

“Oh no, not the M Word! Or is it the C Word?”

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

March 10, 2013

28 laughs
9 hugs
52 smiles
2 contented sighs: \$0
A free day to take them all in: priceless.
You can get free hotel space and many other offers.
Do you have a World MasterCard?

Or, in some versions,
For everything else, there is MasterCard....

Remember that commercial from not so long ago? I wonder. The laughs and hugs and smiles and sighs and time to let them happen surely are priceless. But when the MasterCard or Visa or American Express bill comes due, we're reminded that there was a price tag attached to the extras that described those happy moments posed in the commercial. MasterCard's notion of "priceless" carries a cost.

"Uh-oh," you're probably saying to yourself. "I think I know where she's headed." Well please, don't think too hard, not before you think about what you feel and not before you hear a couple of stories.

We commonly speak of life as a gift, a priceless gift. We also speak of a mother giving birth, even giving life. When we welcome a child into the world by birth or adoption, we often shed tears. When that child grows into the free and freer spirit of adolescence, we often shed tears. When that child attains caring adulthood, we're sometimes so awestruck that again we shed tears. "From you I receive, to you I give," from the voices of our children? An understatement. So it is with any of us in relation to the miracle that is life, a miracle that is often a host of unanticipated minefields, a caravan of unanticipated feelings that include joy, grief, and grace. Life is both priceless and costly. Along the way, we struggle to find meaning. I'm guessing that all of us here this morning are here in part because we sense that such struggle happens with greater buoyancy in *community*.

My favorite question for any of you is: "Why do you keep coming—if you do of course—week after week, year after year?" Sooner or later comes the response, "Community. I cherish the community."

*From you I receive, to you I give,
Together we share, and from this we live.*

“From this we live.” A conversation, a sermon even, about money and community go hand in hand. This morning I invite you to begin to think from the heart about stewardship, that process of supporting and sustaining something that nurtures our capacity to be more expansive in heart, mind, and deed, than any of us could be on our own. This is not yet Stewardship Sunday, but we might consider it an Advent Sunday, a time of approach, of expectancy, of anticipation for the full-flowering month of April, when we will gather at member homes for food and fellowship and to consider our future through opportunities to invest for another year our time, talent, and most specifically our treasure in this religious community and this faith that we share.

We have an easier time talking about birth and death or sex than we do about our financial resources—what we make for a living, what we pay to live well (with countless interpretations of what it is to live well), and what we give away and why.

My late friend and colleague, Bob Thayer, told the story of visiting England several years ago and attending Sunday worship with some of his British Unitarian friends—before Unitarians became Unitarian Universalists. Bob and his friends sat near the front of the church. (You know I’m so happy when these front seats are filled!) Now Bob found the service and the sermon completely gratifying, and he was feeling quite generous when it came time for the offering. He reached for his wallet and in true tourist fashion found only a “wad of British pound notes,” all quite large. Breathing deeply, he pulled out a twenty-pounder. His friend glanced over at what he was about to do and raised his eyebrows. “It’s a rather large donation,” he whispered to Bob.

I can imagine Bob feeling somewhat annoyed as if to say, “This is my choice, not yours.” His friend suggested that the usher would be in full shock. “He may fall down. He’s never seen a twenty-pound note in a collection except for famine relief in India.”

Bob warmed to the challenge. His friend kept at it, “Be mindful that this usher will ask you after the service if you would like change.”

So what happened? Bob dropped the twenty-pound note into the plate. The usher reacted at first with a frown, but the corners of his mouth quickly turned into a broad smile. Then the knowledge washed over Bob that because they were sitting in front, everyone behind them would *see* that recklessly generous gift, presumably dropped into the plate by one of the American guests up front. Since the Second World War, Bob thought to himself, the British tend to view Yankees, who after all broke rank a few hundred years earlier, as “over-sexed, over-paid, and over here.”

At the end of the service, handshakes and hugs were exchanged all around, including Bob and the usher. As Bob stepped out into the autumn air, he glanced back to see the usher take his note out of the plate, then look up, meet Bob’s gaze and mouth the words, “Thank you very much!”

What pure joy it was for Bob to surprise the British usher and his friend. I wonder: who gave and who received?

When I give generously, when I commit to pledging generously, it's not that I feel so cool or righteous or magnanimous. Okay, sometimes I do; but even more so, I feel like I'm returning something that was never really mine in the first place. Ultimately, none of us owns anything. Yet when it comes to church, we commonly confuse ownership with stewardship. This is *our* church. This is *my* church. We say it without a second thought. Yet this congregation is close to 160 years old, with roots that go back much farther to a parish located in Wallingford, not to become a part of the new town of Meriden until 1806, close to a half century before the First Universalist Society of Meriden was established at a different site and in a different building than the one we occupy this morning.

When did it start becoming our church? When will it stop being our church? And this faith that we share... do we own it? Stewards are entrusted with the care of faith and community. None of us owns either. They're gifts given and received. Stewardship is the precious act of affirming this through the gifts of money and time and love that we give and receive.

How frequently have you heard someone say, or have said yourself, "I'm spiritual, but not religious." How easily we're hoodwinked into thinking of religion as a system of obligations to bow to a set of dogma. From dogma, from a system of certainty, we run like that place we don't believe in. Yet religion comes from the Latin *religionem*, which means simply "respect for the sacred." Is life sacred? Consider Albert Schweitzer's "reverence for life," an understanding that evolved from his decades of work as a physician serving the indigenous peoples of Lambarene in the West African nation of Gabon, where he witnessed enormous suffering.

"Reverence for life is a universal ethic," he wrote. "We are born of other lives; we possess the capacities to bring still other lives into existence... So nature compels us to recognize the fact of mutual dependence ..."

"Reverence for life," he claimed, is "the first spiritual act in [one's] experience."

When I hear the claim that one is spiritual but not religious, I sense that the speaker is talking about an isolated spirituality, a highly individualistic form of communing with the God of many names and many forms, most especially nature. This can be profoundly gratifying; but it isn't community, and it isn't the only form of spirituality.

The mutuality of life is sacred. This is found in community. Regard for this from of the sacred is at the core of religion unburdened by dogma. Religion thus understood is a spiritual force. When our hearts open to this force, we seek community in which to express it and share it. The longing of my heart and yours can be satisfied in the community that we are and the faith that we seek to realize. To be a part of such community is to sustain it. To be part of such community is to be accountable for receiving and giving what we can't give or receive on our own.

Twenty-eight laughs, an underestimate; nine hugs, think thousands more; 52 smiles, add an infinite number of zeros. A free day, a morning perhaps, to take them all in: priceless! Okay, this quip from the MasterCard commercial doesn't distill it. How could it possibly do so? What we know as the Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden carries a legacy of more than a century and a half of laughter and tears, births and marriages and illnesses and loss, economic rollercoaster rides, wars and epidemics, heart-wrenching conflicts and familial fractures, heart-healing truth telling, and familial rites of union and reunion. This religious community is priceless.

It is priceless, but it is not free. It costs us time and energy and yes, money, that construct from which some of us recoil. Yet do any of us enjoy the comforts of homes rented or mortgaged without paying the bill? Do any of us enjoy the benefits of education for our children without paying taxes or tuition or both? Do any of us head to the supermarket or the pharmacy or the hardware store without bringing cash or a credit card that will come due?

Cherish what is priceless, and ponder how we will bear the cost together as we consider the gifts of community and the opportunities of stewardship. Religious community is sustained by gifts given and received, not in equal portion, but equitably.

If in years hence, we are, through the breadth of our imagination, reassembled as a historic congregation of 260 years—that's over one-quarter of a millennium—I'm counting on each of us to know that on our watch we cherished the priceless and bore the cost.

Consider once again the house finch of Lois Ann Carrier's poem. He sings his heart out. "Sun and song pour down..." For his perch, he chose "the blue spruce I once called mine because I planted it." The song continues long enough for the poet to learn every note. The epiphany rising from this poetic parable? Its concluding stanza:

"...I grow rich and easy
as less and less belongs to me."

The gift that is stewardship is a gift given and received. The gift that is participation in this religious community—participation in all its forms—is a gift given and received. It has been said that it is better to give than to receive, but when we give, we also receive. So may it be. Amen.

Sources

Lois Ann Carrier, "The Gift," in *How We Are Called: A Meditation Anthology*, Mary Benard and Kirstie Anderson, Editors, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2003, 10.

"From You I Receive," in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, The Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 402.

MasterCard "Priceless" commercial, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sPVppC6jxY>.

"Meriden's Founders and Our Universalist Heritage," <http://www.uumeriden.org/history.html>

Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography* / Edition 60 by Albert Schweitzer, Antje Bultmann Lemke (Translator), Jimmy Carter (Foreword by), Lachlan Forrow (Foreword by), Antje Bultmann Lemke (Preface by), Johns Hopkins University Press, June 2009.

Robert Thayer, "Large Bills," in *Offerings: Remarks on Passing the Plate*, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2004.