

*We, The Stewards*

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Emily DeTar Birt

Reading:

When Giving Is All We Have

Alberto Ríos, 1952

One river gives  
Its journey to the next.

We give because someone gave to us.

We give because nobody gave to us.

We give because giving has changed us.

We give because giving could have changed us.

We have been better for it,

We have been wounded by it—

Giving has many faces: It is loud and quiet,

Big, though small, diamond in wood-nails.

Its story is old, the plot worn and the pages too,

But we read this book, anyway, over and again:

Giving is, first and every time, hand to hand,

Mine to yours, yours to mine.

You gave me blue and I gave you yellow.

Together we are simple green. You gave me

What you did not have, and I gave you

What I had to give—together, we made

Something greater from the difference.

Sermon:

Growing up, there was a part of going to church that I just got used to. It didn't matter what age I was, what I had planned, what service was happening, or even if I was leading service. Before service, I would wash my hands, put on gloves, and help my mom prepare the food for that Sunday. Every Sunday my dad would make the coffee and help set up chairs, while my mom would teach me the proper way to use what knives to slice the cheese. It was a small ritual, but it's a ritual that has lasted ever since my parents became members before I was born, and which lasts to today. People at the church will greet her in the kitchen, choir members getting coffee on their way into practice. My mom would usually continue to prepare foods even during services, listening to the service over the speaker. She told people in the church that came into the kitchen, "Welcome to my holy place".

This practice of giving has been there for my family. It was something we did every week. Even when my dad was in an out of unemployment for ten years. Even when arguments would happen in my childhood peripheral vision about how or where we would spend money, including just how much our family could do for church. Every week we brought something. It could be crackers, boxes of cookies, or fruit punch. Because on Sunday, it didn't matter how much or how little we had, or what was happening in our personal lives. On Sunday, my mom would make sure she talked to people as they flocked around the table. On Sunday, my mom was in her holy place, smiling and laughing, and making another joke to the minister or choir director. Or yelling loudly after service that the food was ready. For most of my childhood and adult life, I got to witness a practice that helped make my mom and my family feel human, and whole.

This is the power of stewardship. Stewardship invites us to think about what we can give, and to have a place and space to bring our gifts to each other. Stewardship helps us invest a part of ourselves in our community, and invites us into sustained practices that help us feel human and whole. Stewardship is not about how much money or time you have, but about what you do with what you have.

Practicing stewardship is not easy to do in our culture or society. It wasn't easy for my family all the time, especially when things are tight. For while I believe everyone appreciates and values generosity, scarcity is a much more powerful economic force that permeates our livelihood, culture, and our everyday decisions.

Scarcity is the principle at work in supply and demand, the impulse in advertisements that says this product is running out, get it before we close. Scarcity is the principles that makes us feel

like we don't have enough. Scarcity is what drives the impulse of the American Dream. That if we aren't home owners, we aren't building equity and not really a proper family. But scarcity isn't only a feeling or psychology that is used around money, it is a reality for all too many people across our country. People who work two or three jobs and still aren't able to afford where they live or to live where they work. Scarcity is the reality of those who suddenly find themselves trapped by healthcare and hospital bills. Scarcity are the ways we are found trapped in our debt driven economy, owing from everything from everyday food and transportation to student loans and mortgage payments. Scarcity is powerful, and scarcity is everywhere.

Living with financial anxiety is a reality for a majority of Americans. In our country there are so many factors that lead to the fear and feeling of scarcity across economic classes. For example, our recent nationwide conversations around health care reform circle around money on both sides. Conservatives say the tax requirement for having health care is costly for those who don't want healthcare, and Democrats say that to remove universal healthcare options would cause several to be uninsured because they couldn't afford it. Conversations about the cost of public school versus charter school all center around our tax dollars, while larger conversations about higher education center on the booming amounts of student debt our current generation is entering into. Student loans are the only loans that are still the responsibility of a person or their family in both bankruptcy or death. The realities of the housing crash of only a decade ago center around families trying to get the American dream sooner, and being promised by banks that they could pay it off. Instead, they found themselves trapped in long term mortgage debts. Economic disparity drives the immigration conversation, and paints our job force as zero sum game, instead of asking why aren't enough jobs to go around? Our economic fears and feelings of scarcity drive our political reform and policies.

This is why it is vital that religious communities talk about money. We need to be able to talk about economic disparity and the hurt, fear, and pain we are all facing in this economy. We need to be able to talk about how the poor are unfairly treated by businesses, our government, and old stereotypes. We need to be able to talk about money, when it comes to the intersections of racism and economic disparity, or mass incarceration, housing discrimination, and police brutality.

Why? Because right now, a former CEO of an oil company is the head of the EPA. Because right now, a former CEO is now the head of the Department of Education. Because right now a former CEO of several bankrupted businesses is now the President of the United States. There is no denying that money has a large role to play in our government right now. And when we think about how much money has power in our government, it is easy to forget that we are the people.

We the people of the United States, we have a duty to understand the ways fear and scarcity about money are used in our politics, and just how money plays a role in our ability to vote, voice our opinions and live as healthy respected citizens. We the people, we are stewards of this country, we are stewards of our citizenship. We cannot fall into the fear or feeling like we can't do anything, because of our relative lack of resources against the billionaires of the world. We must remember that we are the people that make our government our society what it is. That we can make an investment, of our time, our resources, our talent, our voices, to help shape our government and world.

And this is why we need stewardship. Stewardship is a practice that in it's best form, takes scarcity out of the equation. Instead, it focuses on what we can give from what we already have - and that isn't just money. And it invites us to reflect on what we want to do that will make us feel like our values are integrated into our lives and like we are treated as whole people. Unlike the larger economy, stewardship is not tied to how successfully you are able to thrive in our economy, or who has the most of something. Stewardship helps us remind ourselves about our inherent worth by giving back something unique to us, be it time, skill, art, food, transportation etc. Stewardship asks What is the most "you" that you can give? Stewardship, much like any kind of community building an activism, needs all the of the different ways we are able to give. When practiced with faithful care, stewardship can help us heal from the feelings that we aren't enough, or don't have enough to give as taught to us by our larger society. Instead, it asks us to share what we already have reminding all of us that we have so much to share.

How we practice stewardship in this community, helps us and our families inform what we do in our larger society. Look, it is absolutely no lie that we need your pledges and financial commitments. We need the funds to turn on the lights, to help pay our staff, to get new microphones, and to finance what we hope to accomplish. We need you time and talent to lead committee meetings, we need your food for potlucks, we need your smiles for our greeters, we need your hands for Midnight runs. And when you give, in whatever ways you give, you have a direct say in how that helps to create our community. You all vote on the budget, how it's spent, what it's spent for. You all together help this community live into it's mission, of Nurturing Community, Advancing Justice Deepening Spirituality, and Shaping you world in our image of love. You get to honor the past, celebrate the present, and build our future . I know this seems like a small thing, but here in our community we have a direct ability to dream and think about what we want to do without resources. This is usually not an option with those living with financial scarcity in our larger world. Here, we the stewards have the power to determine the future of this community.

And it is here we imagine and begin to shape a different world. I'll give you some examples. State and federal governments debate what kind of sex education can be taught to children. UU

communities do OWL classes to ensure the children of our faith have comprehensive sex education. The youth in the class get to debate and work with teachers to make sure the education offered continues to evolve and be inclusive to people of different sexual identities. Churches around Westchester have helped to create deescalating training to help interrupt hate crimes. Communities like our invite refugees to settle in our midst, welcome immigrants and others. We together determine how we can create an inclusive welcoming community of change.

And this is all and only possible because of the uniqueness of what you give to this community. No one's gift of time, of volunteering, of money, or talent is any less necessary or valuable than anyone else's. By giving gifts unique to us, we together create a new kind of community.

Over my time here with you in the span of two years, I have seen such incredible examples of community and stewardship. This community has modeled the practice of stewardship in amazing ways over my last two years with you. Kevin Weber two weeks ago drove to church with bags of gravel to fill in the holes in the parking lot. Art Lowenstien has routinely overseen and given to Midnight Runs, and almost always has coordinated with Midnight Run even when he wasn't able to go. Nancy Eisenman helped shove out ice and snow one morning over two months ago. Catherine Smith has helped water our plants. April Castoldi has served as RE Coordinator and given us so many of her mandalas in art, auction, or worship I have lost count. I could go on and on. Vikrom has literally filled this house with Hamilton songs, and other youth have helped to lead worship. I tell you, you could look at every person in this place, and I am sure you can remember one thing or several things they have done on behalf of our community.

My hope, is that for many of you, even when it was frustrating or difficult to serve, that you felt your giving was valued, appreciated, and respected. That you felt you were part of this community and part of its vision. But more than that in the giving, you found something for yourself: It could be like home, or the honor of service, or the smile of a member, or the pride of a good work done.

I know for a fact this morning, probably right around now, my mom is cutting vegetables or cheese and setting out crackers at church. And all I know is that she is probably smiling, because she is at worship, in her "holy place". Just like she was when she was singing from the kitchen at her close friends funeral, crying while cutting the strawberries. Or just like she was when she was helping cut the cake at my own Coming of Age service. Or just as she has been week in and out, doing this ritual of giving and practice of service that has comforted her through the years. By doing the little bit that she wants to and can do, and it fills her heart with joy.

May this community as we already do, continue to invite you to invest parts of yourself in it. To make you feel like what you have is already more than enough to share. That your unique gifts and personality make our community what it is. That when you show up and offer something from your heart, and add it to someone else's gift, that we are making something different together.

But more, I wish for all of you a holy place of your own. A way of giving back that is a unique practice to you, that can stand by you through the test of time, through the test of good and bad, hard and easy. A giving that provides you a reminder of just who you are and how much you are worth. A giving that shows you how you are oh so much more than enough, and how you can use your very own hands help to shape the world in our image of love.