

A.Powell Davies

“When... individuals meet, so do... private worlds. None of our private worlds is big enough for us to live a wholesome life. We need the wider world of joy and wonder, of purpose and venture, of toil and tears. What are we, any of us, but strangers and sojourners forlornly wandering through the nighttime, until we draw together and find the meaning of our lives in one another, dissolving our fears in each other’s courage, making music together, and lighting torches to guide us through the dark? We belong together. Love is what we need. To love and to be loved.”

Holiness of Wholeness

Rev. Peggy Clarke

Last night was something else. The evening started with some planned, some spontaneous testimonials about why people are committed to our congregation. We heard people say they are here because they lived in fragmented worlds, disconnected from their neighbors in need of authentic connection; they are here to introduce their children to real family values and faith-based education; they are here because it is here they remember the people they want to be; they are here because when they haven’t been their best, when they have behaved badly, they have been welcomed back and loved anyway. 5 or 6 people spoke, it took 15 minutes and I thought we could have gone home afterwards. 15 minutes and we could have called it a night. Yes, there was great food and music and all kinds of explanations about our budget and our needs. But what we heard in the first 15 minutes was the core of who and why we are.

We also learned that this year’s budget is bigger than it has ever been, not because we’re looking to increase anything but because we’ve created a budget that reflects our actual spending. It seems that for years, we’ve designed a budget that matches our income, but not one that matches our spending. The difference has come out of reserves. For instance, we’ve budgeted \$1500 each year for facilities, but we’ve spent closer to \$10,000. So this year, the budget asks for \$10,000. That looks like an increase, but it’s not. We’re trying to bring in what we need.

It’s a good spiritual principle. Bring in what you need rather than relying on reserves. How do you get what you need? How do you engage the spiritual practice of replenishment?

Since I see most of you every week, I’m going to bet coming here is part of that practice. The act of connecting with this community, sitting quietly, listening to music. Maybe there will be a reading you can carry with you through the week or something in a sermon that will feed you. You might need a gentle spirit listening to your story or a bold friend with whom to laugh. You might need to attend a committee meeting, getting to the work of justice or interfaith healing or sustainable living, knowing you are moving us one step closer to the world we dream about.

While healthy living requires a regular cycle of giving and getting, there is certainly a wish that we could just get and never give. Wouldn’t that be nice? Show up and everything is done for you. Someone has picked a minister for the congregation and hired musicians and a director of religious education and had chosen a social action campaign. The curriculum teaches what someone else has said it will be and even the doctrine and readings have been carefully chosen years in advance by someone unseen and unknown. No one asks you to help- no one asks you to pitch in and no one asks you for money. Nice.

Or maybe it just sounds good. I was Catholic for some time so I know the underbelly of that system. No one has a voice. It starts to feel like no one has value. I wrote curricula and trained teachers, but even I had almost nothing to say about the content of a classroom. Doctrine had been determined; it was simply my job to tell people how to teach this predetermined truth. The priest had been sent and would remain for as long as the bishop wanted him there, regardless of his relationship with the congregation. And while you might be asked for a few bucks, it was relatively little and the place would survive just fine without you.

I know talking about money makes some of you uncomfortable. You wish we wouldn’t do it. The alternative is that kind of disconnect. The alternative is a system in which members don’t have to financially support us but are also not the lifeblood of the congregation in any other way either.

I admit, though, I question the entire assumption that money is an unseemly subject. I think we give money too much power. Money is the one thing you really can’t discuss. It’s a dirty little secret for every single

person in this country. Whether you have it or don't have it or have some of it or sometimes do and sometimes don't, it's not something we ever talk about. As your minister, I know about affairs, crimes, addictions, abuse, but not know what a person's income is, as if that is the most important, most powerful thing there is to know.

I was in a minister's meeting once in which we'd been talking about identity for a week. A week. Every day the same 40 people were in a room together talking about micro-cultures and finally- after I don't know how long – someone admitted that he came from a long line of Appalachian dirt farmers. He was coming out as poor. And slowly, with great trepidation, others followed. One minister confessed that her house had been foreclosed a few weeks earlier. Another one that he was on food stamps even though he was a full time parish minister. One after another, ministers were confessing, coming clean with their most hidden secret. They are poor.

Why do we keep money secret? Why is it the very last thing anyone wants to talk about? Is it possible we've aligned income with self-worth? Is it possible we think the number will tell you how much you should be valued?

For some time, I was good friends with a woman I'm going to call Jane. Jane was bright and confident and curious and a hard worker and very, very good at being a friend. She paid attention to the details and had an impeccable memory so you could count on her to remember things like birthdays or those weird anniversaries like first dates or the day you got your braces off. Jane never went to college, but she found herself a good, stable and well-paying job as an administrative assistant for a major corporation where she worked for years, and where I think she still works today, maybe 15 years after we'd lost touch (outside of Facebook).

Jane was the assistant to a director in that company and every year the director held a meeting for a week over the summer at a resort. The managers under him were required to be there, but their families were invited so this was essentially an all-expense paid vacation for the wives (yes, they were all white, married, straight men) and their kids and there was a lot of fun and free time built into the week even for the guys who were there to work.

I know a lot about these meetings because my friend Jane planned them, so together we'd dream about where this luxury vacation should take place. This is before the internet, so we'd pour over brochures and visit travel agents and fantasize about a week in Hawaii or San Francisco or the Rocky Mountains.

One year, the trip was to a resort on the Cape and Jane was required to go. She wasn't allowed to bring family, although she wasn't partnered and didn't have kids, so that wasn't much of an issue for her. She was very excited; usually they skipped secretarial help and left her and her colleagues home, but this time she was going. Because she was the one who made all the reservations, she also knew that everyone had a two, three or four bedroom townhouse, including her, even though she had no one to share it with. So, not only was she going, but I was going too. Not as her family; she wasn't allowed to bring guests, but as a secret friend hidden away in her room. Neither she nor I were invited to the parties or day trips, but she was able to take advantage of that time to hang out on the beach or by the pool.

There I was, on an almost free vacation with one of my best friends and having a grand ole time. In addition to the fun and freedom I was enjoying, I had front row seats to Jane's life at work. And at work, there was no question that Jane, my smart, self-assured and competent friend, was treated as less than everyone else on this trip. She was given none of the gifts or spa trips and wasn't invited for lobster dinners. She wasn't even invited into the work meetings; she sat outside the room waiting in case they needed her, which happened once every 4 or 5 hours and even then it was to replenish iced tea or double check on lunch. She was having fun and she and I together were enjoying ourselves tremendously, but I wondered how her spirit survived the non-verbal attacks day in and day out.

On our way home, I decided to bring up the subject, naively I suppose. It all seemed so crazy. Admittedly, I was a few years younger than she and might even have been in college at the time so I really knew nothing about the working world. But as a young idealist, I couldn't imagine how Jane lived in a system that seemed designed to devalue her. So, I asked. "How do you live with it?" She didn't know what I was talking about. I felt compelled to clarify. "They act like they are worth more than you."

Her reply has stayed with me all these years. "They are," she said. "No, I don't mean money; I get that they make more than you. I mean worth. They act like they are worth more than you." "They are," she said. I continued to try to clarify but she was feeling pretty clear. These men were worth more- as human beings. They were worth more. They made more money which was either a reflection of inner worth or it was the thing that gave them worth- I never quite got to the bottom of that – but either way, they were worth more.

Jane was not a shy or retiring woman. She didn't lack confidence, but at her core, she equated money with worth.

I wonder if some of us don't do that in some way ourselves. It is not unusual here for people to stop coming on Sundays because they are broke. They are embarrassed or uncomfortable. Their self-worth has shifted and they no longer feel worthy to be here. They don't want the basket to pass them without putting something into it. I've even seen folks leave during the offertory so as not to have to be in that position. It's as if, like Jane, we think financial wealth is the same as human worth, like our bank account is a reflection of something other than how much money we have.

I wonder if that's why stewardship sermons across the religious world get the lowest numbers. A minister can almost guarantee a smaller congregation the Sunday the stewardship campaign is kicked off. No one wants to be asked for money, largely because we don't want to have to say no. But it could also be because we don't want to have to admit we don't have any money. Why is that? Why don't we want to tell anyone we don't have any extra money?

With the exception of very few people, almost every American has been without cash at one time or another. It happens. When we're starting out on our own for the first time, when we're in the process of divorce or adopting a baby or after retirement or a long illness, people are broke. People lose jobs or work slows down or industries change and income is affected. A spouse gets sick or you live with chronic illness or are committed to caring for an elderly parent- all of these things alter our ability to work. Most of us understand that income changes or even that we sometimes have to make choices that affect income; the resulting decrease in bank accounts are not reflections on human worth.

But I wonder if that's not more in our heads than it is in our hearts. If we knew in our hearts, smaller bank accounts wouldn't make us so uncomfortable. Talking about money wouldn't make us want to flee. We'd understand that it's just a matter of resourcing, not a reflection of personal worth.

But last year when our president made announcements before two services asking people to increase their pledges, there was push-back. She was told that it was inappropriate for her to talk about money during a Sunday service. I think what those people meant is that it makes them uncomfortable because they believe that money is private, secret even, and shouldn't be discussed in public.

I'd like us to stop giving money that kind of power. Money is one resource we use to get us where we need to go. Sometimes we have it, sometimes we don't. It's not a reflection of individual worth.

In fact, our First Principle reminds us that we covenant to affirm each person's worth and dignity. Every single one of us. Regardless of income. It's one of the reasons we're here, one of the reasons we need to be here. To create a spiritual home for every person who walks in, regardless of income. It's not because we don't know your income, not because it's a secret and we'll never ask. It's because it's not relevant to who you are at your core, who you have been, who you can become.

It's part of my job during this sermon to throw a few numbers at you because this might be the only time you hear them. So, I'm going to do that, but I hope not to lose track of the reason I'm telling you. First, I'll say that our goal is \$215,000. That's a lot of money. If we divide that up among each household, (106) it comes to \$2,028 each. If we do it by members, (167) which might be more fair, it's \$1287. Some of us can hit that easily if we want to. For some, that's a huge stretch. Last year I told you that I'm not a member and not counted in the 167, so I pledge to cover someone who doesn't have it. At least one person told me they were going to do the same. So, if you have it, you can pledge \$1287 for you + \$1287 for someone who doesn't have it. That comes to about \$2600.

Two more numbers for me to toss out. The first is something I just thought of. Our total budget is higher than the \$215 because it includes rental income. Our Administrator is doing a great job of bringing in new renters which is helpful. But when I broke the numbers down, I discovered that it costs us a little over \$600 a day to stay open. That's the cost of heat and lights and paper and snow plowing and staffing and cleaning. So, another way to look at this is to ask yourself how many days can you cover.

I'm almost done with the numbers. Just one more. We've been given a matching grant. One of our families has done very well this year and wants to give the money to us. But, rather than just writing a check they have an idea they and we are hoping will work. This year, if you increase your pledge, the amount you increase will be duplicated. If you increase under 20%, this family will donate 50 cents on the dollar for the increase. If you increase more than that, it will be dollar for dollar. So, if you gave \$1000 last year and give \$1100 this year,

we will receive \$1150. If you increase from \$1000 to \$2000, First Unitarian will actually get a total of \$3,000.

We can really use that money. We'd like to start living within our means. We'd like to start bringing in as much as we send out. We'd like to hire a competent Director of Religious Education and we'd like to stop our roof from leaking. And we'd like to keep our doors open and our rooms heated and our driveway free of ice and snow.

I'm going to make a daring statement here. I'm going to say that we have to keep our doors open. I heard it last night. I heard people say they need for us to be here, have needed us to be here for decades. We need to be here because we need the next generation to know their own worth and dignity. We need to be here because we live in a time when neighbors don't talk to neighbors, when people are more familiar with the people they work with than the people they live with. We need to be here because we need to connect with our own core values, with our vision and hope for who we want to be. We need to be here because for some people, this is the only place of respite they might have, the only place their worth is not being questioned, the only place they can- we all can- enter broken and return home whole again.