

Follow the Light  
April 6, 2008 (stewardship Sunday)  
Ellsworth, Maine

I grew up near New York City, which has a reputation as bad as it is glorious. The news was rife with trouble: gangs and drugs and murders and rapes and fires and dishonest landlords and trouble of every description. We of the suburbs had various opinions: some of us stayed away; some dove in; some took the City in very small doses. But if we lived there long enough we all heard the other half, the stories that didn't sell papers or advertising in the six o'clock hour, the stories that ran cheek by jowl with violent crime and abject poverty on the streets but almost never made it into print.

Occasionally we'd get lucky; the Rev. Jane Rzepka tells this story:

The scene is a New York subway in the heat of evening commute, probably November, maybe February. A commuter stands on the platform;

she is holding one sleek black leather glove.

As she looks through the closing subway doors she sees the other glove on her seat. It is too late to retrieve it

so with a shrug and a half-smile she throws the glove she still holds back through the doors.

They close

and her gloves move on without her.

I like to think we would all have the presence of mind to do the same, but it's not what our intuition tells us.

Rzepka continues,

*To throw a favorite leather glove into the oblivion of a moving train must involve small pangs of uncertainty, pangs of some degree of loss, pangs of upset. After a lifetime of struggling not to lose our mittens, then our gloves, cavalier abandonment does not come easy.*

*In New England at least, our pattern is to cling, as we cling to our gloves, to routine, hard work, and obligation, all fall, all winter, and right through to the Fourth of July.*

*(Quoted from the UUA's WorshipWeb collection of worship materials).*

After all, you never know. You never know when you'll need whatever it is you hold, when you'll regret giving it up, when you might wish you had hung on.

But the fact of being human is the fact of having to trust, of having to guess, of having to live without knowing what the next day or the next hour will bring. And if we don't know whether we might want it, we don't know what might be possible if we gave it away. What could someone else do with matched gloves? Perhaps it would be better than whatever we might dream up for one.

What do we do when you've already given more than we planned, but it's not enough to make a difference?

Do we give up?

Or do we give more?

Maybe it depends on how much influence we have, or whether we know the recipient;

maybe it depends on who is receiving our gift, or what we think is possible with our contributions.

Maybe it depends on whim or wit or wisdom or whether we got up on the wrong side of the bed.

Maybe in an ideal world it would be a choice of the spirit; a choice of theology; a choice of faith.

Maybe in an ideal world we, who gather in congregations to practice our religion, would live lives informed religiously.

After all, we choose to be here.

We choose.

Here.

What is here? what is this place? Who are we?

our 100,000 voices would speak as many truths:

we are holy

we are an inspiration

we are a miracle

we are a sanctuary  
we are a possibility  
we are a community  
we are a circle  
we are an invitation  
we are salvation  
we are birth  
we are rebirth  
we are a song  
we are a dance  
we are justice  
we are balance  
we are hope  
we are a voice  
we are peace  
we are silence  
we are power  
we are joy  
we are celebration  
we are a relief  
we are a resource  
we are a source  
we are a well

we are a river  
we are darkness  
we are light  
we are the future  
we are the past  
We are safety  
and we are challenge  
we are so many things  
we are charged with care of those things  
and we are charged with care of each other  
which is care of those things,  
because we are it  
we are this community  
we are the present and the potential  
we are everything that is  
and our choices will shape what can be.

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What we know about community  
and relationship and life  
is that love, which is at our heart  
which is at our core  
is important  
Love is central

love is key.

But love by itself is not enough.

Love is not enough.

We want it to be;

we believe it is

most of us try once or twice

falling in love with someone

or something

or the image of someone or something

without the underpinnings

without the support

without the community or the communication

or the understanding or the fortitude or the strength

or the compatibility

to undergird it

and we know it will work

we think it will work

we swear it will work

to be with this person or work for this institution or take this job

because we want it to be true.

But love and desire are not enough.

Just love and wanting it are not enough.

We are full of hope and dreams

we imagine that if everything comes together just right

it could be possible and as long as

nothing goes wrong it will be okay

but the truth is

dreams are not enough.

Love and desire and dreams are not enough.

Because the bottom line is,

love and desire and dreams all happen inside,

they all happen in our bones and heart and soul,

they all happen in our heads,

but when we want something to happen,

when we want something to work

when we want something to be full of life and energy,

when something has to become real,

it has to fill us up:

it has to swell our hearts until the blood is pounding in our fingers and our toes,

it has to run circles in our heads and get us ready to jump out of our skins

we have to burst open!

we have to come through!

we have to get beyond sitting and dreaming and loving and we have to move, people,

we have to get up and dance

we have to party and work and sweat and cry

what has been inside us has to come out, has to spill out, has to foam and ferment and become something alive, become something vital, become something beautiful and messy and alive.

We have to put our hands and feet and money where our mouth is, because the best theories are still just theories

until someone puts them into practice.

If you went to a great teacher and listened to a lecture on meditation, you would not expect to get all the benefits of meditation until you had meditated.

If we listen to a violinist we don't expect to be able to play the violin.

We can think and talk and absorb all the information in the world, but without practice,

without participation,

without life,

it is nothing.

And we,

without life

would be nothing.

We are alive because we believe and then we act.

We are alive because we think and then we act.

We are alive because we feel and then we act.

We are alive because we struggle and then we act.

We are religious because we know our believing and thinking and feeling and struggling is grounded in community and deep connection with each other and with the world around us.

And we are religious because we take what we find within ourselves and we act.

Giving our money is one of the strongest acts of religious practice we can perform, because not only does it involve commitment,

not only does it involve action,

it involves trust.

When we give our money to causes of our hearts, we give our money to other human beings and hope that they will use it on our behalf for the good of the world. The World Wildlife Federation or United Way or the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee or Doctors Without Borders appear to be doing work in the world that makes things better for the planet, which is why they are popular charities. By choosing charities that are specifically connected to our passions and our fears, we hope to direct the use of our gifts just a little.

When we contemplate giving money to our church, it is more intimate. It is more important. It is more risky. Unlike a large nonprofit with an anonymous staff of decision makers, we know each other here. We see each other daily.

We drink coffee together

we break bread together

we sing together

we laugh and cry and live and love together.

We care deeply and passionately about this institution and about all of its choices and all of its decisions.

When something doesn't go our way, it's easy to take it personally, because we probably argued our case; we probably spoke at parish meeting; we probably discussed it over casseroles and cakes.

What happens here matters, not just to the world, but to us—to each of us.

Giving our money to this cause of our deepest heart requires profound trust.

We must trust that people with whom we sometimes disagree, whose faults we know, whose dreams are different from ours, whose decisions and lives and purposes give our congregation the variety and diversity we celebrate—we must trust that those people will make good decisions with our money. And of course, we are those people, all of us are those people, because diversity and difference are part of who we are and how we are committed to being in this world. We are, in all our mosaic selves, one people who are many, and many people who are one.

And with that difference can come distrust, mistrust, conviction that everyone has a right to an opinion, but only our opinion is right.

That's no way to work together. That's no way to build strength. It's exhausting, trying to do all the work of everybody because you don't think anyone else can possibly be as right as you are. It's an easy trap, but it's a recipe for burnout.

When you give your money, it's a gift, like a bird released from your hands. You are giving it to a cause that is so deeply connected to your heart that it is like a child, like a strong and growing-up child.

But this child, this church, has been around for almost 150 years. It has had leaders and boom times and bust times and ministers and laity and programming and at least two rebirths. There are people here who remember when there were 20 people on the membership rolls. There are people here who remember when this building had no community room, no RE wing, just a sanctuary, just a beginning, just a seed of what could be. And there are people here who have seen the plans, seen the possibilities, seen the dreams for more—for a larger sanctuary, for a full staff, for programming that fills the building and fills the week, for religious education for adults and for children, for outreach and social action that transforms the community and draws people through our doors. There is a kind of organic, institutional wisdom here, and it comes from the people and the history and the possibility, and when we trust it, when we let small groups of dedicated and passionate people make choices for the good of the whole, we release energy and time and money for the work that is our purpose. We release ourselves for pastoral care and cooking and visiting; we release ourselves for intellectual and spiritual growth and practice; we release ourselves for meaning-making; we release ourselves for weddings and funerals; we release ourselves for learning; we release ourselves for the things that matter most to us.

We all have chosen to be here.

We have chosen, in this chaotic, busy world, this religious community. We are not bound by law or by local tradition; we are not bound by threat; we are not bound by fear. We have bound ourselves to this community, to this faith and to one another, because we have found something here that calls us, calls us up from our Sunday morning beds and away from our cups of coffee, that calls us from television and newspapers and crossword puzzles and gardens and a thousand other things to this place and this time. In our lives time is one of those things we cannot make more of—each of us has exactly the same twenty-four hours in a day—and we have chosen to spend our time, our precious time, here, in the company of the ineffable and spiritual and sacred and each other. We have chosen to court the unknown and lie with the inexplicable; we have chosen to seek meaning and possibility and share our joy and our sorrow and our anger and our celebration here.

We have chosen, and it deserves our attention: our hearts, our minds, our souls, our money. Choosing a religious community is more intimate, more personal, more profound than choosing almost anything else in our lives. We have chosen this one, even those of us born to it choose to be here, and we have chosen it because in our eyes we have decided it is worthy of our precious attention. If it is so worthy, should we not devote ourselves to it as we would to a cup of tea, with perfect, precise, and graceful pearls of everything? We must look, we must listen, we must taste, we must smell, we must feel, and then sixth we must give ourselves over to the experience of church, like we give ourselves to the experience of tea when we are being who we wish we were.

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These stewards whom you have commissioned this morning will be calling you, if they have not already. They will be meeting with you, if they have not already. They will be coming to see you and asking you what matters to you, what excites you, what makes your spirit soar.

Tell them.

Please tell them. Talk to them about what is important, what is spiritual, what is religious in your life, and how the church can support your spiritual journey. Tell them about your passions and your dreams. Tell them what you believe can be, what you believe we can be together. Tell them what you know about making that happen.

And then make a pledge you can honor to support this life that sets you on fire. Think about who we could be

with a professional religious education director for all ages, envisioning and coordinating both adult and children's programming;

with an administrator to help us all communicate with each other, to coordinate our calendar, to tell us what's going on and where and when and with whom, and to get us in touch with the right people;

with the brand-new kitchen whose installation is starting in a month, with better facilities for the community meals that are so much a part of this congregation's culture;

with funding for training leaders—teachers for the OWL sexuality education program, attendance at UUA Leadership School and UU University and GA so that our board and committee members have the skills they need to work brilliantly for our shared future;

with money to improve our aesthetics and our building so that it can continue to serve us as we develop our institution and our programs;

with money for investing; money for saving; money for the endowment, to ensure a strong and healthy financial future.

Just think who we could be.

Imagine a church where new ideas could be met with unbridled enthusiasm.

Imagine a church where everyone has a place to connect; everyone has a place to grow; everyone has a place to feed their spirit and stimulate their mind.

Imagine a church where leaders are trained, where volunteers have resources, where we use our gifts and our energies in the richest ways possible.

Imagine a church which gives generously and without fear.

Imagine how such a spiritual place would transform us.

Imagine how such religion could transform the world.

You have told me about that place. You have dreamed it, you have seen it, you have desired it, you have loved it. Now you can make it. You can form it from the clay in your hands as surely as any god.

Your time, your vision, your energy, your passion are here.

Now let the life rise up.

Let the passion rise up.

And let the money you give so generously

be a tool for the work of the spirit.

Blessed be,

and amen.