the whole exchange thing might be easier (at least for a while!) if they use something that everybody agrees has a certain value. And they call it money.

So now the bread baker can give the farmer one of these for vegetables. And the farmer can use the same coin to buy a chicken AND another one to buy some eggs.

As it happens, one year the farmer has a great season and people are buying lots of his vegetables so now he has some extra money! And he thinks . . .

WOW! We're so busy we hardly see each other, and I'd like to have a place where we could gather and sing together and be grateful and do things together. I'm going to build a church!

And other people think that's an awesome idea, too, and they all start putting their money together. Some have a lot to give and others have less, but it doesn't really matter because they

are building it together, paying the stone mason and the carpenter with money because neither one of them needs chicken or bread just now.

So the money is what made it possible. It would be hard to imagine building a church with chickens and bread, after all.

READING The Cricket Story

Once two friends were walking down the sidewalk on a busy street during rush hour. There were all sorts of noise in the city: car horns honking, feet shuffling, people talking! And amid all the noise, one of the friends turned to the other and said, *“I hear a cricket.”*

“No way,” her friend responded. *“How could you hear a cricket with all of this noise? You must be imagining it. Besides, I’ve never seen a cricket in the city.”*

“No really, I do hear a cricket. I’ll show you.” She stopped for a moment, then led her friend across the street to a big cement planter with a tree in it. Pushing back the leaves she found a little brown cricket.

“That’s amazing!” said her friend, *“You must have a superhuman hearing. What’s your secret?”*

“No, my hearing is just the same as yours. There’s no secret,” the first woman replied. *“Watch, I’ll show you.”* She reached into her pocket, pulled out some loose change, and threw it on the sidewalk. Amid all of the noise of the city, everyone within thirty feet turned their head to see where the sound of the money was coming from.

“See,” she said. *“It’s all a matter of what you are listening for.”*

Source | Elisa Davy Pearmain,

[Doorways to the Soul: 52 Wisdom Tales from Around the World](#), page 14.

SERMON

Forward Abundant the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Last fall I was invited to be the closing speaker for the Liberal Religious Educators conference in San Diego. The four-day event was focused on four *potentially* – one might say *often* – difficult conversations: race, sex, death, and money – not necessarily in that order, but all in four days.

One comment came out of the money conversation that really stuck with me. Since we’re at the beginning of our annual pledge drive here at Theodore Parker Church and talking – at least to some extent today – about money, AND about the perspective of abundance and what we are abundant with, I thought I would share it. The comment was in the context of our being asked to consider the

relationship between our life's priorities – those things we most value and care about – and what we spend our money on. We were asked to think about how we each framed these questions for ourselves, to which one conferee suggested, “What you're asking is where do I want a bench when I die, and why wait?”

I thought that was brilliant. It wraps into one tidy response all the anxieties we have about what we've accumulated over the course of our lives, or not, and what's important to us, what we have contributed to somehow – time, talent or treasure – and, how it has given us a stake in the game, that is, how it might have lasting impact.

“Where do I want a bench when I die?”

And then, “why wait?”

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Three hundred and five years ago – really, think about it, three hundred and five years ago – some of the folks I talked about earlier, who raised chickens and grew vegetables and baked bread for livings, and who lived here – right in this area we inhabit – put their coins together and built a church so they could sing together, and be grateful, and praise the spirit that animated their lives, and take care of each other and their tender hearts and their children, and work to make the world a better place. We are heirs to those imaginations, those benches – and every person since then who polished the wood, or painted the walls, or set the clock, or rang the bell – every person who committed their time and their love and, not least, their money to this idea is a part of that legacy.

Isn't it kind of stunning?!

We have an abundance of legacy right here in these pews.

We are so blessed with a history of commitment. Talk about abundance!!

And, while we're at it: what else? What else do we have in abundance?

It may not surprise you: I have made a list – but in no particular order.

1. We have work to do – caring work to do, learning work to do, justice work to do – now more than ever, in abundance. We need to continue to be a compassionate, progressive and prophetic voice for sharing a tradition – our Unitarian Universalist tradition – of radical hospitality, and for building a world that says ALL beings – human, animal, plant, and otherwise – all beings have value and dignity and deserve care and respect. We have an abundance of that work to do.

2. We have people to welcome – not only those who are visiting our home and staying but those who have never been through our doors. We have an abundance of welcome to offer, and people who need it.
3. We have space to care for that is ours. It lives and breathes with us; it shelters and provides respite for us; it is ours to care for and maintain so that those who come after us will have it, as well. We have an abundance of place.
4. We have decisions to make – all the time, together, as we grow and become and change because change is life – and doing it well requires us to acknowledge the abundance of decision-making around us all the time.
5. We have grace to celebrate – so much grace in our midst, among, within and between us all – the grace of life, of breath, of care and joy; of sorrows made manageable. Abundant grace.
6. We have creativity in abundance, in our music and our art we are filled – in every pew – with a plethora of creative imagination.
7. And, not least on my list, we have love to share – so much love to share; so much capacity and opportunity; it overwhelms.

No doubt my list is incomplete. You will be reminded of abundances that I have not remembered or acknowledged. How do we even begin to prioritize and move forward?

And how, after all, does the money part fit in?

Well, the bench, of course, costs money – the proverbial benches we'll all be leaving – and why wait?!

I will tell you that the money part fits in a most significant way – that we are not able to be and do and act on all of our abundance – in whatever order – without financial support. Since we stopped trading chickens for bread, we have created lives increasingly dependent on funds, and our congregation is no less connected to that reality.

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Did you recognize the story we heard earlier about the cricket and the coins? I hope so. I used it last year, or maybe the year before that, likely related to a message about our tendency to hear money over more life-oriented things. And I likely cast money in a somewhat negative light, over and against the cricket and our capacity to even hear the cricket more than we do the money.

But today I want us to think about it a little differently.

Money is a reality in our lives – a complicated, experience-laden reality. We all have histories with it, for better or worse. It generates all kinds of emotion, from joy to envy, from frustration to gratitude. But today, I'm hoping there's a way we can orient our perspectives about money so that when we hear that story about all the people turning to find the coins they know have scattered, it is because they

want to do something good with them! It's because they want to leave a bench somewhere, and maybe start now.

I mean, really . . . what can you do with a cricket?

But, money? Money helps us fund the priorities we shape from our abundance.

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Years ago I did a teacher training at a Unitarian Universalist congregation. I wanted people to consider what this tradition and the church I was serving really meant in their lives. I asked them to share four parts of their identity: their nationality, their gender, their sexual orientation, and their chosen faith. (I have likely described this game to you in the past.) The identities are all fluid constructs, of course, but imagine how you would respond.

And then I told them they had to give up one of their identities: which would go first? And then give up another. and another, until finally they were left with only one, which begs the question of what our most significant internal identity is.

Of the 20 or so people present, you can imagine that not very many of them had Unitarian Universalist as their most significant self-distinction. But one family did. It was a couple with two children, who had come to the congregation as husband and wife, until the husband acknowledged the need to transition and live his life as a woman. And in their faith home, they found love and support, and continuing welcome. And they shared with us, in that room where we talked about our most intimate senses of self, how they could not have survived the changes that their family experienced and continued to experience without the tradition and community that said, "This is your home. You are welcome and loved here. You are valued and wanted here, just as you are and are becoming."

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I will confess to you that I am a little worried about the future of our liberal faith communities. We've had a bump this year, thanks – in part, I think – to the current political environment. I'm so glad that people who may feel at a loss in their lives are looking for communities that share their perspectives and help them find a way through by being together. But I also know that religion suffers pretty strong judgment these days; well, either strong judgment or too little consideration. Many find community in places other than congregational life.

I wish they had been dancing with us last night!

Is it overwhelming for me to say that we need to save the idea of faith community – we need to regenerate engagement in congregational life that reminds all of us and teaches our children the value

of questioning, of seeking – of looking for goodness and meaning, that reminds all of us that we care about and for each other, every other who chooses love to lead the way.

We have abundance here – that’s for sure. And, we have abundance to offer. Let’s pick up all those coins we heard drop and put them to work on behalf of our justice-seeking, our welcome, our creativity, our space, our grace, our decision-making, and our love. Whatever order speaks to you, let’s honor the farmer, the chicken guy, and the bread maker by putting our coins together to make this 305-year-old church thrive even more.

We have so much to offer, and a world that needs it. Let’s not wait to fund our benches right here, where they can make a difference.

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We are living in a time of change, my friends – let’s close our service with gratitude for the earth that sustains us, and for the hope of peace that may yet be as we each do our part.

“For the Earth Forever Turning”