

Budget Barbie and We'll Get By Will

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April 18, 2010

Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

When I was in ninth grade I Came of Age at my home church, Unity Church Unitarian up in St. Paul. At that point I became eligible for membership in that congregation, but I did not in fact sign the membership book until a number of years later--for one reason only. My dad frequently and vocally expressed the opinion that a person should not become a member of a church unless he or she was prepared to support the church financially. In other words, his informal but persuasive membership requirements were much stricter than church's official membership requirements. That was an early lesson for me in the fact that everyone has an opinion about the financial support of churches.

A now dated but once very popular new member orientation curriculum included a session in which the prospective new members along with a few current members learn about the variety to be found within a typical Unitarian Universalist congregation. The leader puts down a long strip of tape across the floor of the meeting room. Then he or she directs participants to arrange themselves along the line--at one end Chrissy Christian and at the other end Arnie Atheist and everyone else somewhere along the spectrum. Once everyone is on the line a few minutes of discussion follow as the leader invites participants to observe the mix of beliefs, and asks one or two people to explain their position on the spectrum. And then, Orderly Orv, who likes a familiar, predictable order of service from week to week on one end and Mix It Up Marnie, who likes change for the sake of change, something new and different each Sunday, on the other end. Again, participants arrange themselves along the spectrum, observe the groupings and the gaps, offer comments and move on. Finally, Budget Barbie, who is an advocate of fiscal responsibility, careful planning, and the necessity of explicit financial commitments from church members, on one end, and We'll Get By Will, who believes that members should not be expected to commit themselves to giving a specific amount of money to the church each year, who believes that members must be free to give in the amount and at the intervals that the spirit moves them. We'll Get By Will spouts the UU version of "the Lord will provide," while Budget Barbie's motto is "take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves." Or something like that.

This last spectrum, in my experience, always generated the most heated discussion. The We'll Get By Wills are stunned to learn that their fellow, beloved Unitarian Universalists can be so a rigid and demanding as to expect that folks will promise financial support of the church upfront--and then make good on the promise. And the Budget Barbies marvel that otherwise reasonable and sane UUs imagine any institution, even a church, could possibly survive, much less thrive, without a clear financial picture, a forecast of future income, and a plan for spending it responsibly.

I thought about putting a piece of masking tape down here at the front of the church this morning and asking you to arrange yourselves along it from Budget Barbie to We'll Get By Will, but I decided I don't know you well enough yet to make that kind of demand!

I haven't known any of you very long at all, in fact, but I think I can safely predict how most of you feel about the church's annual financial pledge drive. You hate being asked for money and you particularly hate being asked for money by your church. Somehow the topic of money, income, financial contributions, seems an awful worldly and indelicate discussion for church—even a Unitarian Universalist church. You'd rather the church existed without any need for money at all and short of that, you'd certainly be happy if the budget was at least unchanged from year to year. But since you know the church has to have money and you know it has to come from you, the members and friends, you want to get it over with as quickly as possible. Many of you would rather fill out your pledge card the instant you receive it and mail it to the church. No canvass event. No conversation with a canvasser or board member. No personal contact involved at all. It's easier to pretend it didn't happen that way.

And your Board of Trustees is happy to conspire with you in that illusion this year--there will be no canvass kick-off event, no circle suppers with a hard sell, no wrap-up party to celebrate a successful canvass. You'll receive your pledge letters this morning, along with a pledge card, and, due to technical difficulties, your copies of the proposed 2010/2011 budget will arrive in the mail in a day or two. As long as you turn in your complete pledge card in a timely manner, there will be no phone call, no in-person visit, no need whatsoever to discuss your pledge with anyone.

I, on the other hand, insist on preaching a pledge sermon every single year. Sometimes I wish it could be a stealth pledge Sunday, so that you'd show up expecting to hear about UU history and instead get the dreaded "sermon on the amount," but even if I have to announce it in advance and risk some of you staying away, I preach on money, and financial support of the church, at least once each year.

I suppose as a very new minister I preached canvass sermons or pledge Sunday sermons largely out of a sense of obligation. It was what all ministers did--and boards seemed to expect it. But somewhere along the way to sixteen years in parish ministry, my motivation changed. I now preach pledge sermons because I believe it is important to the spiritual well being of the congregation *and* the individuals within the congregation.

Money is a curious thing. I was thinking about it just the other night--not in regard to this sermon at all. One of the experts talking about the recent nuclear summit was expounding about security. He said that not one ounce of gold has ever disappeared from Fort Knox and that there is no excuse for a single ounce of nuclear material to ever disappear from nuclear energy facilities. That got me thinking about gold, the gold standard, and the fact that American currency is no longer tied to gold. And that got me to thinking that money is a curious thing. That pieces of paper and increasingly, electronic bits of information can be traded for food, furniture, entertainment, gasoline,

clothing, rent, medical care and so on. Who decided? How did we go beyond bartering to a monetary system? How did gold get so valuable? How did money become separated from gold? Oh, I know there's a whole history and many theories about all that. And if I really wanted to, I could look it up. But really, isn't money just a curious thing?

That's sort of the way my mind works most of the time. The guy on the radio talks about protecting radioactive substances and I start thinking about the abstract nature of money.

Money IS abstract, but its power is real. The hours, weeks, years, lifetimes we spend earning it are real. The benefits it can purchase are real. The troubles it can cause are real. And we ignore real things at our peril. We pretend real things will take care of themselves without any attention from us at our peril. We label real things *crass* or *worldly* or *beneath our consideration* at our peril.

Everyone knows a story or two or ten about "the church" misusing funds: from the indulgences of the middle ages, when people were encouraged to buy their way into heaven, to vast collections of property and art, to surreptitious and unlawful support of political campaigns. The church as a human institution is subject to all the flaws of humanity; it has sinned in all these ways and more, at one time or another. And the surest way for misuse to arise, continue, and thrive, is for those folks who make up institutions to sweep discussion of difficult, sensitive topics under the rug. We guard against misuse as well as ensure the future existence and operation of the church when we draft our budgets at open meetings of the board, approve budgets by congregational vote, post monthly financial reports, and discuss in the church's finances in as many forums as possible.

Regular, forthright conversations about church finances and money in general also benefit the individuals within the church. More and more churches these days offer financial planning classes and seminars for their members and friends. And many places of business do so for their employees as well. America seems to be waking up to the fact that financial literacy is a vital component of a healthy, balanced life. So being upfront about the financial situation of the church and the fiscal responsibilities of its members, refusing to allow church members and friends to pretend the church exists and is sustained and maintained by magic, is a way for the church to care for its members. And such forthright conversations about money and the church just may trickle sideways into other areas of financial life--saving for retirement, funding college, eliminating credit card debit and so forth. And then there is that surprising fact mentioned in this morning's reading: giving money is more rewarding than receiving. So, by preaching to you this morning and encouraging your generosity to the church, I'm doing you a huge favor--a scientifically proven, pleasure boosting, healthy favor.

A word about this morning's story (*One Grain of Rice*, by Demi). Your Board of Trustees and your committee chairs do not share the Raja's delusions. They do not believe they are as wise and as fair as they can be while in fact failing miserably in all

ways to be wise and fair. I have, in these eight months I have been here, been impressed at every turn by the way your leadership has the well-being of Nora in its heart, on its mind, and at the center of its every deliberation. Love of this congregation, its past and its future, is embodied in all decisions. Your lay leaders and I ask that you generously support next year's budget, but we do not ask and we never will ask, that you give your last grain of rice, last kernel of corn, last soy bean or dollar to the church coffers. And neither will we hoard your contributions against some future disaster that never comes. Your past leaders have wisely built reserves and your current leaders will wisely preserve them. But they will also spend your money on the enrichment of the current and future church. That's what money is for. That is why you give your money to the church.

I am, both by inclination and by office, a Budget Barbie. I turned in my pledge card earlier this morning--committing myself to a contribution roughly equal to five percent of my annual compensation. I invite you to read Scott's pledge letter--you can't miss it, it's printed on brightly colored paper--meditate for a time on Nora's place in your life, and then promptly fill out and return your pledge card.

I invite your generosity; I celebrate your commitment; I give thanks for your gifts. Amen.